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**PRAYER IN PERSECUTION – ACTS 12**

**As we get into the “middle chapters” of Acts, we see that the church is being persecuted and scattered, but is also gaining strength. Stephen had already been Martyred, many were in prison and James the brother of John is about to be executed. The apostles were still meeting in homes and devoted to the prayer, fellowship, the breaking of bread and the apostles teaching.**

**In Jerusalem, the Apostles were being oppressed by three layers;**

1. **The Romans, who only cared about maintaining the tax-system to keep money flowing to Caesar.**
2. **The Herods, who stayed in power by pleasing the Romans and controlling the Jews.**
3. **The Jewish leaders, who were trying to stop the spread of whatv they considered heresy about Jesus of Nazareth. It is they who killed Stephen and imprisoned others.**

The Herodian Dynasty was brutal and paranoid. They killed those whom they deemed a threat, even within their own household or the innocent children of Bethlehem.

The Herods:

* Herod the Great – Reigned when Jesus was born
* Herod Archelaus – His Son
* Herod Antipas – His other son
* *Herod Agrippa I – who we’ll read about in Acts 12*
* Herod Agrippa II – who actually helps save Paul later in Acts.

**ACTS 12 “**It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.

Right away we see that persecution was spreading. Now it is no longer the religious leaders and Sanhedrin persecuting the believers, the ethnarchs and tetrarchs (those in charge of a people or region) are persecuting them as well.

**2**He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. **3**When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.

This single statement shows how brutal the Herod’s were. The James that they had put to death with a sword was THE James, one of the original 12 Apostles, the brother of John, son of Zebedee, one of the “sons of thunder”. James was one of Jesus’ inner-circle, and a beloved leader in the early church.

 **3**When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. **4**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.

Peter would be next, after Passover. While he awaited a mob trial he was placed under high-security prison guard (16 soldiers).

**5**So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was… (?)

**What was the church doing in response to James’s murder at the hands of the authorities?**

**What were they doing about Peter’s unjust imprisonment?**

**Did they respond by protesting in the streets?**

**Did they begin rallying against the government and inciting anger and reaction toward injustice?**

**Did they begin switching their focus from being witnesses and preaching the gospel to exposing the injustices in the corrupt levels of government?**

**NO! They *prayed!***

**“5**Peter was kept in prison, but the church *was earnestly praying to God for him.*

We will find out soon enough that their “earnest prayers” were enough to not only get Peter miraculously freed from prison, but also it got Herod unceremoniously removed from office.

**6**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. **7**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.

**8**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. **9**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. **10**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.

This is an amazing rescue from prison. Peter was not only chained, he was locked behind iron gates with 16 guards.

**11**Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.”

**12**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.*

This “John Mark” is very important. He is Barnabas’s cousin, and also the reason Paul and Barnabas broke fellowship later in Acts. He is also believed to be the writer of the Gospel of Mark.

**13**Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. **14**When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”

**15**“You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”

**16**But Peter kept on knocking,

This is sort of a comical moment in this very serious chapter. Peter came to this prayer meeting at John Mark’s mother’s house hoping to be let in to the shelter and safety of the home, but Rhoda left him outside and tried to explain it to the rest, and Peter kept knocking.

16b and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. **17**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 other brothers and sisters about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.

It’s interesting that he mentions “James”. He’s obviously not talking about the James that had just been murdered, he is now talking about James the half-brother of Jesus, who is now a believer and becoming a leader of the church in Jerusalem.

**18**In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. **19**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.

This onceagain shows the wickedness and paranoia of the Herod’s. Herod Agrippa was so paranoid that one of the guards may have helped Peter escape, that he had them all executed.

**Herod’s Death**

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. **20**He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing 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.

Herod is being given credit for an important peace treaty with the Northern territories. He is dressed in pompous attire and was receiving praise and worship from the people.

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

A very unceremonious, undignified sudden death.

This is the result of what the apostles did in the face of severe persecution, injustice and oppression. They prayed earnestly!

And because they prayed earnestly;

Not only was Peter freed from Prison,

And not only was Herod removed from the throne,

But something really incredible happened…

**24**But *the word of God continued to spread and flourish.*

The word of God continued to spread and flourish. We don’t know what would have happened if the Apostles did not pray, and decided to do something else instead. But they DID pray, earnestly, faithfully and relentlessly and the results are what they are.

**25**When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned fromJerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.” <end>

That’s Acts, what about US?

Often when we are feeling oppressed and persecuted, or we see injustice directed toward us or others, we want to react. We want to muster up any strength, influence or power we have and direct it toward the perceived perpetrator. We sometimes like to rouse up anger in others toward a common enemy and rally whatever resources we can influence to fight back.

This is not the what the apostles did here in Acts 12, and most often what we should normally do as well. This does not mean that we should never speak up. Solomon tells us that there is “a time to keep silent, and a time to speak”. There is a time to react to injustices, sometimes that means speaking, sometimes acting, but it should always be done through the power of the Holy Spirit and never done as purely in anger as an action of reaction of the ”flesh”. James, the one Peter mentioned, tells us this:

**James 1:20** “human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.”

We must never forget what the goal is for the great commission that Jesus gave us. It’s not that we go out and punish the wicked, or go out a make right every injustice, it’s that we go out and preach, the gospel, make disciples and be His witnesses. When we have this right, we will get the same results the Apostles did here in Acts 12.

**“the word of God will continue to spread and flourish.”**

But what about all the injustice in the World, how should we react?

It’s natural to feel angry and indignant about injustice,

Most of us agree that the days we are living in are not just unjust, they are evil. Immorality, lack of Faith, deception, godlessness, and governments that blatantly disregard the Word of God and the Will of God in their actions, policies, laws and agendas.

Many have become angry, fearful and deeply concerned about the evil that seems to have permeated all aspects of society and culture. I know Christians who are very disturbed and having severe anxiety about all that is going on in the world, particularly in government.

But we have to remember, that this is nothing new. The days were evil during the time of Acts that in some ways are more disturbing than they are now.

In fact if we were to go through the Bible, particularly the New Testament and pick out our most flowery, feel-good verses, the kind you might see on a painting of a beautiful nature scene, or a Wedding, birthday or sympathy card.

Verses like:

* “Love is patient, Love is kind” (1st Cor 13.)
* In everything give thanks (1st Thess. 5)
* “Rejoice in the Lord always”

ALL of these verses were written in times that are way worse than we are experiencing now, or likely will ever experience. The church in these times was constantly threatened with imprisonment and death just for believing in Jesus.

IN fact one of the most comforting and encouraging verses ever written, was penned by Paul while he was in a Roman prison. This is the same Rome that fed prisoners to wild animals for sport, burned people at the stake and decapitated or crucified countless thousands.

In this verse, we see ethe secret that the early church in acts and the other churches knew about, that brought them peace regardless of what they were facing.

This familiar verse gives us instructions on how to have incomparable peace, even in times of tremendous worry and anxiety.

**Phil. 4:6-7**“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. **7**And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Part by part (NLT)

* **6**Don’t worry about anything;
* instead, pray about everything.
* Tell God what you need,
* and thank him for all he has done.
* **7**Then you will experience God’s peace,
* which exceeds anything we can understand.

**If we do all this;**

**then His peace**

**will guard our hearts and minds**

**as we live in Christ Jesus.**