

## Chapter 29: Patience in Prayer

*Acts 12:1–19*

Each new wave of persecution forces the church to grapple with the Lord's sovereign control over the situation, compassion for his people, and wisdom in what he ordains. Here, we see the church responding to persecution in the best way possible: by offering "earnest prayer" to the Lord on behalf of Peter when he is imprisoned (v. 5). Yet, when Peter is released from prison, they do not believe that God has actually answered their prayers. This whole passage reminds us that we need the Lord to strengthen our faith in order to pray, and to strengthen our faith through prayer. Toward this end, this passage teaches us to *pray with patience*.

### Patience for the World (Acts 12:1–5)

In relation to the previous passage, Luke tells us that "About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church" (v. 1). The word for "time" is the word *καιρός* (*kairos*), meaning something like "season" (as opposed to the other primary word in Greek for time that focuses on sequence, from which we get our word *chronology*). Lenski explains the sense: "The prophecy of Agabus preceded Herod's persecution and his death, and this, in turn, preceded the famine and its suffering and the relief brought by Barnabas and Saul. Herod died after the Passover of 44, the famine followed toward the end of 44 and continued into 45."<sup>1</sup> "Herod" refers to Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, who grew up around great political insecurity in Rome.<sup>2</sup> Because of that political insecurity surrounding his benefactors in Rome, Herod needed "to win the loyalty of his Jewish subjects in order to give him at least a firm footing at home. Everything Josephus said about Agrippa would indicate that he made every attempt to please the Jews,

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<sup>1</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 466.

<sup>2</sup> "Herod the king' of this chapter is Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great and the Hasmonean princess Mariamne, born in 11 B.C. and sent by his mother to be brought up at Rome after the execution of his father Aristobulus in 7 B.C. At Rome he grew up on terms of intimate friendship with some of the members the imperial family, especially with Gaius, the grand-nephew of the Emperor Tiberius. When Gaius succeeded Tiberius as emperor in A.D. 37, he bestowed upon Agrippa the former tetrarchies of Philip and Lysanias in southern Syria (cf. Luke 3:1), together with the title 'king'. Two years later Agrippa's kingdom was augmented by the addition of Galilee and Peraea, the former territory of his uncle Antipas, whom Gaius deposed from his rule and sent into exile. When Claudius was made emperor in A.D. 41, after the assassination of Gaius, he further increased Agrippa's realm by the addition of Judaea, which since A.D. 6 had been administered on the emperor's behalf by a procurator. Agrippa was more popular with the Jews than most members of the Herod dynasty were, largely owing to his descent from the Hasmonean royal family; and he set himself sedulously to win and retain their good will. It is evidence of a change in the attitude of the people of Jerusalem towards the apostles, who had not been molested in the persecution that followed Stephen's death, that Agrippa should make them his principal target in his attack upon the church." (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 246–47.)

particularly currying the favor of the influential Pharisees.”<sup>3</sup>

Although we are not told if there were any specific circumstances that led to the death of the apostle James (“James the brother of John”; v. 2), Luke tells us that Herod’s desire to please the Jews led him “to arrest Peter also” (v. 3). It is important to note that some persecution and even martyrdoms are less a result of a specific, calculated hatred of the oppressor against a Christian on the basis of that Christian’s testimony. Herod’s persecution of Peter (and possibly James) does not seem to arise from his own hatred of Christianity, but only a desire to curry favor with Christianity’s enemies.

Further, we should note that, while the martyrdom of Stephen had scattered the gospel into wider regions (Samaria, and then Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch; Acts 8:1–4; 11:19ff), the Lord does not seem to use the martyrdom of James in quite the same way.<sup>4</sup> The differences between (1) how God used Stephen’s martyrdom, and (2) the different fates of James and Peter, are difficult to reconcile to our minds. As Peterson notes, however, “Without explanation, one apostle is executed, but another is rescued, teaching the church to live with the mystery of God’s providence and to rely afresh in each situation on the mercy and continuing care of God (cf. 4:24–31).”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in the background of this story are Jesus’ words to Peter that he must die for his faith (John 21:18–19), creating tension in this narrative as we wait to see whether this moment would bring about the fulfillment of that prophecy.<sup>6</sup> In that passage, however, we should also remember Jesus’ words to Peter when Peter asked what would happen to John, the brother of the James who is here executed: “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” (John 21:22). At this moment, Peter will suffer more than John, but less than James. Part of what these passages remind us is that we cannot compare our lives to one another. The Lord’s ultimate purposes for his servants are hidden from our eyes in this life; however, as we each walk the path that the Lord has appointed for us, we may never doubt that the Lord is working all things together for our good (Rom. 8:28). We are not better or worse off than those around us. If we love the Lord and are called according to his purposes, there is nowhere else that would be better for us.

