

When Chains Fall Off

Acts 12

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It has often been said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, and that's true. By that statement what we mean is no matter what satan brings against believers by way of persecution or opposition, the church goes on, continues to grow, and flourishes. Jesus said that He would build His church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it, right? The church is going to continue to grow and thrive no matter what opposition satan brings. We've seen through the book of Acts: the persecution that broke out with Stephen, the first martyr that died; the persecution that came as they were scattered when the early apostles were beaten, arrested, and told not to preach in His name; and God actually released them earlier from prison as He's going to do again tonight. They must have a special angel that's just kind of created by God to spring people out of prison or something because we get that story again tonight. It's one of the favorite stories of the Bible, but as we go through this chapter (and we're going to cover the whole chapter) there are four things that we can remember that will encourage us whenever we are facing opposition, persecution, or challenges in our own walk with the Lord.

The first is, and I want you to notice it in verses 1-4, we find that God is in control. We need to remember when we're facing hardships, trials, and difficulties that God has not vacated the throne. God is still sovereignly ruling, and He is in control. Even though things may look like they're out of control, God is still in control. In verses 1-4 it says, "Now about that time," we'll come back to that, "Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. 2 And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. 3 And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)" Luke gives us the time of the year when this took place, which was Passover, the month of Nisan, from the 14th-21st. (There was Passover followed by seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.) "And when he had apprehended him," that is, Peter, "he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers," which is 16 soldiers, "to keep him; intending after Easter," or Passover, "to bring him forth to the people."

It says in verse 1, "Now about that time." What time? It was the time when Paul and Barnabas left Antioch and had taken the offering to Judaea for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Remember the Gentile church in Antioch had gathered together this offering and gave it to the apostles, Barnabas and Paul (actually called Saul at this time), who took it to Jerusalem and shared that with them? Well, this is during that period of time, "...that Herod the king," who was this Herod the king mentioned in verse 1?

There are actually about five Herods mentioned in that period of time. First of all, they start with Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the Herod that was there during the time when Jesus was born. He's the wicked king that slew all of the babies in Bethlehem. He was followed by Herod Archelaus, then there was Herod Antipas, followed by Herod Agrippa I, and Herod

Agrippa II. This Herod that is mentioned here in verse 1 is actually Herod Agrippa I. He was the grandson of Herod the Great. The Herodian dynasty were actually what's called Edomites. They were of the tribe of Esau and were ruthless, wicked, and cruel. They tried their best to kind of cater the favor of the Jews. They were trying to be Roman kings but also trying to get along with the Jews. They were just wicked, cruel, ruthless individuals. There was also Herod Antipas that had John the Baptist beheaded.

This wicked, "Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church." We know from the text that he did that because he wanted to make the Jews happy. Why did he want to make the Jews happy? Because he wanted the Jews to like him. He kind of picks something that he can do to gain the favor of the Jews so he thinks, Well, let me try this out. I'm going to have one of these apostles arrested and put him to death. In verse 2, here's the statement, "And he killed James the brother of John with the sword." This is the first of the apostles (Peter, James and John, Thomas, Bartholomew, and Nathaniel—the twelve apostles minus Judas) that Jesus picked to actually die a martyr's death. We had other martyr's already. It started with Stephen, but this is the first of the apostles. He was part of that inner circle that we sometimes refer to as Peter, James, and John. He was the brother of John; and James and John, the two of them, it's interesting, were known as the Sons of Thunder, right? Because they were going to call down fire from heaven and have the Samaritans consumed because they didn't want Jesus to come through their territory, so they were called the Sons of Thunder.

Another little interesting footnote there is this murder by Herod of James the brother of John, this first apostle, was actually a fulfillment of prophecy spoken by Jesus Himself. You say, "Well, what're you talking about?" The mother of James and John, (we call her Mrs. Zebedee, they were the sons of Zebedee) came to Jesus and said, "Lord, may my two boys, James and John," a mother's love for her sons, "sit next to You in Your kingdom, one on Your right hand and one on Your left?" These guys are probably embarrassed thinking, Mom! What are you doing here? She's trying to give a word for her boys, you know, "Jesus, when You get into Your kingdom, can my two sons sit on Your throne with You, one at Your right hand and one right there on Your left?" Jesus said, "You don't know what you're asking." Jesus said, "Are you able to drink of the cup that I will drink of? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism that I will be baptized with?" Here's what James and John said, "Yes." I don't know that they realized what they were saying. Jesus was referring to His suffering. He was referring to the cross that He would have to die on and He's saying, "Are you willing to suffer and die? Are you willing to be baptized with the same baptism and drink the cup of suffering that I'm baptized with?" They most likely very glibly just said, "Oh, yeah. We're able." Interesting, Jesus then said, "You shall be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with, and you shall drink of that cup that I drink of." Jesus actually predicted that they would suffer and die.

