

The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 18: Peter's Deliverance and Herod's Death

Acts 12:1-25

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 12 sets the death of James and the deliverance of Peter side by side, then crowns the chapter with the death of the proud king Herod and the triumphant note that the word of God increased and multiplied. What is doctrinally at stake includes the sovereignty and wisdom of God in both suffering and deliverance, the power and place of prayer, the worship that belongs to God alone and His judgment on pride, and the unstoppable advance of God's word over every earthly power.

The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on the sovereignty of God over human powers and the unstoppable advance of His word. The same chapter that shows an apostle martyred and a king exalted ends with the king dead and the word multiplying. Teach that God reigns over history, that earthly power is fleeting, and that His word and kingdom cannot be stopped.

Yet aim at the heart. This passage calls students to trust God's wisdom when He does not rescue as they hoped, to pray earnestly and expectantly, to fear God rather than men, to give God the glory He alone deserves, and to rest their confidence in the enduring word of the Lord. Help them become praying, God-fearing, humble people steadied by God's sovereignty.

Question 1

Student Question:

In the same chapter, James was put to death by Herod while Peter was miraculously rescued (vv. 2-11). How do you make sense of God allowing one faithful servant to die and delivering another, and what does this teach about the sovereignty and wisdom of God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is one of the hardest and most honest tensions in Acts. James, a faithful apostle, is executed, while Peter, equally faithful, is delivered. The church surely prayed for both. Why does God rescue one and not the other? Luke does not explain, and we must be careful not to pretend we can.

What this teaches first is the sovereignty of God. God reigns over life and death, and the timing and manner of each belong to Him. James was not less loved or less faithful than Peter; God simply had different purposes, taking James home and leaving Peter for more years of service. Both outcomes were under God's sovereign hand.

It also teaches the wisdom of God, which often exceeds our understanding. We cannot always see why God delivers in one case and not another. His ways and thoughts are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). Faith does not require that we understand all His reasons; it requires that we trust His character, His goodness, wisdom, and love, even when His providence is mysterious.

Help students sit honestly with this tension rather than resolving it too quickly. God is not obligated to rescue us from every trial, and faithfulness is not measured by whether we are delivered. Both the martyr and the rescued are in God's hands. For James, death was not defeat but homecoming. We trust a sovereign, wise, loving God whose purposes are good even when His answers are not what we would have chosen.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereignty over life and death
- God's differing purposes for His servants, both under His hand
- The wisdom of God exceeding our understanding (Isaiah 55:8-9)
- Faithfulness not measured by deliverance
- Trusting God's character when His providence is mysterious

Discussion Prompts

- How do you make sense of God delivering Peter but not James?
- What does this teach about the sovereignty and wisdom of God?
- Why is faithfulness not measured by whether we are rescued?

Question 2

Student Question:

The church prayed, yet God's answer included the death of James as well as the deliverance of Peter (vv. 2-11). When God does not rescue you the way you hoped, through unanswered prayer, loss, or suffering, how do you respond? What helps you keep trusting Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Every believer eventually faces the reality that God does not always rescue as we hoped. We pray for healing, and sometimes the loved one dies. We pray for rescue, and sometimes the trial remains. Like the church praying for James and Peter, we do not control the outcome.

Invite honest reflection. How do I respond when God's answer is not what I wanted? Do I grow bitter or doubt His love? Do I conclude that prayer does not work, or that I lacked faith? These responses are understandable, but they often rest on the assumption that God owes us the outcome we chose.

What helps us keep trusting is a right view of God and of this life. God is good and wise even when He says no or not yet. This life is not the whole story; for the believer, even death is gain

(Philippians 1:21), and our deepest hope is beyond the grave. We can entrust unanswered prayers and painful losses to a God whose goodness we have seen most clearly at the cross.

Encourage students to bring their disappointments honestly to God, as the psalmists did, while clinging to His character. Trust is not pretending the loss does not hurt; it is holding on to a good and sovereign God in the midst of the hurt, believing that He is working all things for good even when we cannot see how (Romans 8:28).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God not owing us the outcomes we choose
- God's goodness and wisdom in His no and not yet
- This life not being the whole story (Philippians 1:21)
- Honest lament combined with trust in God's character
- God working all things for good (Romans 8:28)

Discussion Prompts

- How do you respond when God does not rescue you the way you hoped?
- What assumptions about God lie beneath your disappointment?
- What helps you keep trusting Him through loss?

