



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

Notes: Week Twenty-One

Acts 12:1-25 (NIV)

Peter's Miraculous Escape From Prison

¹² It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

⁶ The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. ⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

⁸ Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. ⁹ Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

¹² When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. ¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

¹⁵ "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

¹⁶ But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

¹⁸ In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Herod's Death

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. ²⁰ He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

²¹ On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. ²² They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." ²³ Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

²⁴ But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

Barnabas and Saul Sent Off

²⁵ When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from^[a] Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 12:25](#) Some manuscripts *to*

Holman Christian Standard Bible - Study Bible¹

Acts 12:1-25

12:1 This **King Herod** was Herod Agrippa I, who ruled in Palestine from A.D. 37 to 44. His attack apparently focused on the apostles in Jerusalem.

12:2 The **James** whom Herod executed was one of the "Sons of Thunder" ([Mk 3:17](#)).

12:6-10 Peter was again rescued from prison by an **angel of the Lord** (see note at [5:19-20](#)), though this time he initially thought he was only seeing a vision.

12:11 Jesus too was once rescued from **Herod's grasp**, though it was a different king Herod ([Mt 2:13-15](#)).

12:12-16 Knowing that everyone inside was praying for Peter, **Rhoda** rushed back in to tell them that God had answered their prayers, not bothering to let Peter in first! Remarkably, they disbelieved her and suggested it was Peter's **angel**. This reflected the common Jewish belief in guardian angels. It also shows how serious the persecutions had become, for it was believed that your guardian angel would sometimes appear shortly after your death. Thus it seems the crowd of believers was better prepared to believe Peter had been executed than that he had been released.

12:17 Peter **went to a different place** most likely in an attempt to throw Herod and the Jewish authorities off his trail. God had freed him miraculously, but this did not mean Peter could flaunt his freedom or act imprudently. Peter instructed those present to **report** his freedom to **James**, Jesus' brother, mentioned here for the first time in Acts. James, apparently not a follower of Jesus until after the resurrection, emerged as a leader in the Jerusalem church ([Gal 1:19](#)).

12:20-22 **On an appointed day** Herod arranged to receive praise from his subjects, but God had other plans ([v. 23](#)).

12:23 Herod **died** because he claimed for himself the honor and **glory** that belongs only to God. There have been various speculations about the immediate cause of Herod's death, including appendicitis, poisoning, and intestinal blockage.

12:24 With Herod out of the way, there were fewer hindrances to the spread of the good news, which **flourished and multiplied**.

12:25 **Barnabas and Saul** returned to Jerusalem after their relief mission. Here again we see the vital role Barnabas played in assimilating Saul into leadership of the early church.

1. Jeremy Royal Howard, ed., *HCSB Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Acts 12".

English Standard Version - Study Bible²

Acts 12:1-25

12:1-25 The Jerusalem Church Is Persecuted. [Chapter 12](#) is the last chapter in Acts that tells of the Jerusalem church without reference to Paul's ministry.

12:1-5 The Death of James. Herod executed the apostle James and imprisoned Peter, intending to do the same to him.

12:1 about that time. See note on [11:24](#). **Herod** was Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great (see note on [Matt. 2:1](#)). He was reared in Rome, and because of boyhood playmates who later became emperors he was granted rule over various territories in Judea until his kingdom reached the full extent of his grandfather's territory (A.D. 41-44). See [map](#). His persecution of the Christians may have been an attempt to curry favor with the Jews (cf. [Acts 12:3](#)).

The Kingdom of Herod Agrippa I

c. A.D. 41

Largely due to his influential friendships with the Roman emperors Gaius (Caligula) and Claudius, Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great, pieced together what was essentially his grandfather's old kingdom plus the region of Abilene to the north. He wielded great power over the whole region of Palestine, as well as Syria, including Tyre and Sidon.



2. Lane T. Dennis, ed., *ESV Study Bible, The: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Acts 12".

[12:2](#) The martyred **James** was Jesus' disciple, son of Zebedee and brother of John, not to be confused with James, the brother of Jesus and author of the book of James, who became a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church (see note on [v. 17](#)). Jesus had predicted his suffering ([Mark 10:39](#)).

[12:3](#) Why this **pleased the Jews** is not specified. Perhaps the persecution following Stephen's death ([8:1](#)) had escalated. The **days of Unleavened Bread**, the seven days following the Passover meal, were considered holy and not to be desecrated by an execution.

[12:4](#) The **prison** was probably the Tower of Antonia, which was at the northwestern corner of the temple complex and was the quarters of the Roman garrison. The use of **four squads of soldiers** reflects Roman practice: one squad of four soldiers for each of the four three-hour watches of the night. **Passover** refers to the entire spring festival that unites Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

[12:5](#) The mention of **earnest prayer** continues Luke's emphasis that every step in building the church is due to God's blessing and supernatural intervention.

[12:6-19](#) **Peter's Deliverance from Prison.** Peter was half asleep throughout his "escape" from prison. The angel had to rouse him and direct him ([vv. 7-8](#)), and he remained in a stupor until the angel led him through the gates and into a side street ([vv. 9-11](#)).