It's interesting that James is the first in order, in light of that prophecy, of the apostles that died but his brother John was the very last one of the group to die. As best we know from history, the first to die of the twelve was, of course, Judas, who betrayed the Lord but there was James and then John. James died a martyr's death and John, his brother (who, by the way, is the apostle John who wrote the gospel of John, the book of Revelation, and the epistles of John),

died of old age. We don't know exactly for sure how he died, but tradition says that he died of old age. Remember, he was banished by the Roman emperor Dalmatia to Patmos in about 90 A.D. when he received the book of Revelation or the apocalypse, and some feel that even in his old age that he continued to preach and was persecuted but then eventually died of old age.

Notice verse 3, Peter is then arrested. "And because he saw it pleased the Jews," so Herod killed James and saw that the Jews were happy about that, "he proceeded further to take Peter also," and it was during the time of the unleavened bread. Luke wants us to know the period of time (Nisan, the 14th-21st, this period of Passover and unleavened bread), so he has Peter now. He first takes James and then takes Peter. Peter was, no doubt, the lead apostle. "And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers," there would be 16 soldiers, and each quaternion would have four soldiers and would then rotate them. There would be two soldiers chained to Peter and two soldiers outside the prison doors watching him. Earlier, Peter had been sprung from prison so, no doubt, Herod said, "We're going to learn our lesson from this. I'm going to really button down the hatch and have these soldiers on top of and chained to him so that he won't get away. He was intending after Passover, "to bring him forth to the people."

Here's the thing. At this time the church could be very discouraged, very bothered, and thinking, What is going on? This is horrible. James has most likely been beheaded. When it says that he killed him with the sword, it's most likely that he actually had his head taken off. Now, Peter has been arrested. We can't lose Peter as well, and they were probably quite upset and quite bothered. Whenever you look at your life and things are going crazy and you don't understand what God is doing, you need to remember this: Remember, God is in control, right? God still sits on the throne. Every time in the book of Revelation God is referred to as being in heaven—He's still on the throne. The throne is not vacated. I don't know what you're going through or what is happening in your life tonight—what tragedy, darkness, difficulty, or hardship you might be facing—but we need to remind ourselves that God knows. God is on the throne. God is in control. I can trust in Him.

The second thing we need to remember (the background for it is verses 5-17, the largest section of this chapter) is that God hears our prayers. There are a lot of lessons about prayer in this story, but God hears our prayers. First, God is in control. Secondly, when we pray, God actually does hear and answer our prayers. Follow with me beginning in verse 5. "Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer," and I love that! Peter was kept in prison. James has been beheaded with the sword, Peter has been arrested, and it could be that he was arrested before Passover and kept there the whole week. Why didn't Herod kill Peter during Passover? Because the Jews were celebrating the feast. He didn't want to execute him for probably a couple of reasons. First, it would disrupt their feast. Secondly, they would be so preoccupied with Passover that they couldn't appreciate the fact that Peter is dead; and he wanted to win their favor, so he wanted to have a maximum impact by waiting until Passover was over.

The contrast is that Peter was being prayer for, "but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him. 6 And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night," so

it was evening time when Herod was going to have him taken out and executed, that evening or early in the morning, "Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison. 7 And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him," there's another one of the great angel stories in the book of Acts, "and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. 8 And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. 9 And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision." What an awesome thought!

"When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him. 11 And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews. 12 And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying. 13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda." It's interesting, Luke lets us know what her name was. By the way, that's a variation of the name "Rose." It's another aspect of the name "Rose."

"And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate. 15 And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel," or perhaps it was his spirit, they thought. "But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished. 17 But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James;" which is not the James that was just murdered. This is James, the Lord's brother, who was in charge of the church in Jerusalem, who actually wrote the book of James that we're studying together on Sunday morning. "...and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place." There's a touch of humor—a lot of humor—I see in this story. That's why we so love this story. Go back with me to verse 5.

What made the difference here, and an amazing point that Luke makes is "Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." You say, "Was not prayer offered for James? Why was James put to death and Peter was released? Didn't they pray for James? Maybe they didn't pray in enough faith? What's going on here?" Well, let me say this to begin with. I believe they did pray, no doubt, for James as they prayed for Peter, but this is one of the difficult things that we deal with in life when we're facing hardship, trials, and difficulties is that we don't understand the ways of God. God's ways are not our ways. God's ways are beyond our ways. God's ways are past our finding out.

