

Herod Vexes the Church

Lesson Scope: [Acts 12](#)

Lesson Focus

For the fifth time, the church in Jerusalem was experiencing persecution (Acts 4-8). King Herod initiated this persecution and directed it toward the church leaders. As has often been the case, it was a cooperation between civil authority and false religious leaders. Herod simply killed James and took Peter with the same purpose in mind. The believers seemed very vulnerable.

It may sometimes appear that God does not respond to His saints "which cry day and night unto him," but their prayers ascend to Him as a sweet incense (Revelation 8:3-4). The God of heaven and earth hears His people and will build and preserve His church to the end (Mark 13:20).

Prayer and its accompanying act of fasting are effective. There is always the need to strengthen our prayer life and move beyond prayer as a ritual duty. Real communication with God brings our daily challenges to Him and "hears" His answers through His Word. Daily communication with God makes it our "vital breath," and we naturally resort to prayer when the big challenges come. At times of deep sorrow and grief, we automatically lay other duties aside. God's Word becomes our daily bread.

We may experience more unrest in our society in the years ahead if the Lord tarry. This should drive us to our knees because, as a nonresistant people, we do not use physical force or threats to confront lawlessness. The spiritual power we get from God is our only, but adequate, resource as we become a public example of standing for the truth.

The growth of the church provokes increased opposition from the enemy. Through fervent prayer, however, God's people can face this opposition victoriously.

Lesson Aim: To portray the effectiveness of prayer in overcoming the enemy.

Theme Verse: James 5:16. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

Lesson Text:

The Adversary Attacks

Acts 12:1-5 ¹ Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth *his* hands to vex certain of the church. ² And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. ³ And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.) ⁴ 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. ⁵ Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.

An Angel Delivers

Acts 12:6-11 ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him. ¹¹ 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.

The Saints Rejoice

Acts 12:12-19 ¹² 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. ¹³ And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda. ¹⁴ And when she knew Pe-

ter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate. ¹⁵ And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel. ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened *the door*, and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter. ¹⁹ 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 Judaea to Caesarea, and *there* abode.

Questions for Study

The Adversary Attacks

1. What two human authorities often unite to persecute believers?
2. Why is Satan's tactic of torture and death often effective (Hebrews 2:14-15)?
3. How can prayer help us overcome in the face of death?

An Angel Delivers

4. What does Peter's ability to sleep tell us about his spirit?
5. What can we learn from miraculous deliverances?
6. How does seeing the sovereign movements of God strengthen our prayer life?

The Saints Rejoice

7. What are the values of corporate prayer meetings?
8. How can we show gladness at God's answers to prayer?
9. Name some incidents in recent church history where God defeated her foes.

Analyzing the Passage

Herod the king was Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great who slew the babies in Bethlehem in his effort to destroy Jesus. He was father of Herod Agrippa II who later tried Paul (Acts 26). Agrippa I was also a nephew of Herod Antipas who beheaded John the Baptist and mocked Christ at His trial.

"James the brother of John" (both sons of Zebedee) was the first disciple to be slain, and John (the Revelator) was likely the last disciple to die. The

second James (Acts 12:17) was likely the half brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19) and the writer of the Book of James.

"Days of unleavened bread" (Acts 12:3) and Easter (Passover) (Acts 12:4) both referred to the whole seven-day Passover observance (Leviticus 23:6-8). The Passover was killed on "the first day of the feast of unleavened bread" (Matthew 26:17). With the Romanization of Christianity, the name Easter (after Eastr, the Teutonic goddess of spring) was substituted for Passover.

"Four quaternions of soldiers" (Acts 12:4) totaled sixteen. Each set was responsible for one of the night watches. The "no small stir" (Acts 12:18) among the soldiers resulted from the knowledge that the ones responsible would give their life for the escaped prisoner (Acts 12:19).

Principles and Applications

The Adversary Attacks

1. God's people face an aggressive, self-serving enemy (Acts 12:1-4). Down through history, Christians have endured persecution and death. The burnings, beheadings, and other methods of execution that the saints suffered would make one think that they would be destroyed. The enduring church of Jesus Christ is evidence of God's power. He does respond to the believer's prayers and loyalty to Jesus.

2. Prayer is powerful when God's people persevere (Acts 12:5). Our interest and commitment to a cause are shown by our perseverance. When we are grieved to the heart, we automatically lay other duties aside, even eating. Jesus said prayer can move mountains, so surely He can cure the sick, deliver from prison, and such like. He is sovereign.

3. United collective prayer is effective (Acts 12:5). Wherever the saints, even just two or three, unite for prayer, there God is in their midst (Matthew 18:20). Through the prayers of the church, God moves in ways unknown

to us "His wonders to perform." It is through saints submitted and committed to one another and Jesus Christ that God can work. Corporate prayer not only influences events but also prepares and purifies the individuals in the church.

An Angel Delivers

4. Through prayer, the Christian receives strength to be at rest in difficult circumstances (Acts 12:6). Peter was in prison, chained between two soldiers, awaiting probable execution the next day. Yet the angel needed to

wake him from an apparently deep and restful sleep. When we pray and rest in God's eternal purposes and all-wise providence, He gives strength and comfort.