Question 3

Student Question:

While Peter was in prison, earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church (v. 5). What does this teach about the place and power of prayer in the life of the church, and about God's willingness to work through the prayers of His people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Luke draws a deliberate connection: Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer was made for him by the church, and that very night God delivered him. The church's response to Herod's power was not panic or plotting but earnest, united prayer, and God worked through it.

This teaches the place of prayer in the church's life. Faced with the might of a king, the believers turned to the greater power of God in prayer. Prayer is not a last resort when other options fail; it is the first and primary work of the church, the means by which we lay hold of God's power.

It also teaches that God is willing to work through the prayers of His people. God did not need the church's prayers to free Peter, yet He chose to act in connection with them. Throughout Scripture, God invites His people to pray and works in response, the prayer of a righteous person has great power (James 5:16). Prayer is a real means God uses to accomplish His purposes.

Help students recover a high view of prayer. The church that prayed for Peter teaches us to bring our greatest threats and needs to God, earnestly and together, trusting that He hears and acts. We are not helpless before the powers of this world; we have access to the throne of the God who reigns over kings.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Earnest, united prayer as the church's response to threat (v. 5)
- Prayer as the church's first and primary work, not a last resort
- God willing to work through the prayers of His people (James 5:16)
- Prayer as a real means God uses to accomplish His purposes

Discussion Prompts

- What does this teach about the place of prayer in the church?
- Why is prayer the first response rather than the last resort?
- How does God's willingness to work through prayer encourage you?

Question 4

Student Question:

The believers were praying for Peter, yet when he stood at the door they could not believe it, saying Rhoda was out of her mind (vv. 13-16). Do you ever pray without really expecting God to answer? What would it look like to pray with more honest, hopeful faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

There is something both humorous and deeply human in this scene. The church gathers to pray for Peter's release, and when their prayer is answered and Peter stands knocking at the door, they refuse to believe it. You are out of your mind, they tell Rhoda. They prayed, but they did not really expect God to act.

This is a gentle, honest mirror. We too can pray for things we do not really expect God to do. We go through the motions of asking while quietly assuming nothing will change. Our prayers can be sincere yet faithless, dutiful yet without expectancy.

Yet notice God's grace: He answered their prayer anyway, despite their weak faith. This is enormously comforting. God does not wait for our faith to be perfect before He acts. He hears and answers even the prayers of those whose faith is small, even as small as a mustard seed (Matthew 17:20).

Encourage students toward more honest, hopeful prayer. This does not mean working up a feeling of certainty, but praying with genuine expectation that the God we address is able and willing to act. And where our faith is weak, we can pray as the father did, I believe; help my unbelief (Mark 9:24). God meets us in our weakness and answers beyond our expecting.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sincere prayer that lacks expectancy
- God answering even weak, faithless prayers by His grace
- Faith as small as a mustard seed still effective (Matthew 17:20)
- Honest prayer in our weakness (Mark 9:24)

Discussion Prompts

- Do you ever pray without really expecting God to answer?
- How does it encourage you that God answered despite their weak faith?
- What would more honest, hopeful prayer look like for you?

Question 5

Student Question:

An angel woke Peter, his chains fell off, and the iron gate opened by itself, delivering him from Herod's heavily guarded prison (vv. 6-11). What does this deliverance reveal about God's power over human plans and prisons, and about His care for His servants?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Herod had taken every precaution: four squads of soldiers, chains, guarded gates. By every human calculation, Peter was finished, awaiting execution. Yet God's deliverance made all of Herod's security irrelevant. The chains fell, the guards slept, the iron gate opened by itself, and Peter walked free.

This reveals God's power over all human plans and prisons. No fortress, no power, no scheme of man can hold against the purpose of God. When God determines to act, the strongest human barriers become nothing. The God who reigns over kings is not hindered by their walls and weapons.

It also reveals God's care for His servants. Peter was precious to God, and God still had work for him to do. So God intervened to preserve him. This does not mean God always delivers physically, as James shows, but it does mean that nothing can take a servant of God before his appointed time and work are complete.

Help students draw both confidence and humility from this. Confidence, because the God who serves us is sovereign over every power that threatens us. Humility, because His deliverance comes on His terms and timing, not ours. We can entrust ourselves to a God for whom no prison is too strong and no servant too small to notice.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's power over all human plans and prisons (vv. 6-11)

- No human barrier able to hinder God's purpose
- God's care for His servants
- Nothing taking a servant of God before his work is done

Discussion Prompts

- What does Peter's deliverance reveal about God's power?
- How does this show God's care for His servants?
- How does God's sovereignty over human powers encourage you?

