



The Power of a Praying Church (Acts 11:1-25)

Commentary: Week Twenty-One

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

5. Persecution Again in Jerusalem [12:1-25](#)

After the glimpse at the Antioch church, attention focused once more on Jerusalem in chap. [12](#). If the apostles had remained largely untouched by the persecution that followed Stephen's death, the situation radically changed when Herod Agrippa assumed rule over Judea. The apostles then became the specific target of the king's efforts to suppress the Christians. James was beheaded, and Peter was put in prison in anticipation of the same fate. But not even the king was able to stem the tide when God was behind it. Indeed, the king found himself fighting against God and suffered the consequences (cf. [5:39](#); [11:17](#)).

The whole story is told in one of the most delightful and engaging narratives in all of Acts. The villainy of Herod is established in vv. [1-5](#) with his execution of James and arrest of Peter. His designs were thwarted in the latter instance, however, when God delivered Peter in a miraculous manner (vv. [6-19](#)). Peter's escape is told in two scenes, both related with consummate artistry. The first scene pictures the angel delivering Peter from jail (vv. [6-11](#)). It has a vivid, almost comic touch; the angel had to prompt the groggy Peter every step of the way. One can almost hear Peter telling the story: "I tell you, I was completely out of it. It was all God's doing. I thought I was having a particularly pleasant dream." The second scene is no less entertaining, as Peter hastened to the house of John Mark's mother (vv. [12-19a](#)). There is again a comic touch (with Rhoda leaving him knocking at the gate) and also a decidedly dramatic effect. Would he get inside before Herod's men discovered his escape and came after him? The story was still not over. There was a final deliverance of the apostles, as God dealt with their persecutor, Herod, in a definitive manner (vv. [19b-23](#)). Once more at peace, the witness of the church prospered (vv. [24-25](#)). The whole story of the deliverance of the apostles from Herod's clutches is bracketed by references to Paul and Barnabas's delivery of the Antioch relief offering ([11:30](#); [12:25](#)). It is the last narrative in Acts that deals exclusively with the apostles and the Jerusalem church. From this point on, whenever Jerusalem was involved, it would be in connection with Paul's ministry. Peter and his fellow apostles faded into the background, and Paul took center stage.

(1) Herod Agrippa's Persecution of the Apostles [12:1-5](#)

[12:1](#) The story begins with a vague time reference. It was "about this time." Evidently Luke meant about the time the Antioch church was preparing its relief offering for the Jerusalem church ([11:27-30](#)). Considering the history of Herod Agrippa I, the Herod of this story, the time most likely would have been the spring of A.D. 42 or 43. The Greek of v. [1](#) is quite vivid: Herod "laid violent hands" on some of the Christians. To understand why he would do this, it is necessary to understand something of Herod Agrippa I and his relationship to the Jews. Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great. His father,

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 275-285.

Aristobulus, had been executed in 7 B.C. by his grandfather for fear that he might usurp his throne. After his father's death, while still a child, Agrippa was sent to Rome with his mother, where he was reared and educated along with the children of the Roman aristocracy. These childhood friendships eventually led to his ruling over a Jewish kingdom nearly the extent of that of his grandfather. In A.D. 37 the emperor Caligula gave him the title of king and made him ruler over the territories formerly ruled by his uncle Philip, lands in the Transjordan and the Ten Cities (Decapolis) north of Galilee. In A.D. 39 Caligula extended Agrippa's rule by giving him Galilee and Perea, the territory of his uncle Antipas, who had been sent into exile. Finally, when his former schoolmate Claudius became emperor in A.D. 41, he was given rule of Judea and Samaria, which had been under Roman procurators for thirty-five years. He was truly "king of the Jews" now, ruling over all of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, the Transjordan, and the Decapolis.

Though king, Agrippa was hardly secure. Much of his good fortune was due to his friendship with Caligula, and Caligula had not been a popular emperor with the Romans. In fact, Agrippa could not count on always being in the good graces of Rome. It became all the more important for him 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, particularly currying the favor of the influential Pharisees. His "Jewishness," however, seems to have been largely a face he put on when at home. When away, he lived in a thoroughly Roman fashion. Why persecution of the Christians was particularly pleasing to them at this time is not stated. Perhaps the acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles as related in chap. [11](#) had something to do with their disfavor.

