

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

An Exposition

by

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CHAPTER TWELVE

With this chapter we reach the conclusion of the second part of this book.

Jerusalem had heard the second offer concerning the Kingdom and mercy was ready even for the murderers of the Prince of Life. But that offer was rejected. Stephen's testimony followed by his martyrdom marked the close of that second offer to the city where our Lord had been crucified. Then broke out a great persecution and they were scattered abroad except the Apostles.

With the eighth chapter we saw the Gospel preached in Judea and Samaria. From our last chapter we learned that others who were driven out of Jerusalem preached the Word in Phoenice, Cyprus and Antioch.

In this second section of the Book of Acts the conversion of Saul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, Peter's acts and his preaching to Cornelius, the foundation of the church in Antioch as a second great center of Christianity, are reported.

The twelfth chapter, with which this part of Acts closes, is an interesting one. It is not only interesting on account of the historical information it contains, but also because of its dispensational foreshadowing.

Once more we are introduced to Jerusalem and see another great tribulation. The wicked King is reigning over the city. James is killed with the sword, while Peter is imprisoned but wonderfully delivered; the evil King, who claimed divine power and worship, is suddenly smitten by the judgment of the Lord.

Then the Word grew and multiplied, Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem to Antioch, from where the great missionary operations were soon to be conducted.

The events in Jerusalem, James' martyrdom under King Herod, Peter's imprisonment and deliverance, as well as the fate of the persecuting King foreshadow the events with which this present age will close.

After the true church is taken from the earth, that is when I Thessalonians 4:16-17 is fulfilled, the great tribulation will take place. While great tribulation and judgment will come upon the whole world, the great tribulation will come upon the Jewish people who have returned in part to their own land.

In the midst of the masses of unbelieving Jews, there will be found a remnant of God-fearing Jews, who are converted and bear testimony to the truth. A wicked King, the man of sin, the false Messiah, will then be in power in Jerusalem. Part of that Jewish remnant will suffer martyrdom; these are represented by James, whom Herod, the type of the Antichrist, slew. Another part will be delivered as Peter was delivered. Herod's presumption and fate clearly points to that of the Antichrist (II Thessalonians 2:3-8).

All this may well be kept in mind as we study this chapter in detail.

I. The great persecution of the church by Herod Agrippa I (Verses 1-5).

II. The miraculous deliverance of Peter (Verses 6-17).

III. The Presumption and Judgment of King Herod (Verses 18-23).

IV. Barnabas and Saul returning to Antioch (Verses 24-25).

I. The great persecution of the church by Herod Agrippa I.

“Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread). And when he had apprehended him he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people. Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him” (Verses 1-5).

The second great persecution broke out. It was about that time when the events had taken place with which the previous chapter closed. Herod, the King, mentioned here is known in history as Herod Agrippa I. He was the grandson of Herod the Great. First he had the tetrarchy of Philip (Luke 3:1), then he received the territory of Herod Antipas, Galilee and Peraea; lastly through political intrigue he added to his Kingdom Judea and Samaria.

Much of his time was spent in Rome, where he lived extravagantly. When he came to Jerusalem he tried in every possible way to gain the good will of the Jews by an outward observance of the law and defense of their customs.

The persecution of the church was no doubt inspired by the desire to gain favour with the Jews.

As far as the historical account goes, it seems his hatred was exclusively directed against the Apostles; James was killed by the sword. This James was the brother of John, one of the three disciples who are specially mentioned in the Gospels. With his younger brother John and Peter, he had witnessed the raising of Jairus' daughter, had been on the mount of transfiguration and in Gethsemane.

No record is given of his work as an Apostle nor anything about his trial; the details of his martyrdom are also passed over. He was put to death in the same way as John the Baptist, beheaded with the sword. This mode of death was looked upon by the Jews as the most disgraceful.

The Talmud makes this statement and informs us that this punishment was used in case someone misled the people to worship other gods.

Whether this was the accusation or not which was brought against James, we do not know. The two sons of Zebedee, James and John, had desired to sit at the right and at the left hand in His Kingdom. The Lord had answered them, after their declaration that they could drink the cup that he was to drink of, and had said, **“Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with”** (Matthew 20:23), and here is the fulfillment of this prediction in the life of James.

He is the first Apostle who died and the only Apostle of whose death we have an account given in the New Testament.

That no record is given of the details of His suffering and death is also significant. Well has one said:

“In days of ardent faith and also of expectation of the Lord’s speedy return, death sank into its true place as simply a change of condition; it was but a falling asleep. Accordingly instead of dwelling with morbid interest on the painful details of the martyr’s sufferings, the church pressed forward to reap with joy the harvest of their blood.” *

* R. B. Rackham.

