

# Peter's Miraculous Escape From Prison / Herod's Death



1. Who was the most surprising person to ever show up at your door?
2. Have you ever felt unjustly accused or mistreated by the legal system?

## Scripture Passage

Acts 12:1-25

**12** It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. <sup>2</sup>He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. <sup>3</sup>When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup>After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

<sup>5</sup>So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

<sup>6</sup>The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. <sup>7</sup>Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

<sup>8</sup>Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. <sup>9</sup>Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup>They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

<sup>11</sup>Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."

<sup>12</sup>When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. <sup>13</sup>Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. <sup>14</sup>When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

<sup>15</sup>"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

<sup>16</sup>But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. <sup>17</sup>Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

<sup>18</sup>In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup>After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. <sup>20</sup>He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

21On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. 22They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." 23Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

24But the word of God continued to increase and spread.

25When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from<sup>a</sup> Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

a [25] Some manuscripts to



## Bible Study

1. This Herod is the nephew of the Herod who ruled in Jesus' day. What do you learn about his character in verses 20-23? Why would his choice to arrest (vv. 2-4) Peter please the Jewish leaders? Why do you think Herod, as a Roman official, would now join in the Jewish opposition to the church?
2. When Rhoda announced who was at the door, what would you have said if you had been there?
3. How do you feel about the fact that God saved Peter but not James? In light of John 21:18-19, how might Peter respond to this question?
4. Who is the James of verse 17 (see Gal 1:18-19)? Why do you think he is mentioned? What does this tell you about his importance in the Jerusalem church?
5. Putting yourself in the place of the soldiers (v. 18), what would you say to each other in the morning?
6. In verses 20-22, what contrasts do you see between Herod's power and God's?
7. What do you make of Herod's death (vv. 21-23)?
8. In this "Judea and Samaria" phase (ch. 8-12) of God's plan (1:8), how has the church fared? What opposition has it faced so far? How far has it expanded?



## Reference Notes

**12:1 King Herod.** This is Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, who ruled when Jesus was born, and the nephew of Herod Antipas who governed Galilee during Jesus' ministry. Herod Agrippa I was popular with the Jews; some even wondered if he might be the Messiah who would free them from Rome. To further cultivate this popularity, he resumed the persecution of the church which had ceased upon Paul's conversion (Acts 9:31). Since Herod died in A.D. 44, this story precedes the visit of Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30).

**12:2-4** After receiving support for executing the apostle James, Herod arrested Peter as well. He was imprisoned, chained, and placed under constant guard while awaiting trial after Passover.

**12:7 a light shone.** Similarities between this story and other escape stories circulating in the first century have led some commentators to assume that supernatural overtones were added to an account of how Peter was released with the help of a sympathetic insider. However, this fails to account for how the security measures used to imprison Peter could have been circumvented. Peter

was constantly guarded by four soldiers on six-hour shifts (vv. 4,6). Two soldiers were in the cell with Peter chained to their wrists, while the other two stood guard at the door. Such intense security measures may have been implemented precisely to prevent any such "unexplainable" release such as happened when the Sanhedrin had imprisoned him earlier (Acts 5:19-24). The description of the light, a common symbol of divine glory, underscores that this was a miraculous intervention of God. He struck Peter on the side. Williams notes that the Greek is more like "he kicked Peter in the ribs"!

**12:8-10** In a trance-like state, Peter was led past the prison guards and through the main gate of the prison.

**12:11 *the Lord ... rescued me from Herod's clutches.*** In Acts, there is no predictable pattern of how God will work. While Peter was released from prison, James, for whom the church undoubtedly prayed just as earnestly, was killed. Dorcas, a kindly but relatively insignificant woman (9:36-41), is raised from the dead while a bold, courageous man like Stephen is not. Even in this account, Peter, although so miraculously protected by God, decides he should go into hiding lest Herod catch him again (v. 17). The answer to why these things should be so is not given. It is not a matter of Peter being more deserving, or moral, or having more faith than James. The mystery is only known in the secret counsel of God who works all things according to his will. The call to the church is to be faithful and take responsible action whether or not God chooses to act in a miraculous way.

**12:12 *Mary the mother of John, also called Mark.*** This is the Mark who later wrote the Gospel bearing that name (see Acts 12:25; 13:5).

**12:13-17** In a humorous way, Luke recounts how Peter was left standing at the gate of the courtyard while the disciples refused to believe that he could possibly be there! They were astonished, even though they had been "earnestly praying" for him (vv. 5,12)!

**12:15 *It must be his angel.*** It was believed that each person had a guardian angel who watched over that individual. Assuming that Peter was killed, the only solution the disciples could come up with was that Peter's angel had taken on Peter's form.

**12:17 *James.*** This is the half-brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3). James did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah during Jesus' ministry (John 7:5), but after the Resurrection Jesus appeared to him in a special way (1 Corinthians 15:7), qualifying James to be an apostle. James became a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 2:9) and his piety and devotion to God gained the respect of the Jewish community in general. When executed by the Sadducean high priest in A.D. 61, his death was mourned by many Pharisaic Jews as well as Christians. He left for another place. While Peter recognized his release as an act of God, he did not believe that made him invulnerable to Herod's plots. Thus, he left Jerusalem for some time. Although Peter was in Jerusalem at the time of the council in Acts 15, nothing more is told of his story in Acts. Church tradition associates him with travels to Alexandria, Asia Minor, and finally to Rome where he was crucified upside down by the Emperor Nero.

**12:18-19** As in Acts 5:22-24, the release of Peter threw the officials into confusion. Unable to explain how Peter could possibly escape without the complicity of the guards, Herod ordered them to be executed. Under Roman law, a guard who allowed his prisoner to escape suffered the fate intended for the prisoner.

**12:20** The quarrel was not one of physical warfare, but of commercial and economic matters. Given the extent of Herod's political control, the cities of Tyre and Sidon would be dependent on his goodwill for their own economic stability.

**12:22 *This is the voice of a god, not of a man.*** While the Gentiles listening to Herod undoubtedly intended this chant as nothing more than royal flattery, Herod, as a Jew, should have repudiated such a blasphemous gesture. Instead, the Jewish historian Josephus specifically notes how Herod did not do so.

**12:23 *eaten by worms and died.*** While this may refer to tapeworms or roundworms as the cause of death, this phrase also appears to be a stock way for ancient writers to describe the death of disreputable leaders.

**12:25** Ancient historians were more concerned about faithfully compiling accounts from various sources rather than forcing their material into strict chronological order. Having finished with the source dealing with Herod, Luke returns to his material on Paul and Barnabas. Their visit to Jerusalem (Acts 11:30) probably did not occur until A.D. 46, nearly two years after Herod's death. By this time, there was great need in Judea for outside assistance because of a local famine.

## **Caring Time**

1. Who truly has power here: Herod or the Lord? What does this tell you about how Christians ought to deal with opposition and persecution? What worldly forces seem all-powerful to you? How does this chapter put them in perspective?
2. How are you like the people at the prayer meeting in this story (v. 12)? What are some of your prayers that would surprise you if God answered affirmatively?
3. If you were arrested by a dictatorial government for being a Christian, what evidence might they use as proof of your guilt? What could some "well-meaning" character witnesses point to as proof of your innocence?