[12:2](#) Agrippa began his persecution of the Christians by having James killed "with a sword." This James is described as "brother of John" and thus was the apostle, the son of Zebedee. Some interpreters have suggested that his brother John was also executed at this time, interpreting [Mark 10:39](#) as a prediction that both would be martyred. [John 21:23](#), however, seems to predict the opposite; and early church tradition has John living to an old age and dying a natural death. If Herod executed James in the Roman fashion "with the sword," he was beheaded. If he used the Jewish mode of execution, which forbade beheading as a desecration to the body, he had "the edge of the sword" thrust through his body. The martyrdom of James is told with the utmost brevity. Luke did not want to dwell on it but used the incident to set the stage for his main emphasis—God's deliverance of Peter.

[12:3–5](#) Having won points with the Jews by the execution of James, Agrippa then moved against the chief of the apostles, Peter, arresting him and placing him in prison. Luke noted that it was the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. Herod would not risk his favor with the Jews by executing Peter during this time, since that would be considered a desecration. The Passover was eaten on the eve of Nisan 14 and was followed by seven days of eating unleavened bread, ending on Nisan 21. Luke used the term "Passover" for the entire period. It would have been after the holy days had ended that Agrippa would have brought Peter forth for public trial and surely also for execution (v. [4](#)). Peter was placed under heavy security, being guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. This was the usual Roman practice, changing guards every three hours throughout the twelve night hours to assure maximum alertness. Why the heavy guard? Perhaps the Sanhedrin had informed Agrippa of their own experience in jailing the apostles on a previous occasion ([5:19](#)). While Peter waited in prison, the Christians used their most effective means of assistance. They prayed continually for him (v. [5](#)).

(2) Peter's Miraculous Deliverance from Prison [12:6–19a](#)

[12:6–8a](#) The story of Peter's deliverance begins with the notice that it was the night before Peter's trial. This heightens its dramatic impact. It was the last minute before the sealing of the apostle's doom. Peter is described as sleeping, bound with two chains, each fastened to a guard, one on his right and one on his left. The other two guards of the squadron of four stood watch at the doors of the prison. Perhaps one stood at each of the two inner gates of the prison (cf. v. [10](#)). That Peter could sleep so soundly the night

before his trial is perhaps indicative of his calm assurance that he was in God's hands. It may also reflect that the guards were asleep on either side of him. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a flash of heavenly light filled the cell. Peter was still fast asleep, and the angel had to arouse him, perhaps with a kick in the ribs. Still not fully alert, Peter really had no idea what was happening. The angel had to direct every single movement of the apostle: "get up"; "put your coat on"; "tie your sandals"; "follow me." Obviously, this was not Peter's *escape*. It was rather his *deliverance*. Peter was totally passive throughout the entire incident.

[12:8b–11](#) Peter dutifully followed the angel's direction. Still half-asleep, he imagined that he was having some sort of vision (v. [9](#)). With a pronounced dramatic tone, each step of their progress was noted. They safely passed the first sentry guarding the inner gate to the cell. Perhaps a "deep sleep from the Lord" had fallen upon the guards (cf. [1 Sam 26:12](#)). Suspense mounted: Would they make it past the rest of the guard? They passed the second gate safely and then came to the outer gate that led into the city, a forbidding iron barrier.

Most likely the place of Peter's confinement was the Tower of Antonia, where the Roman troops were barracked. Located at the northeastern corner of the temple complex, its eastern entrance led into the streets of the city. Even this formidable iron barrier proved no hindrance to Peter and the angel, opening of its own accord and allowing their safe passage. The angel led Peter down the length of the first street from the prison. Perhaps coming to a corner and allowing Peter to turn into a side street and out of sight of the prison and having delivered the apostle to safety, the angel disappeared. Only then did Peter come to full alertness and realize that God had indeed delivered him from Herod's clutches and his anticipated death (v. [11](#)).