The bloody deed pleased the Jews and the wicked King stretched out his hand against Peter and put him into prison. Peter was the only remaining Apostle in Jerusalem. This seems to be clear from verse 17.

Peter requests that his deliverance be made known to James (the Lord’s brother) and to the brethren. His fellow Apostles, the ten, are not mentioned by him. They were away from Jerusalem at that time. That one of the twelve had been taken away and the others, with the exception of Peter, were not in Jerusalem, is a hint that their work in connection with the nation was ended.

Peter was put into prison for the third time.

The wonderful deliverance of the same man as recorded in chapter 4 must have been still vividly in the minds of many of the Jews and it may have led to the great caution exercised in this imprisonment. Four quaternions of soldiers guarded him. He was in the inner ward. A soldier was on each side and he was bound with two chains and the keepers before the door kept the prison. Thus he was kept in that prison.

Cruel Herod would stamp out the Nazarenes and Peter was to share James' fate. *

* Four Herods are mentioned in the New Testament. All are types of the Anti-Christ and all were energized by Satan.

- Herod the Great who had the children of Bethlehem killed.
- The Herod who killed John the Baptist.
- The Herod who slew James,
- The Herod Agrippa before whom Paul stood and preached.

But prayer was made without ceasing by **“the church unto God for him.”** Of this Herod knew nothing; with this fact the cruel despot did not reckon. Nothing is said of prayer having been made for James. Perhaps his martyrdom was a sudden event. Or it may have been that the Holy Spirit indicated at once that James was to glorify the Lord by his death and no prayer could then be made for his release.

The church held a prayer-meeting and it was a prolonged prayer-meeting. However, the word translated **“without ceasing”** means *“intensely.”* It was an intense prayer meeting and of course was therefore carried on without ceasing. The prayer-meeting was held in a private house, as we shall see later. One member suffered and so all suffered. Prayer was their refuge; they were led into it by the Holy Spirit.

II. The miraculous deliverance of Peter.

“And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison. And behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals: and so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision. When they were past the first and second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of its own accord: and they went out and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him. And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews. And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying. And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda. And when she knew Peter's voice she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate. And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel. But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished. But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place” (Verses 6-17).

A few hours before Herod intended to carry out his wicked scheme the prayer of the church was answered.

Peter was sleeping between the two soldiers, in all probability chained to each, so as to make another escape an impossibility. And why did Peter sleep so peacefully? It was not the sleep of exhaustion, but must have been the result of a calm mind trusting in the Lord. Perhaps he remembered in that prison the words which the risen Lord had addressed to him at the shore of the lake Tiberias:

“When thou shalt be old thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.”

Thus the Lord had spoken, signifying thereby by what death he should glorify God. He was not yet old. He knew his Lord was greater than poor, miserable Herod. Peter rested in the Lord and in His gracious word to him.

Oh! that God’s people might know the calm rest of faith. Our lives are in His hands. He is over us and no enemy can harm us; nothing can touch us without His will.

An angel appeared and delivered Peter. The chains fell from his hands. The light of glory shone in the prison. He obeyed the angel, following him as in a dream. The first and second ward passed, they came to the iron gate, which opened by itself. Outside in the street the angel departed. Then Peter realized that the Lord had sent an angel to deliver him. No further comment on the details of this miracle is necessary.

In spite of all the precautions, Peter was delivered, and once more the prison was empty. Still on Kingdom ground an angel was seen. Through this age the ministry of angels is hidden.

This book closes with another prisoner, Paul, in Rome; no angel was sent to lead him forth. And ever after there have been unaccountable prisons in which the children of God suffered for Christ and for righteousness sake, but the heavens were silent and did not interfere. Thousands were tortured and dragged out a miserable existence in prison till death released them, and, though prayers ascended for their deliverance, no answer came. This has been a mystery to not a few and has been one of the taunts of infidelity. But one of the characteristics of the present age are the closed heavens. *

* We recommend to our readers the excellent book by Sir Robert Anderson “*The Silence of God.*” It deals with this question.

They will not be closed forever. James’ death and Peter’s deliverance foreshadow the death of future Jewish saints during the tribulation and the miraculous deliverance of others.

Once more Peter goes to his own company. They are gathered in the house of Mary, the mother of John. The Mary here is the mother of John Mark, and she is here introduced for the first time in the Book of Acts; she was the aunt of Barnabas.

The house must have been a large one, for there was a court-yard. In the spacious house a goodly number of believers were gathered, engaged in prayer. No leader was there, for we read that James and the brethren were absent. It was, as we say, an informal gathering, but the Holy Spirit was the leader.

Perhaps they were still on their knees when Peter knocked for admission.