Question 6

Student Question:

Herod could kill James and imprison Peter, but he was powerless against the God who delivered Peter and later judged Herod himself (vv. 2-11, 23). Do you fear what people can do to you more than you trust God's care? Where do you need to fear God rather than men?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Herod seemed all-powerful, able to kill and imprison at will. Yet the chapter shows that his power was limited and temporary, while God's power was absolute. Herod could touch the body but not the soul, and his own life was in God's hands all along.

We often fear people more than we trust God. We are intimidated by what others can do to us, their disapproval, opposition, rejection, or harm, and that fear can silence our witness, compromise our convictions, and rob us of peace. Jesus addressed this directly: do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both (Matthew 10:28).

The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe (Proverbs 29:25). To fear God rather than men is to give God His rightful place as the one we most reverence and trust, which frees us from being controlled by the fear of people.

Invite honest reflection. Where does the fear of people control me, keeping me from obedience, witness, or peace? Encourage students to bring those fears into the light of God's sovereignty. The God who reigns over every Herod cares for His people, and to trust Him is to be set free from the tyranny of fearing what others can do.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The limited, temporary nature of human power
- Fearing God rather than those who can harm the body (Matthew 10:28)
- The fear of man as a snare (Proverbs 29:25)
- Trust in God's care freeing us from the fear of people

Discussion Prompts

- Do you fear what people can do more than you trust God's care?
- Where does the fear of man control you?
- What would it look like to fear God rather than men?

Question 7

Student Question:

Herod accepted the crowd's praise that his was the voice of a god, and immediately God struck him down because he did not give God the glory (vv. 21-23). What does Herod's judgment teach about the worship that belongs to God alone and about the danger of pride?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Herod's end is swift and severe. Dressed in royal splendor, he accepts the crowd's flattery: the voice of a god, and not of a man. He receives worship that belongs to God alone, and immediately an angel of the Lord strikes him down, because he did not give God the glory.

This teaches that worship belongs to God alone. To accept worship, or to usurp the glory that is God's, is a grave sin. Herod's offense was not merely vanity but a kind of blasphemy, taking to himself the honor due only to God. The apostles, by contrast, always refused such honor and redirected it to God (Acts 10:26; 14:14-15).

It also teaches the danger of pride. Herod's downfall is the supreme example of the principle that God opposes the proud (James 4:6) and that pride goes before destruction (Proverbs 16:18). The proud heart that exalts itself and steals God's glory sets itself against the Almighty, and that is a losing battle.

Help students take this to heart. We are not kings accepting worship, but the same root sin of pride and glory-stealing lives in every human heart in subtler forms, craving praise, taking credit, exalting ourselves. The God who struck down Herod calls us to give Him the glory in all things and to walk humbly before Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worship belonging to God alone
- Usurping God's glory as a grave sin (vv. 22-23)
- The apostles refusing worship and redirecting glory to God (Acts 10:26; 14:14-15)
- God opposing the proud (James 4:6; Proverbs 16:18)
- Giving God the glory in all things

Discussion Prompts

- What does Herod's judgment teach about the worship due to God alone?

- Why is pride and glory-stealing so serious?
- How does the subtler form of this sin appear in our own hearts?

Question 8

Student Question:

Herod fell because he took for himself the glory that belongs to God (v. 23). Where does pride or the craving for praise show up in your own heart? How can you cultivate the humility that gives God the glory in all things?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Herod's sin, in its essence, lives in all of us: the craving for glory and praise, the impulse to exalt ourselves. Most of us do not accept worship, but we do hunger for admiration, take credit for what God has done, and quietly resent being overlooked.

Invite honest reflection. Where does pride show up in me? Do I crave recognition and praise? Do I take credit rather than giving glory to God? Do I exalt myself in conversation, compete for status, or resent others' success? Pride is subtle and pervasive, hiding even in our spiritual lives.

Cultivating humility is a lifelong work. It grows as we remember that all we have is from God (1 Corinthians 4:7), as we deliberately give Him the glory, as we serve in hidden ways, as we rejoice in others' success, and as we keep the cross before us, where our pride is exposed and our boasting silenced.