[12:12](#) The scene shifts to the Christian community who had been praying fervently for Peter (vv. [12–17](#)). One group had gathered at the home of John Mark's mother, and Peter headed there. It is unusual that Mary was identified through Mark; usually the child was identified by the parent. The reason possibly is that Mark was the better known of the two in Christian circles, or it may be that there were several prominent women named Mary in the early church. They were perhaps distinguished by their children. John Mark would soon play a significant role in the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas ([12:25](#); [13:5](#), [13](#); [15:37](#), [39](#)).

[12:13–14](#) The scene at Mary's house is played out in a delightful fashion with the servant-girl Rhoda as the main character. Rhoda was a common Greek name, often borne by servants and meaning *rose*. When Peter arrived, he stood at the outer gate that entered into the courtyard. Rhoda probably was responsible for keeping the gate, a task often delegated to female servants (cf. [John 18:16f.](#)). Responding to Peter's knocking, she hurried out to the gate and discovered who was there. For all her joy, she ran back into the house to announce the good news, forgetting altogether that Peter would really like to have come in. This heightened the suspense all the more. Peter did not need to be standing outside in the street, exposed to possible recapture. "Peter is at the door!" Rhoda announced excitedly, interrupting the prayers of the Christians who had gathered there. "No, it can't be," they replied; "it must be his angel."

[12:15–16](#) This response reflects the Jewish belief that each person has a guardian angel as his or her spiritual counterpart. It was believed that one's angel often appeared immediately after the person's death, and that idea may lurk behind the response to Rhoda. "You've seen his ghost," we would say. Such a reply is remarkable coming from a group that had been totally occupied in prayer for Peter's deliverance. They found it easier to believe that Peter had died and gone to heaven than that their prayers had been answered. In any event, who could trust a hysterical servant girl? "You're crazy," they said. Some things are just too good to be true (cf. [Luke 24:11](#)). But it was true, and Peter's persistent knocking finally got a response (v. [16](#)).

[12:17](#) Verse [17](#) is a key verse. Basically, it gives three pieces of information: (1) Peter's report of his miraculous delivery, (2) his instruction to tell the news to James, and (3) his departure to "another place" where he would find refuge from the wrath of Agrippa. The first item is exactly what one would expect under the circumstances. That Peter had to motion them to silence in order to share his story is indicative of the excited hubbub created by his totally unexpected presence. The second item, though seemingly incidental, is actually a keynote for the subsequent text of Acts. The James who was to be informed of Peter's deliverance was James the oldest of Jesus' brothers, who from this point on assumed the leadership of the church in Jerusalem (cf. [15:13–21](#); [21:18](#)). It is interesting that "the brothers" are to be informed along with James. Perhaps this refers to the elders, who were assuming an increasing role in the governance of the Jerusalem church (cf. [11:30](#)). The other apostles are not mentioned. At this time they may have been absent from Jerusalem, having taken refuge from Agrippa's persecution. The third piece of information in v. [17](#) has perhaps provoked more scholarly attention than it deserves, largely due to the tradition that the "other place" to which Peter went was Rome. Luke evidently did not consider the place all that important and did not specify where it was. The point is simply that he had to go elsewhere to find safety from Agrippa. Later, after Herod's death, he was back in Jerusalem ([15:7](#)). That Peter went to Rome at this early date is most unlikely, and Paul's Epistle to the Romans seems to speak against it ([15:20](#)).

[12:18–19a](#) The final scene in the story of Peter's escape returns to the prison (vv. [18–19a](#)). When the guards awoke in the morning, they found no one attached to their chains and likely no evidence of an escape other than the obvious fact that Peter was not there. After interrogating the guards and failing to locate Peter, Agrippa had the guards executed. This was in accordance with Roman law, which specified that a guard who allowed the escape of a prisoner was to bear the same penalty the escapee would have suffered. Agrippa had every intention of subjecting Peter to the same fate as James.