With a remarkable similarity to the intentions of the Sanhedrin to wait until after the Passover festival before executing Jesus (Matt. 26:5), so also Herod waited until after Passover to execute Peter (v. 4).<sup>7</sup> During this time, “Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church” (v. 5). Calvin insists that we recognize how the prayers of the church for those suffering for the sake of the gospel are an essential part of our confession of faith.<sup>8</sup> Lenski observes a dramatic contrast between two verbs put in the

<sup>3</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 278.

<sup>4</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 467–68.

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 362.

<sup>6</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 475.

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 470.

<sup>8</sup> “This place teacheth, first, how we ought to be affected when we see our brethren persecuted by the wicked for the testimony of the gospel, for if we be slothful, and if we be not inwardly touched with their dangers, we do not only defraud them of the due duty of love, but also treacherously forsake the confession of our faith; and, assuredly, if the cause be common, yea, if they fight for our safety and salvation, we do not only forsake them, but even Christ and ourselves; and the present necessity requireth, that they be far more fervent in prayer than commonly they are, whosoever will be counted Christians. We see some of our brethren (being brought to extreme poverty) live in exile, others we see imprisoned, many cast into stinking dungeons, many consumed with fire, yea, we see new torments oftentimes invented, whereby being long tormented they may feel death. Unless these provocations sharpen our desire to pray, we be more than blockish; therefore, so soon as any persecution ariseth, let us by and by get ourselves to prayer.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:480–81.)

imperfect tense: Peter “was being kept” in prison, but earnest prayer “was being made” for him. Lenski asks, “Which will be the stronger, the dungeon and its guards or the prayers of the church?”<sup>9</sup>

## Patience for the Lord (Acts 12:6–11)

Thus we come to the primary scene: “Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison” (v. 6). Polhill observes the “dramatic impact” that this rescue happens on “the night before Peter’s trial.”<sup>10</sup> Would the Lord intervene or not? Peter’s sleep suggests that he is not kept up with worry and anxiety, but is at peace in his trust in the Lord’s providential hand. The description of Peter’s rescue in vv. 7–10 is vivid, and Polhill notes that the language portrays not as “Peter’s *escape*. It was rather his *deliverance*. Peter was totally passive throughout the entire incident.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the angel who appears is violent (“struck Peter on the side”), urgent (“Get up quickly”), demanding (“Dress yourself and put on your sandals... Wrap your cloak around you and follow me”), and powerful (“the iron gate leading into the city... opened for them of its own accord”), and then gone as quickly as he had appeared (“immediately the angel left him”).

It takes a moment for Peter to realize what had happened, since he thought he was seeing a vision (v. 9). When he does, he says to himself, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting” (v. 11). While the Scriptures do not attribute James’ death to any *lack* of prayer, the Scriptures do attribute the “earnest prayer” of the people (v. 5) to Peter’s deliverance. Bruce writes, “But in any case the narrative is a witness to the delivering grace of God and to the power of earnest prayer. That James should die while Peter should escape is a mystery of divine providence which has been repeated countless times in the course of Christian history, down to our own day.”<sup>12</sup>

## Patience for our Weak Faith (Acts 12:12–19)

Indeed, the church is still engaged in prayer when Peter arrives at the “house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark” (v. 12). This Mark is the author of the Gospel by that name, and he is a figure who will play an important role in the missionary journeys of S/Paul and Barnabas (see Acts 12:25). As was also the case with Barnabas and Saul, Luke often introduces figures incidentally before they become major parts of the storyline. The larger part of the story is the delightful scene where the servant girl Rhoda is so overjoyed to hear Peter’s voice that she leaves him outside, but then the church waits to deliberate who he might be before letting him in (vv. 13–15). In a great irony, the Lord has answered their prayers, but they do not believe in the fulfillment. We should not be too hard on them, as Calvin notes, since their earnest, continual prayer demonstrates the relative strength of their faith, as much as it may also be weak.<sup>13</sup> How kind the Lord is to lead

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<sup>9</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 471.

