

The Great Escape

Devotional

During the oppressive regime of Nicolae Ceausescu, Josif Ton, in one of his published sermons, told how the authorities threatened to kill him. He responded:

“Sir, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying.”

There had been, however, little persecution for the first Christians since the wave of opposition that resulted in the death of Stephen (Acts 7). Some time had passed since that incident during which the church had become established in Antioch. As a consequence of Stephen’s death, Christians from Jerusalem fled throughout Judea and Samaria, taking the gospel with them. God’s way of growing the church, fulfilling Jesus’ expressed intention that the gospel spread “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8), involved an unfolding of providence in a way that might at first seem wholly unexpected. If God is sovereign, could he not have accomplished this purpose by withering his enemies’ taunts by acts of unparalleled triumph, which would not involve the suffering and death of his people? Whatever the answer to this question may be, the facts of what actually occurred are very different. Just as the expansion of the church to Antioch occurred as a result of Stephen’s martyrdom, so the missionary journeys of Paul (which begin in the next chapter) were a direct result of the persecution instigated by Herod Agrippa I, which led to the martyrdom of James. Luke had just given a marvelous description of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Antioch. The church was growing by leaps and bounds (Acts 11:21). Everything was going well.

In chapter 13, Paul and Barnabas will set off on their first missionary journey. In that light, what occurred here in chapter 12 is shocking and unexpected. One of God’s chosen saints is brutally killed. Yet God’s ways are not our ways. **The martyrs were bound, imprisoned, scourged, racked, burnt, rent, butchered— and still the church multiplied.**¹

¹ Thomas, Derek W. H.. Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries) (p. 328). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Open it

1. When have you endured a difficult or hard situation that you hated going through at the time only for it to turn into a great blessing later on in your life?

Read it

Acts 12:1-25

Explore it

2. What things did Herod do to the Christians in an attempt to slow their growth?
3. What did the church do in response to these acts?
4. What happened to Peter while he was in prison?
5. Where did Peter go and what happened upon his miraculous release?
6. Why did God strike down Herod?

James, half brother of Jesus and author of the book of James, who became a leader in the Jerusalem church). This James, along with Peter and John, was a member of the innermost circle of Jesus. Herod kills this important leader “with the sword” (v. 2), which may imply beheading.

So following the violent martyrdom of Stephen, the church grieved over the first martyred apostle, James. This decision “pleased the Jews,” and because it did, Herod proceeded to arrest Peter also (v. 3). There was no reason to execute James or to arrest Peter—the two weren’t political revolutionaries—but Herod wants to play to the Romans and the Jews. In taking such drastic actions, he can assure the Romans that this little sect called Christianity isn’t violating the ways of Rome, and he can also appeal to the Jews by showing that he is standing up for their traditions (i.e., the temple, the law, and separation from Gentiles). Herod loves power. He loves glory. He loves to please people.

We don’t have to look far to find modern examples of the beheadings of those who claim the name of Christ. The images of ISIS beheading professing believers on the coast of Libya will never leave my mind. But Christians can die with confidence because our King can put heads back on. Herod may have started with James and not Peter, who seems the more outspoken of the two, in order to gauge the crowd’s reaction to his cruelty. When they were pleased with the death of James, Herod decided to go all the way to the top of the Christian movement’s human leadership in making an attack on Peter. (The evil one always loves to attack those in leadership.)³

10. Agrippa chooses a persecution tactic different from Saul’s in Acts 8. Instead of going after the followers, he sets his sights on the leaders. How might striking out against the leaders instead of the followers be more effective at stopping the Jesus movement?

Billy Graham once said:

It is never easy to be a Christian. The Christian life can still bring its own loneliness, unpopularity, and problems. It is human nature to dislike, resent, or regard with suspicion anyone who is “different....” To suffer for the faith is not a penalty; it is a privilege. In doing so, we share in the very work and ministry of Christ. If we are united with Christ and his sufferings, we shall also be united with Christ in his resurrection.⁴

11. Why can a believer live with great hope amidst times of great persecution? How do we prepare for the possibilities of such persecution while living in a time and place of peace?

³ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 3887-3906). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Girard, Robert C.. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 2633-2645). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

12. Throughout Acts 12 we see unbelievers plotting and persecuting while we see the believers praying. Where do Christians turn when opposition comes instead of to prayer? Why are we prone to choose these ways instead of turning to the Lord?

BLINDED BY THE LAW NOT THE LIGHT

The religious establishment rejoiced to see James's head roll. A good politician knows the expediency of pleasing the special interests, so when what he did to James got good press, Agrippa decided to nab another apostle, Peter. Agrippa decided not to terminate the Big Fisherman until after the twin festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread. The festival schedule that year was carefully planned to go like this:

- Thursday—Search and destroy all yeast (leaven).
- Friday noon—Sacrifice Passover lambs at the Temple.
- Friday after sundown—Eat Passover meal with family and guests.
- Next seven days—Celebrate Israel's escape from Egypt. Eat only unleavened bread.
- Day after the festival—Chop off Peter's head!

The Jews took a dim view of executions during this high holy season. One must operate by certain priorities, you understand: First, we must take a few days off to worship God. Then we can get back to killing Christians! So, in the spirit of the holidays, Peter "celebrated" in prison (probably at the Roman Fortress Antonia), guarded by four relays of four soldiers each—one squad for each of the night watches. This was unusually heavy security, reserved for the most dangerous felons.⁵

13. The Jewish people were so religious and yet were pleased to kill God's messengers. How can religion cause us to oppose God's plans instead of promote them? What makes people so blind to this truth?

SLEEPING LIKE A BABY

While Herod prepared to bring Peter out of prison, Peter was "sleeping between two soldiers" (v.6). He isn't biting his nails, pacing the floor, or trying to negotiate a deal. He's sleeping! The passage provides no hint of any anxiety at work in him, a fact that reminds me of a later story in which Paul and Silas sang hymns in prison. Paul sings; Peter sleeps (Stott, Message of Acts, 209). Here we find a wonderful application.⁶

⁵ Girard, Robert C.. The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 2691-2693). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Merida, Tony. Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 3966-3969). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

14. Why do people suffer from worry and anxiety? What things did Peter know from the Bible and his prior experiences that would give him and all of us peace amidst such difficult and stressful times?

MY CHAINS FELL OFF...I HAVE BEEN SET FREE!

In verse 7 an angel comes in and stands next to Peter, and light shines in the cell, but that doesn't wake Peter up! The angel has to strike Peter on the side to move him. I've got to believe Luke loved to tell this story. He had to get some details from several sources to write it, but I think Peter's confession made him smile. Can't you imagine Peter reporting, "An angel was kicking me in the ribs, saying, 'Get up!'"? When Peter wakes, the chains fall off. Our Lord specializes in breaking chains (see Ps 146: 7). Peter follows the angel, thinking he's dreaming.

This detail is important because it tells us that Peter knew he couldn't claim that the rescue was owing to anything he did or could do. He wasn't freed because he was strong or fast. All he contributed to the event was walking dazedly through the prison area as told. The "iron gate" opens the same way the stone was rolled away: by God's mighty power. It opened "by itself" (*automate* in Greek). Upon exiting, Peter enters the street, the angel leaves, and Peter finally comes to and becomes aware of the Lord's great rescue.⁷

15. When have you faced an impossible task or situation only to have God make a way where there seemed to be none?

Yes, there is a fresh grave outside the city with James' name on it. The church has suffered physical losses. A Christ-hating, Christian-killing King Herod sits on the throne. Is God in total control? Yes! His plans are unstoppable; His will is irreversible.⁸

16. In our text we see two disciples (James & Peter) in two similar situations (both being persecuted) with two different outcomes (James is killed and Peter is rescued). What does this chapter say about God's sovereignty and our expectations and response as we face difficult times?