Encourage one concrete practice. Perhaps it is to consciously redirect praise to God, to do a good work no one will know about, to celebrate someone else's success, or to confess a particular form of pride. The God who humbles the proud gives grace to the humble (James 4:6), and the humble heart that gives God the glory is the heart that flourishes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride and the craving for praise in the human heart
- All we have received from God (1 Corinthians 4:7)
- Humility cultivated through giving God glory and serving hiddenly
- Grace given to the humble (James 4:6)

Discussion Prompts

- Where does pride or the craving for praise show up in your heart?
- How do you tend to take credit rather than giving God glory?
- What practice could help you cultivate humility this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

The chapter that began with a king killing an apostle ends with the king dead and the triumphant words, but the word of God increased and multiplied (v. 24). What does this contrast teach about God's sovereignty over earthly powers and the unstoppable advance of His word and kingdom?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it crowns the whole chapter. Set the contrast before students vividly. The chapter opens with Herod, a powerful king, stretching out his hand against the church, killing James and imprisoning Peter. It seems that earthly power is winning and the church is at its mercy. But by the end, Herod lies dead, struck down and eaten by worms, while the church lives on, and Luke writes, but the word of God increased and multiplied. The king is gone; the word marches on.

This teaches the sovereignty of God over all earthly powers. Herod wore the crown and commanded the soldiers, but God reigned over Herod. Kings and rulers, however mighty they appear, hold their power only by God's permission and for God's purposes, and they answer to Him. The Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will (Daniel 4:17). No earthly power is ultimate; God alone is.

It also teaches the unstoppable advance of God's word and kingdom. Herod could kill an apostle and imprison another, but he could not stop the word of God. Throughout Acts this refrain keeps sounding: the word of God increased (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). The kingdom of Christ is not at the mercy of kings; it advances through persecution, outlasts its persecutors, and cannot be overthrown, just as Gamaliel warned (Acts 5:39) and Jesus promised when He said the gates of Hades would not prevail against His church (Matthew 16:18).

There is a deep comfort and confidence here for God's people in every age. We watch the powerful of this world, kings, rulers, cultural forces, hostile movements, and they can seem overwhelming, even able to harm the church. But this chapter teaches us to take the long view. Herod is dust; the word endures. The powers that rage against God and His people are temporary; the word and kingdom of God are eternal. Of His kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:33).

Pastorally, this steadies us. We do not need to be ruled by fear of earthly powers or despair when evil seems strong. The God who buried Herod and multiplied His word still reigns. Our task is faithfulness; the triumph of His word and kingdom is certain. Help students fix their confidence here, not in the changing fortunes of earthly power, but in the sovereign God whose word cannot be stopped.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereignty over all earthly powers and kings (Daniel 4:17)

- Earthly power as temporary, held only by God's permission
- The unstoppable advance of God's word (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20)
- The kingdom of Christ unable to be overthrown (Matthew 16:18; Acts 5:39)
- The eternity of God's kingdom over the fleeting powers of this world (Luke 1:33)
- Confidence and freedom from fear grounded in God's sovereignty

Discussion Prompts

- What does the contrast between Herod's death and the multiplying word teach about God's sovereignty?
- How does this chapter put earthly power in perspective?
- How should the unstoppable advance of God's word shape our confidence today?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over this whole chapter, the mystery of suffering and deliverance, the power of prayer, the judgment of pride, and the triumph of God's word, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to grow, in trust, in prayer, in humility, or in confidence, and what is one step you will take this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws the lesson to a personal response. Acts 12 calls us to trust God's wisdom in suffering, to pray earnestly and expectantly, to fear God rather than men, to give God the glory, and to rest our confidence in His sovereign reign and unstoppable word.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to trust God through an unanswered prayer or loss, to pray with more honest faith, to lay down a fear of people, to confess and turn from a form of pride, or to fix their confidence on God's sovereignty rather than the powers of this world.

Keep the focus on the God who reigns. Every theme in this chapter points to a sovereign, faithful God whose purposes cannot be thwarted. Transformation comes as we anchor our lives in Him.

Close by reminding students that the same God who delivered Peter, received James home, judged the proud king, and multiplied His word is at work in them, worthy of their trust, their prayers, their reverence, and their confidence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal response to God's sovereignty, faithfulness, and reign
- Trust, prayer, humility, and confidence as the call of the chapter
- Anchoring life in the unstoppable purposes of God
- Transformation through resting in the sovereign God

Discussion Prompts

- What most challenged or moved you in this chapter?
- What specific step toward trust, prayer, humility, or confidence will you take?
- How can this group encourage and pray for you?