I've met so many people that get mad at God because they prayed and God didn't give them what they wanted. "I prayed, and God didn't heal my parents," or "God didn't heal my wife," or

“God let my child die,” or “Why did God let me lose this job,” or “Why did I get cancer, and I prayed that God would heal me, and God didn’t heal me?” We don’t understand. We don’t know. That’s why I go back to my first point, that God is in control and remind ourselves, too, that God does hear. God does answer prayers, but He doesn’t always answer them the way that we want or the way we expect Him to. Part of walking by faith and learning to trust God is that God doesn’t always answer the prayers the way we ask Him to answer our prayers. God has reasons and purposes beyond our knowledge and understanding that we just learn to walk by faith and not by sight—we don’t know, we don’t understand, we don’t have the answers. Some people say, “Well, maybe God had plans for Peter, and it was just time for James to go,” and “God wanted to use Peter, and God had ministry for Peter to do.” We don’t know that. We can’t theorize or read that into the narrative. Actually, after this (in the book of Acts) Peter passes off the scene.

There is not a lot of mention of Peter after this, so we don’t know or understand why God takes some people early, why God let’s other people live, why some people will get sick and die, why some people are healed, why other people are not healed. We just have to learn to trust God. You say, “Well, I can’t believe that you bring that up, Pastor Miller, and you don’t give us any hope.” Your hope is in God. Your hope is being realistic in realizing that God knows better than we do, right? God is sovereign, God is in control, and God knows what He is going to do. We don’t like that. We want God to do what we want Him to do, but the idea is that God is God and that’s where faith comes in. The Bible says the just shall live by faith. It’s learning to trust God even in the dark, even when we don’t see what God is doing or what God’s purpose or plans actually are.

This passage certainly points out the importance of prayer, verse 5. “Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” Some people wrestle with the subject of prayer because they think, If God is sovereign and will only do what He’s going to do, then why pray? Good question. The answer is that God has actually ordained that through our prayers that His purposes and plans are accomplished and fulfilled. I admit this again is another mystery, but God actually uses us. I’d like to think of it as joint participation. Prayer does change things, but prayer also changes us. We need to learn that God wants to save people, but He wants to save them as we pray and witness to them, as we share with them. You know, we don’t just say, “Okay, God’s going to save whom He’s going to save, and whoever God’s going to save, that’s God’s will and God’s work and we just let God do it.” No. God said to go into all the world and preach the gospel, right? And, we need to pray for the lost. The God that has ordained the end, the salvation of sinners, has also ordained the means to the end, that we actually pray and align ourselves with God’s will. And, when we learn to pray, we become joint participants in the work that God wants to do. There is a sense in which that God works when we pray. God sometimes moves us to pray in accordance to His will and hears and answers us, and God gets the glory for it.

They were praying. Notice some things about their prayer. First, they were praying to God. You say, “Well, isn’t all prayer to God?” Answer: No. Sometimes people pray to impress people, especially in public prayer meetings. You know when you’re praying in a public prayer meeting

you've got to use King James English, "Thou, God of the universe, we cometh to Thee, O Father," you know, and it's gotta be King James. Like God listens quicker if it's in King James English, or we're worried about the phrases and the words we use. We're too people conscious. Jesus said, "Go into your closet and pray unto your Father in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." One thing you need to do when you pray, whether in private or in public, (this was a public prayer meeting, they were praying corporately) is you need to pray to God. You need to say, "Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." You're talking to your Father. You need to realize your words are directed to God, not to impress people. And, notice they prayed together. It was a corporate prayer meeting at the church. There's power in corporate prayer. It unifies and unites God's people, and I think that we should be joining together and praying as a church.

Thirdly, they prayed earnestly. "Without ceasing" conveys the idea that it was earnest prayer. The passage indicates that it was like an all-night prayer meeting. They were earnest in praying and seeking the Lord. The Bible says, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." They were also praying specifically. They were praying corporately. They were praying to God. They were praying earnestly, and they were praying specifically for him (the end of verse 5). For who? For Peter. They were asking very specifically for God to do something. I've been in a lot of public prayer meetings where people don't even ask for anything. They actually just tell God, "God, You know I'm really tired right now. You know I need money right now, Lord," and you know, "I want You just to see what I'm going through." Sometimes they're just informing God, and sometimes I'm thinking, Just ask Him for something, you know. We just tell God everything He already knows, but we don't get specific, "Lord, would You do this? Would You specifically do this?" You ask God specifically so that you can see God answers your prayer. They were praying specifically and interceding for Peter.