The maid Rhoda (Rose) hastened to the gate. Gladness filled her heart when she recognized Peter's voice. For joy she forgot all about that latch at the gate, and instead of opening to Peter she ran back to the house to communicate the good news. She must have interrupted the prayers of the assembled company. The prayer had been answered and praise was now in order. Alas! there was no response from their side.

Instead of believing that Peter had been delivered, they looked upon the happy, beaming face of Rhoda and said, "**thou art mad.**"

Not one of the company believed that Peter had been released. Rhoda was the one who believed that it was Peter. And this is undoubtedly the reason why her name is mentioned in this book. The poor maid, perhaps a slave girl, pleased God because she had faith. While there was great earnestness in that prayer meeting, when the prayer was answered, unbelief manifested itself.

When Rhoda could not be shaken in her belief that it was really Peter, the company tried to explain the knocking in a spiritualistic way.

"**It is his angel,**" they said.

This is generally believed to mean that it was his "guardian angel." Upon this expression, much of the belief in guardian angels is founded. However, it is far-fetched to do so. They meant by this expression, the disembodied spirit of Peter. They thought that he had been martyred and that it was a kind of spiritualist manifestation of the fact. But the door was at last opened, and Peter stood safe and sound in their midst; then they were astonished.

After making known how he was delivered, he departed and went into another place.

This left James, the Lord's brother, in Jerusalem.

The other Apostles had gone and Peter makes likewise haste to leave Jerusalem. Surely this marks the conclusion of this transition period. Where did Peter go? We do not know.

Roman Catholicism declares that he went to Rome. There is absolutely no proof for it, but all is against it. Peter never saw Rome. Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans in 54, and there we learn that at that time no Apostle had visited that city.

We see Peter back in Jerusalem in chapter 15, and it is clear that he had not followed work among the Gentiles. He continued to hold to the gospel of the circumcision (Galatians 2:7-8).

III. The Presumption and Judgment of King Herod.

“Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter. And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Cesarea, and there abode. And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king’s chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king’s country. And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of man. And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost” (Verses 18-23).

The escape of Peter was soon discovered, and the soldiers, being responsible with their lives, according to Roman law, were of course greatly distressed. Herod sought for his prisoner, but he was beyond his reach. The keepers were put to death by the king. He followed the footsteps of his cruel grandfather, who had the children of Bethlehem killed.

He then left Jerusalem for Caesarea, where he had a magnificent palace.

Some difficulty existed between him and the people of Tyre and Sidon. The Phoenician cities were dependent on Palestine for food, as their land was but a narrow strip along the seacoast. They were therefore forced to make peace, which they did through Blastus, their friend and the king’s chamberlain. Most likely the interest of Blastus was gained by a bribe. It also seems that Herod must have cut off the supply of the Phoenicians. They could not buy nor sell. Thus they were forced to bow before the king. In all this, he appears as a type of the man of sin, whose character Herod foreshadows.

Then a day came when an audience was granted unto the people.

The king appeared in royal apparel. Josephus, the Jewish historian, informs us that his garment was made of the brightest silver, which, with the sunlight falling upon it, dazzled the eyes of the multitude. He sat on his throne, the bema, or judgment seat. Then he made an oration, most likely announcing to the ambassadors of Tyre and Sidon that he was now reconciled. The scene must have been a brilliant one.

The people were carried away by the magnificent spectacle and flattering oration of the king, and cried out, **“it is the voice of a god and not of a man.”** No doubt the aim of Herod was this very acclamation. He had planned it all. The zenith of his glory seemed reached. Monarchs were then deified, and Augustus, the emperor, was also worshipped. He gave not the glory to God, but usurped His Glory, and the result was a sudden judgment.

What happened to Herod is mentioned by Josephus. He, however, tries to shield the king, though he speaks of Herod’s wickedness. He says that sudden pains attacked him, which were produced by the sight of an owl, a bird he dreaded, and which was seen sitting on one of the ropes of the awning of the theatre.

The Word of God gives us the true account. It was the angel of the Lord that smote him, and he was eaten of worms.

A most awful and loathsome disease took hold of him, and literally he was eaten, after a few days, of Worms.

“He was seized with violent internal pains, and carried to his palace. There he lingered five days in extreme agony; being eaten of worms, the cause of his intestine disorder.”

The coming antichrist, too, will claim divine honors and assume the place of God. His end is foreshadowed in Herod’s awful fate and the place which is beyond, “**where the worm dieth not.**”

IV. Barnabas and Saul returning unto Antioch.

“But the word of God grew and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark” (Verses 24-25).

Nothing could hinder the victorious progress of the Word of God. It grew and was multiplied. Herod’s removal by divine judgment must have had an influence for the truth. Then Barnabas, having been in Jerusalem, went back to Antioch, and John Mark accompanied him. The last verse connects closely with the beginning of the third great part of the book.

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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