(3) Herod's Self-Destructive Arrogance [12:19b–23](#)

[12:19b–20](#) There are two climaxes to the account of Agrippa's persecution. One is Peter's escape from his clutches. The other is Agrippa's own grisly fate. Chronologically, his death came anywhere from several months to a year after Peter's escape, but the Christians viewed it very much as a divine retribution for what they had suffered under the king. Josephus also gave an account of Agrippa's death (*Ant.* 19.343–52) which, though going into greater detail, is very much in agreement with the narrative in Acts. Josephus and Acts both set the event in Caesarea ([Acts 12:19b](#)). Josephus did not mention the quarrel with the Phoenician coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. Evidently it was some sort of economic war in which Agrippa had the upper hand, since these coastal towns were indeed totally dependent for their food on the inland territories Agrippa ruled (v. [20](#)). We know nothing more of Blastus. He is described as being the king's "chamberlain," or "personal servant." As a trusted servant, he was evidently able to gain the king's ear on the matter and negotiate for a settlement suitable to the Tyrians and Sidonians. Blastus was likely given some "financial consideration" by them in exchange for his role as mediator.

[12:21–23](#) Verse [21](#) describes Agrippa as appearing before the people "on the appointed day." Josephus specified that it was the day of a festival in honor of Caesar. Evidently the king chose this as the occasion for formally concluding the agreement with Tyre and Sidon. Josephus also went into greater detail on the "royal robes" worn by Agrippa. The garment was made of silver and glistened radiantly in the morning sun. As Herod, in all his glory, turned and addressed the people, they shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man" (v. [22](#)). Josephus recorded a like response from the people, who hailed Herod as a god and "more than mortal." Josephus at this point added significant detail, noting that Herod neither affirmed nor denied the people's ascription of divinity to him. Then, looking up, he saw an owl. On an earlier occasion, when imprisoned in Rome, he had seen a vision of an owl; and a fellow prisoner told him it was the harbinger of good fortune for him. That had indeed proved true, for he was released and eventually became king of the Jews. The same prisoner, however, had warned him that if he ever again saw an owl, he would have but five days to live (*Ant.* 18.200). Josephus added that he was

immediately stricken with pain and carried to his bed chamber, and he died exactly five days later. Luke's account also speaks of an immediate death, making explicit what is implicit in Josephus—he was struck down by “an angel of the Lord.”

Once again we see a motif already familiar in Acts. There is both mercy and judgment with the Lord. The Spirit blessed the faithful Christians with miraculous works and great growth ([5:12–16](#)). The same Spirit brought judgment to Ananias and Sapphira ([5:1–11](#)). The Lord's angel delivered Peter from mortal danger ([12:6–17](#)). The Lord's angel struck Agrippa dead for all his arrogance ([12:20–23](#)). He did not “give praise to God”—neither in his acceptance of the people's blasphemous acclamation nor in his persecution of God's people. Josephus spoke of acute pain in Agrippa's abdomen. Luke said that he was “eaten by worms.”

(4) Peace for the Church [12:24–25](#)

[12:24](#) With Agrippa's sudden removal, the persecution of the church ended, and once more the word of God flourished. The Greek says literally that it “grew and multiplied,” just as the seed that fell on good ground in Jesus' parable of the sower. This is the last summary of the Jerusalem church in Acts. It ends on a positive note. God continued to bless the witness of the Jerusalem community.

[12:25](#) Verse [25](#) moves the narrative forward, mentioning the return of Paul and Barnabas to Antioch on completion of their mission of delivering the famine relief offering ([11:30](#)). Viewed chronologically, it would have most likely been around this time, around A.D. 46 and thus a couple of years after the death of Agrippa, that the famine struck Judea and Antioch sent its offering. The best manuscripts read “to,” not “from,” Jerusalem, but that would scarcely make sense. Clearly, the two were returning from Jerusalem to Antioch and were set for the following narrative, which took place in Antioch ([13:1–3](#)). The NIV has chosen, as most translations do, to follow the more poorly attested reading “from Jerusalem,” since the context seems to demand it. Another solution, however, is to put the phrase “to Jerusalem” with “ministry,” a construction found elsewhere in Luke-Acts. The translation would then read, “Barnabas and Saul returned, having finished their ministry to Jerusalem.” In any event, they took a companion along with them—John Mark (cf. [12:12](#)). The church at Antioch would soon send the three of them on a mission ([13:1–3](#)) that would result in tremendous success among the Gentiles. The witness to Judea and Samaria had now been well-established. The way to the Gentiles had already been paved by Philip, by Peter, and by the church at Antioch. From this point it would be Paul who above all would take up the Gentile witness and move the gospel to “the ends of the earth.”