⁷ ibid

⁸ Sermon by Stephen Davey entitled The Answer Came Knocking found @ http://www.wisdomonline.org/media/messages/series_list?filter=book&book=36&page=2

KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCKIN' ON MARY'S DOOR

The first thing Peter had to do was let the Christians know of his escape. Next, he had to head for cover—Agrippa was sure to be after him. From the fortress he went directly to Mary's house where a group was praying through the night. Her home was the meeting place of one of Jerusalem's early house churches. Peter knocked on the entrance. Rhoda, a servant girl, part of the praying group, went to the gate. Peter identified himself. She recognized his voice, and in her excitement she left him standing in the street while she rushed back inside with the incredible news.

Not all the reactions show evidence of "mighty, mountain-moving faith." Rhoda was overjoyed. But others said, "You're nuts!" (Too many sleepless nights of prayer, perhaps, had driven the sensitive young thing over the edge!) Another theory: "It's his angel." (Many believed a person's guardian angel could take on the appearance of the person under his care.) When they stopped arguing about who or what was at the gate and opened it, they saw Peter and "went wild!" He waved his hand to calm them down, "Shh! You'll wake the neighbors!"

He stayed only long enough to ask them to report his escape to James (another James—brother of Jesus, now a leader among Jewish Christians). Then he disappeared into the night. He left Judea, possibly for Antioch or someplace in Asia Minor (Galatians 2:11; 1 Peter 1:1), beyond Herod's jurisdiction. Even though their reactions to Peter's knock at the door reveal they weren't at all sure God was going to answer their prayers, the disciples prayed anyway. It was the right thing to do. It was the only thing to do! They prayed because they cared. They prayed because Jesus taught them to pray. They prayed because God uses prayer in his war against the powers of this world. **And, even though their prayers were not perfect and their faith was shaky, God heard them.**⁹

17. Based on their response, the praying disciples seemingly prayed for something less than a miraculous release. What things short of his release might they have been praying for? What keeps us from praying for greater things?

18. Many people say that they don't pray because they don't know how to "pray correctly." What does this event in Acts teach us about prayer, and how does it encourage us to devote more time and attention to this endeavor?

⁹ Girard, Robert C.. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 2762-2775). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

THERE'S ONLY ONE GOD, MA'AM, AND I'M PRETTY SURE HE DOESN'T DRESS LIKE THAT.

—Captain America

Herod couldn't be bothered any more with the Peter incident. He rushed to Caesarea to put out another political fire. Apparently in worse famine conditions than those in Herod's kingdom, the people of Tyre and Sidon depended on Judea for food. The audience with Herod, gained through the mediator Blastus, took place during a public festival. (Josephus tells us about athletic contests in honor of the emperor.) This occurred nearly a year after Peter's release, but Luke connects the two events (12:21–23).

Taking advantage of the occasion, Herod delivered a public address, common Roman behavior but not much in character for a Jewish king—except this one. The people's response (whether sincere or not, Luke does not tell us) ascribed deity to this wicked man. Luke implies he had the opportunity to deny it and, failing to do so, was struck down by God's angel. Josephus reported that Herod lived in pain for five more days and died at the age of fifty-four (*Antiq. XIX, 343–50, vii.2*). Scholars cannot agree on the disease which killed Herod, but speculation seems to center on round worms, which is precisely what Luke says. Herod could very well have recited in his dying days a poem Lord Byron wrote centuries later:

My days are in the yellow leaf;
The flower and fruits of love are gone;
The worm, the canker, and the grief are mine alone.

So God's angel strikes twice in this chapter, once for deliverance and the second time for death.¹⁰

19. We see in our text that God deals with self promotion decisively. How do we know when we are crossing the line of stealing the spotlight given only to God? In what ways can we combat against the temptation of stealing His limelight from Him?

20. What lessons can we learn about God from Herod's death? In what tangible ways this week can you endeavor to promote the glory of God over your own?

¹⁰ Gangel, Kenneth. *Holman New Testament Commentary—Acts:5* (Kindle Locations 4914-4915). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Note: This study was compiled and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.org/smallgroups