

The Book of Acts

Lesson 18: Peter's Deliverance and Herod's Death -- Acts 12:1-25

King Herod stretches out his hand against the church, and the first blow is fatal. He has James, the brother of John, one of the inner circle who walked the hills of Galilee with Jesus, put to death with the sword. There is no rescue, no last-minute angel, no happy ending in this life. James dies. And when Herod sees that it pleases the people, he seizes Peter too, throws him in prison behind four squads of soldiers, and plans a public execution after the feast.

But the church does not give up. While Peter sleeps in chains between two guards, the believers are gathered, praying earnestly to God for him. That very night, an angel of the Lord wakes Peter, the chains fall from his wrists, and the iron gate of the prison swings open by itself. Peter walks out past the guards into the street, thinking he is seeing a vision, until the cold night air convinces him it is real. The Lord has rescued him from Herod's hand.

What happens next is almost comic. Peter goes to the house where the church is praying, and the servant girl Rhoda is so overjoyed to hear his voice that she forgets to open the door and leaves him standing outside while she runs to tell the others. And the praying church, gathered to pray for Peter's release, refuses to believe it: you are out of your mind. It is a gentle, honest picture of how small our faith can be even as we pray, and how God answers anyway.

The chapter ends with a study in contrasts. Herod, robed in splendor, accepts the crowd's flattery that his is the voice of a god and not of a man. He steals the glory that belongs to God alone, and immediately an angel of the Lord strikes him down; he is eaten by worms and dies. The proud king who killed an apostle is gone in a moment. And then Luke writes the line that towers over the whole chapter: but the word of God increased and multiplied. Kings rise and fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.

Group Discussion: James was put to death while Peter was miraculously delivered, even though the church surely prayed for both (vv. 2-11). How do you wrestle with the truth that God sometimes rescues and sometimes does not, and what helps you trust Him when His answer is not the one you hoped for?

Personal Reflection: The believers were praying earnestly for Peter, yet they could hardly believe it when their prayer was answered (vv. 5, 13-16). When have you prayed without really expecting God to act? What would it look like to pray with more honest, hopeful faith?

Read Acts 12:1-25

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. Herod accepted the crowd's praise that he 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Daniel 4:17, 34-35, the Most High ruling the kingdom of men and humbling the proud; James 5:16-18, the powerful, effective prayer of the righteous; Matthew

10:28, fearing God rather than those who can only kill the body; Proverbs 16:18, pride going before destruction; Isaiah 40:6-8, the word of our God standing forever while all flesh fades