<sup>10</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 280.

<sup>11</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 280–81.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 251.

<sup>13</sup> “Whereas they think that the maid is mad, which telleth them that Peter was come; we gather by this, that they did not hope or look for Peter’s deliverance, and yet we will not say that they prayed without faith; because they looked for some other success, to wit, that Peter being armed with power from heaven, should be ready, whether it were by life or death, to glorify God, that the flock being terrified with the violent invasion

us by faith, while yet convicting us of our lack of faith so that he might strengthen that faith!

So, when the church finally lets Peter in, he bears witness to the power of God to deliver him from prison (v. 17a). When he instructs the church to “Tell these things to James and to the brothers” (v. 17b), he is talking about James the brother of Jesus, who appears to have become the leader of the church in Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> It is worth observing that we do not read that the apostles sought to replace James among their number, as they had with Judas (Acts 1:21–22). Instead, we have begun to read that the leadership of the church is shifting away from the apostles and toward the more permanent governance of the *elders* in the churches (e.g., Acts 11:30; 15:6).<sup>15</sup> As important as the office of apostle was in the establishment of the early church (Eph. 2:20), that office was temporary, closing with the death of each apostle in turn.

If the timeline of Peter’s intended execution after the Passover had paralleled Jesus, so also this final scene parallels the scrambling of the guards with the chief priests after Jesus had risen from the dead (Matt. 28:11–15). Whereas the chief priests had paid off the guards to lie about Jesus’ resurrection, Herod executes the guards who had allowed Peter to escape (vv. 18–19). In both cases, the guards could not have withstood the power of God, and both groups of authorities are blind to the significance of the miracle that had happened under their noses.

## Discussion Questions

1. Who was “Herod” (v. 1)? Why was he so interested in pleasing the Jews (v. 3)? What had Jesus told Peter about his eventual death (John 21:18–19)? What did Jesus tell Peter when Peter asked about whether John would share his fate also (John 21:21–22)? What happened to John’s brother, James (v. 2)? What ultimately happens to Peter in this passage? What can we learn about trying to compare God’s appointment in our lives with that of others?
2. What was the church doing when Peter was imprisoned (v. 5)? What would have happened to Peter the next day if the Lord had not intervened (v. 6)? Why might God have waited so long to rescue Peter? What do we observe about the behavior of the angel toward Peter (vv. 7–10)? What does Peter think is happening (v. 9)? What does he come to understand once he “came to himself” (v. 11)?
3. Where does Peter go after being delivered out of prison (v. 12)? Who is Mark (v. 12)? Why do

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of wolves might not be scattered abroad, that those that were weak might not faint, that the Lord would put away that whirlwind of persecution. But in that the Lord granteth them more than they hoped for, he surpasseth their desires with his infinite goodness. And now that which was done seemeth to them incredible, that they may be the more provoked to praise his power.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:486–87.)

<sup>14</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 283.

<sup>15</sup> “Note also that the death of one of the Twelve does not necessitate the election of another apostle (cf. 1:21–22 note). James the apostle is replaced by James the Lord’s brother, who works with a group of elders in the leadership of the Jerusalem church (cf. 11:30; 12:17; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 21:18).” (Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 362.)

you think that the church struggles to believe that Peter has been released (v. 16)? What is significant about the fact that Peter specifically asks for James (the brother of Jesus) to be notified about his departure (v. 17)? How does Herod's interrogation of the sentries compare to the Sanhedrin's actions toward the guards at Jesus' tomb (Matt. 28:11–15)?

4. What have you been praying for over a long period of time? How has your faith continued to move you toward prayer? How has your faith been stretched, especially the longer that God does not seem to be answering your request? How does the Lord expose and strengthen the weakness of our faith through prayer? How does that thought encourage us to continue praying, even when the Lord does not seem to be answering our prayers?