[12:12](#) **John whose other name was Mark** will be a major figure in the next three chapters, going with Paul and Barnabas on the first part of their first missionary journey but then leaving them (see [v. 25](#); [13:5](#), [13](#)). This was a cause of contention between Paul and Barnabas (see [15:37](#), [39](#)). Mark regained Paul's favor later (see [Col. 4:10](#); [2 Tim. 4:11](#); [Philem. 24](#)). Mark accompanied Peter (see [1 Pet. 5:13](#)), and there is substantial testimony from the early church that he wrote the Gospel of Mark (see [Introduction to Mark: Author and Title](#)).

[12:13-14](#) Rhoda's failure to **open the gate** on account of **her joy** adds a touch of humor and heightens the suspense.

[12:17](#) **James** here is the brother of Jesus (see [Introduction to James: Author and Title](#); [Gal. 1:19](#)), not James the brother of John (who was killed by Herod, [Acts 12:2](#)). From this point forward in Acts, James seems to have the most prominent leadership role among the apostles in Jerusalem (see [15:13-21](#); [21:18](#)). Though James was not one of the original Twelve, he apparently became an apostle as well (cf. [1 Cor. 15:7](#); [Gal. 1:19](#); [2:9](#)). The book of James also seems to be written on his own (apostolic) authority, not as a spokesman for someone else (see [James 1:1](#)). For some reason Peter no longer remained the leader and spokesman for the apostles in Jerusalem but **went to another place**. Luke does not specify where Peter went (some have suggested either Rome or Antioch); he was back in Jerusalem later for a conference ([Acts 15:7-21](#)).

[12:18-19](#) In executing the **sentries** (i.e., guards), **Herod** was following Roman practice, which specified that soldiers who lost their prisoners were subject to the same penalty as that due to the prisoners. Since the soldiers knew that their lives were at stake, they certainly would not have all fallen asleep apart from the miraculous intervention of the angel who rescued Peter. **Caesarea** was the seat of the Roman government and had a mixed Jewish and Gentile population (see note on [8:40](#)).

[12:20-25](#) **The Death of Herod Agrippa I.** [Chapter 12](#) begins and ends with **Herod** Agrippa I: the persecutor of the church now brings about his own death (see note on [11:24](#) and the parallel account of Herod Agrippa's death in Josephus, [Jewish Antiquities 19.343-350](#)).

[12:20](#) A **chamberlain** is a trusted personal assistant to a high government official; the Greek literally means "the one over the bedroom," but such a person would have had wider responsibilities than this.

[12:21](#) Josephus gives the added detail that Herod's **royal robes** were made of silver that sparkled in the sun, provoking the crowd's acclamation ([Jewish Antiquities 19.344](#)).

[12:23](#) **because he did not give God the glory**. In contrast to Peter's instantaneous rejection of worship in [10:26](#), Herod receives this wrongful praise with delight. In both cases the instinctive response to an unexpected situation revealed the condition of the man's heart.

[12:24](#) **the word of God increased**. No power can triumph over the word of God (cf. [6:7](#); [13:49](#)), and those who attempt to harm God's people will in the end face judgment themselves.

[12:25](#) **their service**. That is, their famine relief journey to Jerusalem (see [11:29-30](#)). Having completed that mission, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with Mark accompanying them (see [12:12](#)).

NLT Life Application Study Bible³

Acts 12:1-25

[12:1](#) King Herod Agrippa I was the son of Aristobulus and grandson of Herod the Great. His sister was Herodias, who had been responsible for the death of John the Baptist (see [Mark 6:17-28](#)). Herod Agrippa I was part Jewish. The Romans had appointed him to rule over most of Palestine, including the territories of Galilee, Perea, Judea, and Samaria. He persecuted the Christians in order to please the Jewish leaders who opposed them, hoping that would solidify his position. Agrippa I died suddenly in A.D. 44 (see [12:20-23](#)). His death was also recorded by the historian Josephus.

[12:2](#) James and John were two of Jesus' original 12 disciples. They had asked Jesus for special recognition in his Kingdom ([Mark 10:35-40](#)). Jesus had said that to be a part of his Kingdom would mean suffering with him (drink from the same cup—[Mark 10:38, 39](#)). James and John did indeed suffer—Herod executed James, and later John was exiled (see [Revelation 1:9](#)).

[12:2-11](#) Why did God allow James to die and yet miraculously save Peter? Life is full of difficult questions like this. Why is one child physically disabled and another child athletically gifted? Why do people die before realizing their potential? Questions like these we cannot possibly answer in this life because we do not see all that God sees. He has chosen to allow evil in this world for a time. But we can trust God's leading because he has promised to destroy all evil eventually. In the meantime, we know that God will help us use our suffering to strengthen us and glorify him. For more on this question, see the notes on [Job 1:1ff](#); [2:10](#); [3:23-26](#).

