

Acts 12:5

1 Now about that time, Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. 2 And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.

Unless Christ returns during your life time, the truth is that you and I are going to die. And when we die, they will put us into a box, lower us into the ground, dirt will be kicked over the casket and everyone will go to a gathering and eat potato salad.

And as they eat the potato salad they will be remembering the good times that they had with you while you were alive. And so, I'd like to ask you a question. What would you like people to say about you when you're gone?

Our passage this morning opens with the martyrdom of the first apostle, James. Let's begin with verse 1.

1 Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. 2 And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.

Herod Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great who ordered all Jewish babies killed following the birth of Jesus. He was a wicked man and he ordered that Christians be found and put to death. James was the first to die.

You will recall that James and John were the brothers who asked Jesus if they could sit on either side of him when he came into his kingdom. Listen to the story as recorded in Mark 10:35-41.

35 James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You." 36 And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" 37 They said to Him, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory." 38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink,

or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" 39  
They said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized..."

41 Hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John.

Jesus said to James, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized."

When Jesus said these words, what do you think James and John thought he meant at the time?

When you think about James' death, the words of Jesus take on a special meaning. Jesus was saying that there can be no glory apart from suffering. James was killed with the sword and John was exiled to Patmos and was burned in oil.

Go back to Acts 12.

To follow Christ, suffering will occur. Herod was able to kill one of the apostles and he planned to do the same with others. Notice verse 3.

3 When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread.

This is the second time Peter has been taken to prison. You will remember that the first time an angel intervened and took them out of jail. The Jews were afraid of the crowd and Gamaliel said that if Peter's words were not true, he would just be a flash in the pan but if his words were true, there was nothing they could do to stop him. So they did not pursue him.

Notice that Herod was trying to please the Jews in verse 3. Why do you think he cared what the Jews thought?

The Jews were probably angrier than they had been before. Now they saw Gentile and Jewish believers fellowshiping together! This must have infuriated them. Why?

Look at verse 4.

4 When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people.

Herod had let him escape once but this time he was not going to take any chances. Peter must have thought that he was going to die.

Look at verse 5.

5 So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.

What was going on while Peter was being held in prison?

A prayer meeting was going on, on Peter's behalf. The Bible says that they were praying fervently for him. Peter later wrote in 1 Peter 3:12:

12 "For the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and his ears attend to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

God knew what happened to James and he knew what was happening to Peter. One of my favorite quotes from J.I. Packer's book, Knowing God, is, "You are never out of the mind of God." Herod was an evil man but nothing he did escaped God's sovereignty.

It looked like everything was going badly for Peter.

Would someone read the story beginning with verse 6?

6 On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. 7 And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to

him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." 9 And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the Iron Gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. 11 When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

When you read this story, what do you think was going through Peter's mind as he followed the instructions from the angel?

Why do you suppose God allowed James to die but allowed Peter to live?

Notice that Peter was sleeping when the angel appeared. I love Luke's language in verse 7. It says that the angel struck Peter. He must have been sleeping soundly.

A friend of mine asked someone how they were doing. The person's response was, "Not bad, under the circumstances." My friend replied to him immediately, "Well what are you doing way down there, under the circumstances?"

Peter wasn't "under the circumstances." He knew that "To live is Christ and to die is gain!" He wasn't worried at all and he was fast asleep.

Well Peter gets out of jail free and immediately goes to Mary's house. Look at verse 12.

12 And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

What were they praying for?

This next section shows that God has a sense of humor. Verse 13.

13 When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate.

Can you picture this? Peter gets out of the jail but can't get into the prayer meeting they were holding for him!

And the people who were praying...look at their reaction. Verse 15.

15 They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel."

So this group is praying and God would allow Peter to be released but no one believed that what they had been praying for would actually come to pass. Sound familiar?

Look at verse 16.

16 But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed.

The whole church was praying for Peter's release and when he is released they can't believe that God would do what they asked. We are like the father who said to Jesus in Mark 9:24, "I do believe; help my unbelief." Oh how little faith we all have. Or is it just me?

Peter now tells them what had happened. Verse 17.

17 But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place.

This James was the half brother of Jesus and the head of the Jerusalem church. He was also the author of the Book of James.

The end of verse 17 says that Peter left and went to another place. Where he went is a mystery. Peter walks off the pages of scripture after this event and we don't know much about his life after this time. We know from what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians that Peter and his wife ministered together, perhaps in Corinth. There is no evidence that Peter ever went to Rome. So it is hard to know whether he did or didn't found the church in Rome as the Roman Catholics teach. From Fox's book of Martyrs we learn that Peter was crucified upside down following his wife who was burned at the stake. Fox tells us that his last words to his wife as he watched her being burned alive were, "Remember Christ! Remember Christ!"

Peter's words in 1 Peter 3 were that "But the face of the Lord is against them that do evil." And the end of this chapter certainly attests to that. Look at verse 18.

18 Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. 19 When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.

Roman law stated that if a guard permitted a prisoner to escape, the guard would receive the same punishment that the prisoner would have received even if it was death. So Herod had all of the guards put to death probably hoping that their deaths might please the Jews who wanted Peter dead.

But instead God decided to put Herod to death. Look at verse 20.

20 Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country. 21 On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. 22 The people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" 23 And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.

I'm not sure why Luke put the words in that order. Verse 23 says he was eaten by worms and then he died. Pretty gross!

So instead of Peter being killed, Herod was killed. How ironic.

Why did the people of Tyre and Sidon call Herod a god?

They thought flattery would get them food. Herod's ego was so great that he may have started to believe he was a god. But Almighty God makes the strong weak and the weak strong. Herod was nothing to God and in just an instant, he was dead.

There are many lessons for us in this chapter.

1. God is sovereign. He does what He wants.
2. God hears and answers prayer.
3. God uses our circumstances to bring glory to himself.

Next week we will look at the final verses in chapter 12 and the beginning of chapter 13. Saul, Barnabus and John Mark become the central characters and their journeys are incredible.