It's interesting in verse 6, it says, "And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night," it's interesting that the night that Herod was going to pull Peter out of the prison and have him executed was when God delivered him. Isn't it funny that God's timing is different than ours? I mean, they had probably been praying for days, and why didn't God save him days before? Sometimes God waits till the very last minute just to test us, that we will continue to pray and trust in Him, but God's timing and God's will is so very important. And the whole concept that Peter was sleeping between two soldiers...would you be sleeping if you knew you were going to be executed the next day? If you were in prison or on death row, and in a matter of hours you were going to be put to death, would you say, "I need to take a nap." Would you say, "I've gotta retire early tonight, it's going to be a big day tomorrow," you know. "Things are really going to come to a head here, you know." I don't think so. I've never understood this "last meal" kind of a concept. What do you want to eat before you die? It's like, who cares?

I think it's interesting when Peter wrote in his first epistle in 1 Peter 5:7, "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you." Peter put it into practice in his own life. Peter understood that. When he wrote those words, Peter knew what he was talking about. It's funny. I was thinking about Peter sleeping in the Bible today. So many times you find Peter sleeping in the Bible. He's sleeping in Gethsemane. Now, he's sleeping in the prison. It's like, does this dude do

anything else but sleep, you know? He just eats and sleeps and fishes, but it's just an indication that he was just totally trusting God. He was in such a deep sleep that when the angel of the Lord showed up, the angel had to slap him to wake him up. This would make a great movie. It's like, "Peter!" You can imagine, he's doing the (making whistle-snoring sounds) and you see the Zs going out. He's like snoring, and he just had to shake him and wake him up. He's in this deep sleep, and then the Bible says, "And his chains fell off from his hands." What a picture of salvation that is! "And the angel said unto him," I love it, verse 8, "Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me."

It's interesting that so often in the Bible you see the blending together of the miraculous and the human. God opens the prison...the chains just fall off of his arms, the prison doors "opened to them of his own accord." An angel shows up and springs him out of jail, yet he had to put his own clothes on. You know, if I were doing this in cartoon fashion, the shoes would've SHWOOSH! on his feet, and his coat SHWOOSH! jumped on him, and he would've just KWOOSH! flying out, you know, kind of like the Flying Dutchman or something. Yet, the angel had to actually physically wake him up. The passage says that the prison cell filled with light, which is interesting, I don't know how Luke got that information; but you know, somehow Luke got that information because Peter's asleep. How did he know the prison was full of light? He was sound asleep when he woke up, and the angel had to shake him and kind of knock him around, "Come on, Peter, wake up," and then tell him, "Gird yourself," that is, that strap around your waist, gird your loins. Put on your belt. Put on your sandals and grab your outer coat or tunic. Put it on and follow me.

Remember when Jesus fed the five thousand? He told His disciples to take the bread and the loaves. He prayed and He multiplied it, and they had to pass it out. It's interesting, too, when Lazarus was raised from the dead, Jesus brings him out of the grave miraculously by His power, but He actually told them to roll away the stone. You have the human mixed with the divine—You roll away the stone, I'll bring him out of the grave. You pass out the bread, I'll multiply it. The angel wakes him up and miraculously opens the prison, but you've gotta put your clothes on and get ready to leave this prison cell. What an awesome thought that is!

"And he went out, and followed him," Peter was following the angel, "and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision." Again, which is interesting because in Acts 10 we just read a few weeks ago, Peter was on the housetop of the roof there in Joppa and remember what happened? He had a vision, right? By the way, I forgot that one. What was Peter doing? Sleeping! I love Peter. Peter and I have the same gift. It's called the gift of sleep. He was sleeping up on the rooftop, and he had this vision. Now, he's sleeping in prison and thinks that it's a vision. Now, when you're in prison, these are the kind of visions you have. These are the kind of dreams you have. He's probably smiling, "Huh huh," you know. It's like, these are the kind of dreams you have, and "The angel is springing me out of here," but when they went out, the prison doors opened on their own, "...and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him." It says that Peter knew not, until he got out in verse 11, and said, "I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and

hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.” Finally, he pinches himself. He wakes up. He was kind of groggy. He thought that it was a vision. No, it’s a real experience, and he’s actually delivered. What an amazing thing!

