

Acts Part 1 Study Guide

Lesson 11: Herod's Persecution – Acts 12

Introduction: Herod Agrippa 1 gradually broadened his kingdom by edicts from the Roman Emperors Caligula (AD 37-41) and Claudius (AD 41-54). In order to solidify his support from the Jews, he turns to the persecution of Christianity. Thus, difficulty comes to the brethren in Judea on two fronts: the natural catastrophe of famine and the civil persecution by Herod.

1. James' Death and Peter's Arrest – Acts 12:1-4

- A. It is interesting to note the peculiarities of inspiration. The death of Stephen is given much space while one of Jesus' closest associates and the first apostle to die, James, is given 11 words. This is not the exalted position that James once coveted.
- B. Some speculate that this renewed persecution, much to the Jews' liking, is consequent upon the inclusion of the Gentiles. This would have further enraged the Jewish leadership, especially if such Gentile believers gradually began to infiltrate Jerusalem (cf. the charge against Paul in Acts 21:28-31). If this is accurate, it is not surprising that Peter is Herod's next target.
- C. For maximum political effect, Herod engineers Peter's arrest and planned execution at Passover. This would ensure broad publicity and favor among orthodox Jews.

2. Peter's Release – Acts 12:5-19

- A. It was undoubtedly reported to Herod by the Jews that his prize prisoner had once before been imprisoned and had escaped under highly unusual circumstances. Thus Herod devotes 16 guards to guarantee Peter's incarceration.
- B. Opposite this flexing of military muscle, *"constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church"* (12:5; cf. 12:12). As a result, an angel comes to liberate Peter.
 - 1. Peter, himself, seems slow to grasp what is happening to him. At first he thinks the events are a vision (12:9). Not until he is outside the prison, *"when Peter had come to himself"* (12:11), does he understand that his freedom is real.
 - 2. Further, the disciples, who are gathered praying, are shocked by such a sudden and clear answer to their prayers (12:15-17).
- C. Peter escapes to an undisclosed location, making it impossible for Herod to find him. One would like to have witnessed the consternation, anger and frustration of this pompous, carnal man as he realized that his political insurance had inexplicably disappeared from the midst of sixteen soldiers. They are summarily executed for their "dereliction of duty."

3. Herod's Demise – Acts 12:20-24

- A. Herod's horrendous death is consistent with Old Testament accounts of God's

immediate judgment against some rebellious civil rulers, false prophets and other enemies. Josephus sustains Luke's account and says that Herod was stricken even while speaking to the crowd.

B. Note the contrasting actions of angels: toward those who are in fellowship with God they are benevolent; toward those who rebel against God they are frighteningly destructive.

C. But in spite of such persecution and threat, *"the word of God grew and multiplied"* (12:24). Note other such assessments of the growth of the kingdom and give the context of each:

1. Acts 9:31 –

2. Acts 6:7 –

3. Acts 5:14 –

4. Acts 4:4 –

Questions

1a. What was Peter doing the night before his death?

1b. How might this be explained?

2. What lessons for us today grow out of this story?

a.

b.

c.

d.