[12:3-5](#) Herod had Peter arrested during the Passover celebration. This was a strategic move, since more Jews were in the city than usual, and Herod could impress the most people. Herod's plan undoubtedly was to execute Peter, but the believers were praying for Peter's safety. The earnest prayer of the church significantly affected the outcome of these events. Prayer changes things, so pray often and with confidence.

[12:7](#) God sent an angel to rescue Peter. Angels are God's messengers. They are divinely created beings with supernatural power, and they sometimes take on human appearance in order to talk to people. Angels should not be worshiped because they are not divine. They are God's servants, just as we are.

3. *Life Application Study Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 1844-1846.

Herod Agrippa

For good or evil, families have lasting and powerful influence on their children. Traits and qualities are passed on to the next generation, and often with the mistakes and sins of the parents being repeated by the children. Four generations of the Herod family are mentioned in the Bible. Each leader left his evil mark: Herod the Great murdered Bethlehem's baby boys; Herod Antipas was involved in Jesus' trial and John the Baptist's execution; Herod Agrippa I murdered the apostle James; and Herod Agrippa II was one of Paul's judges.

Herod Agrippa I related fairly well to his Jewish subjects. He had a Jewish grandmother of royal blood (Mariamne), which allowed the people to accept him—though grudgingly. As a youth, Agrippa I had been temporarily imprisoned by the emperor Tiberias, but he was now trusted by Rome and got along well with the emperors Caligula and Claudius.

An unexpected opportunity for Herod to gain new favor with the Jews was created by the Christian movement. Gentiles began to be accepted into the church in large numbers. Many Jews had been tolerating this new movement as a sect within Judaism, but its rapid growth alarmed them. Persecution of Christians was revived, and even the apostles were not spared. James was killed, and Peter was thrown into prison.

But soon Herod made a fatal error. During a visit to Caesarea, the people called him a god, and he accepted their praise. Herod was immediately struck with a painful disease, and he died within a week.

Like his grandfather and uncle before him, and his son after him, Herod Agrippa I came close to the truth but missed it. Because religion was important only as an aspect of politics, he had no reverence and no qualms about taking praise that only God should receive. His mistake is a common one. Whenever we become proud of our own abilities and accomplishments, not recognizing them as gifts from God, we repeat Herod's sin.

Strengths and accomplishments

- Capable administrator and negotiator
- Managed to maintain good relations with the Jews in his region and with Rome

Weaknesses and mistakes

- Arranged the murder of the apostle James
- Imprisoned Peter with plans to execute him
- Allowed the people to praise him as a god

Lessons from his life

- Those who set themselves against God are doomed to ultimate failure
- There is great danger in accepting praise that only God deserves
- Family traits can influence children toward great good or great evil

Vital statistics

- Where: Jerusalem
- Occupation: Roman-appointed king of the Jews
- Contemporaries: Emperors Tiberias, Caligula, and Claudius. James, Peter, the apostles.

Key verse

"Instantly, an angel of the Lord struck Herod with a sickness, because he accepted the people's worship instead of giving the glory to God. So he was consumed with worms and died" ([Acts 12:23](#)). Herod Agrippa I's story is told in [Acts 12:1-23](#).

12:12 John Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark. His mother's house was large enough to accommodate a meeting of many believers. An upstairs room in this house may have been the location of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples ([Luke 22:8ff](#)).

12:13-15 The prayers of the group of believers were answered, even as they prayed. But when the answer arrived at the door, they didn't believe it. We should be people of faith who believe that God answers the prayers of those who seek his will. When you pray, believe you'll get an answer. And when the answer comes, don't be surprised; be thankful!

12:17 This James was Jesus' brother, who became a leader in the Jerusalem church ([15:13](#); [Galatians 1:19](#)). The James who was killed ([12:2](#)) was John's brother and one of the original 12 disciples.

12:19 Under Roman law, guards who allowed a prisoner to escape were subject to the same punishment the prisoner was to receive. Thus, these 16 guards were sentenced to death.

12:19 The Jews considered Jerusalem their capital, but the Romans made Caesarea their headquarters in Palestine. That is where Herod Agrippa I lived.

12:20 These coastal cities, Tyre and Sidon, were free and self-governing but economically dependent on Judea (see the map in the introduction to Acts for their location). We don't know why Herod had quarreled with them, but now representatives from those cities were trying to appease him through his personal assistant.

12:23 Herod died a horrible death accompanied by intense pain; he was literally eaten alive, from the inside out, by worms. Pride is a serious sin, and in this case, God chose to punish it immediately. God does not immediately punish all sin, but he will judge everyone ([Hebrews 9:27](#)). Accept Christ's offer of forgiveness today. No one can afford to wait.

12:25 John Mark was Barnabas's cousin ([Colossians 4:10](#)). His mother, Mary, often would open her home to the apostles ([12:12](#)), so John Mark would have been exposed to most of the great men and teachings of the early church. Later, John Mark joined Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but for unknown reasons, he left them in the middle of the trip. John Mark was criticized by Paul for abandoning the mission ([15:37-39](#)), but he wrote the Gospel of Mark and was later acclaimed by Paul as a vital help in the growth of the early church ([2 Timothy 4:11](#)).