5. Through prayer, the tactics of the enemy come to naught (Acts 12:6-7). Many evil devices are foiled through the work of angels in response to praying saints as in Daniel 10:12, 20. God delights in the prayers of His people and wants us to persist in prayer.

6. Prayer links the believer to God's unlimited resources to arrange circumstances for our good (Acts 12:6-10). From a human perspective, it is hard to see how Romans 8:28 can be true. "All things work together for good ... to them who are the called according to his purpose." The key to a better understanding is to accept what our highest good and God's purposes are. Our highest good is to grow in faithfulness. God's purpose is to work out the redemption of His purchased possession to His eternal glory (Ephesians 1:10-14).

7. Thinking upon unfolding events gives the believer assurance that God is at work (Acts 12:11). Hebrews 11 tells of some who experienced miraculous deliverance and others who suffered cruel tortures and death. But in it all, whether by life or by death, God's plan was going forward. Events in our lives may not be as dramatic as Peter's deliverance from prison, nor may they be so clearly perceived as historical accounts we may read, but as we are faithful, we can be confident that God is at work.

The Saints Rejoice

8. Receiving answers to prayer is an inspiration to the Christian (Acts 12:17). "And be ye thankful" is a reminder that we need at times. We take so much for granted as we pray and receive. Thinking of God's daily care, protection, provision, and deliverance can give us joy in our walk with God.

9. God's work leaves the enemy frustrated and defeated (Acts 12:18-19). The outcome was that the soldiers to whom Peter was chained died instead of Peter. And Herod experienced embarrassment instead of the acclaim he sought. It is in the very strongholds of Satan that God gains victories. "The gates of hell shall not prevail against [the church]" (Matthew 16:18). Our prayers for our enemies need to be like Jesus' words on the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." We desire that in their defeat, the enemies of truth would turn to God.

Important Teachings

1. God's people face an aggressive, self-serving enemy (Acts 12:1-4).
2. Prayer is powerful when God's people persevere (Acts 12:5).
3. United collective prayer is effective (Acts 12:5).
4. Through prayer, the Christian receives strength to be at rest in difficult circumstances (Acts 12:6).
5. Through prayer, the tactics of the enemy come to naught (Acts 12:6-7).
6. Prayer links the believer to God's unlimited resources to arrange circumstances for our good (Acts 12:6-10).
7. Thinking upon unfolding events gives the believer assurance that God is at work (Acts 12:11).
8. Receiving answers to prayer is inspiration to the Christian (Acts 12:17).
9. God's work leaves the enemy frustrated and defeated (Acts 12:18-19)

Answers to Questions

1. What two human authorities often unite to persecute believers?

False religious leaders often use the authority of the civil government to apprehend, punish, and put to death true believers. The Jewish leaders did not have authority to execute people.

2. Why is Satan's tactic of torture and death often effective (Hebrews 2:14, 15)?

Our natural man desires life and will do nearly anything to avoid pain and death. So Satan capitalizes on the fear of physical death. Physical pain and suffering have caused many to turn back because they could not endure it.

3. How can prayer help us overcome in the face of death?

In prayer, we are brought close to God and eternal realities. We are made conscious of the power of God and the fleeting nature of temporal things. We resign our will to God's will as Jesus did when He said, "Thy will be done."

4. What does Peter's ability to sleep tell us about his spirit?

Peter evidently had the same commitment as Paul, "Whether we live ... or die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8). Each personality is different, and God knows our strengths and weaknesses. But when we fully trust the Lord, we can turn unfavorable circumstances over to Him and not worry.

5. What can we learn from miraculous deliverances? There is no limitation to God's ability in life or in death. Our attitude must always be like that of the three Hebrew children: "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us.... But if not, we will not serve thy gods" (Daniel 3:17-18).

6. How does seeing the sovereign movements of God strengthen our prayer life?

When we see how God's ways are so much wiser and better than our ways, we are less set on our own answers. We are humbled and can rest in God's superior workings. Our hearts are more open to accept His will.

7. What are the values of corporate prayer meetings?

Group prayer meetings give opportunity to share our needs and fears. We are strengthened, and our perspective of issues is helped by the spiritual strengths of others. The correct spirit in prayer is not "storming the throne" (God knows our needs before we come), but learning His will and waiting on the Lord (Romans 8:26-28).

8. How can we show gladness at God's answers to prayer?

Whatever the outcome is, we should always give God the glory. We forget so often to "let the peace of God rule in [our] hearts... and be ... thankful" (Colossians 3:15). We should share the goodness of God with others.

9. Name some incidents in recent church history where God defeated her foes.

There have been some instances where aggressive social services have taken children out of homes. With prayer and contacts, the children were finally returned home. In the world wars, through prayers and sufferings, an alternative was found to military service for conscientious objectors.

Summarizing the Lesson

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

—William Cowper

Research Guide

1. Use a Bible dictionary to familiarize yourself with the several men who held the title Herod and with their characters and personalities.
2. After Peter's escape, Herod went down to his palace at Caesarea. Its ruins on the Mediterranean Sea coast may be pictured in a Bible dictionary. A large restored amphitheater there is probably the place where Herod Agrippa I gave his final speech (Acts 12:21-23). The angel of the Lord acted again and smote him that he died of worms.