“And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark.” This is the home of Mary who was the mother of Mark, who is also known as John Mark. This was the home the disciples spent a lot of time at. It’s believed that it was a large home because they gathered there in a large group. Some feel that it was the upper room from the day of Pentecost where the Holy Spirit came in Acts 2, but they’re gathered there praying. This John Mark is actually the writer of the gospel of Mark, and he’ll be mentioned again here in just a moment at the end of the chapter where he becomes the traveling companion of Paul.

They were gathered together praying and Peter knocked at the door. They had an outer courtyard around the house with a gate. Peter is outside. He’s at the gate, knocking on the door, and Rhoda comes to the door. Now, another thing that’s interesting about the prayer meeting that was going on is when Peter knocked at the door, they were praying. Have you ever been in a prayer meeting when the phone rings or something happens and you all kind of look up with one eye like, Who’s going to answer the door or Who’s going to get to the phone? Someone is praying and the prayer meeting is going on. I want you to imagine. They’re all praying. They’re praying, “Lord, we just pray for Peter. God we pray that you’ll just release Peter. Lord, we don’t want Peter to die. We need him, Lord. Please deliver Peter. Lord, we just pray right now for Peter’s deliverance,” and you hear a KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK! on the door. They just keep praying, and they hear another knock. Maybe Mary kind of gave a motion to Rhoda, you know, “Would you go get the door while we’re praying? It’s going to disrupt our prayer meeting.” So, Rhoda goes out into the courtyard. She goes to the door and actually says, “Who is it?” “It’s Peter!” She recognizes it’s Peter’s voice! She’s so excited that she forgets to let him in! And, Peter’s thinking, (he’s looking around) I could get busted any minute! Come on, Rhoda, open the door and let me in. She gets so excited, she runs back into the prayer meeting and actually tells everyone that Peter’s outside! What’s their response? “You’re crazy! How can Peter be outside? We’re praying for him. He’s in prison right now. We’re asking God to deliver him. Come on! Get praying with us!” I mean, if this isn’t humor, I don’t know what is. This is just hilarious! She says, “No, no! He’s really there! It’s Peter.” They say, “It must be his spirit. He’s probably already been executed.”

Do you know the Jews had an idea that when you died your spirit kind of hovered around the grave for a few days before you finally SWOOP! took off. They thought, Well, maybe his spirit came to say good-bye to us. This is kind of like a seance and we’re in this meeting and maybe the spirit’s knocking on the door, or something like that. She says, “No, no. It’s really Peter.” Finally, she convinces them. They go to the door and lo and behold, guess what? It’s Peter, and the Bible says (verse 16), “they were astonished.” That’s so amazing to me! This is what amazes me, that they were actually praying and didn’t really believe that God was going to answer their prayers, yet God did answer their prayer. This is what’s so amazing that even though they weren’t praying with the faith that we would expect them to pray with, God

graciously still answered their prayer. So, you need to remember God's on the throne, God answers prayer, even if you might think, Well, I don't know if I trust the Lord enough or if I have enough faith, and I don't know if I'm praying with enough faith. You know, God, in His mercy and grace, will answer our prayer even when we sometimes have unbelief? It's kind of like that, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." It's amazing to think about the fact that they weren't really even praying with that much faith, and God, in His grace, still answered their prayers. Peter told them, "how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go show these things unto James," and James is the Lord's half brother, the author of the book of James.

Let me give you my third thing to remember when you're facing persecution, opposition, and difficulties—God deals with our enemies. God will deal with those who are opposing and coming against us. God says, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." Verses 18-23, "Now as soon as it was day," this all happened during the night, "there was no small stir among the soldiers," so early that morning, Herod was going to get Peter and have him executed, "what was become of Peter." The soldiers were freaking out, "And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea, and there abode." Under the Roman law, if someone escaped from prison, the soldiers would actually be executed or put to death. So, Herod, this cruel, wicked ruler has these soldiers, maybe without even talking to them and getting the scoop on what happened...and you can imagine how baffled these guys would've been that this angel actually came and released him from prison. Herod has these soldiers put to death, and it says, "And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea," last week I showed you the picture of Caesarea along the coast there. So, he went kind of northwest from Jerusalem up to Caesarea, that Roman capitol.

"And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king's country. 21 And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. 22 And the people gave a shout," as Herod was speaking, "[saying, It is] the voice of a god, and not of a man. 23 And immediately the angel of the Lord," here's another angel in Acts, "smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost." I believe that Luke puts this in the narrative here so that we could see how God takes care of our enemies. The Bible says, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." Herod stretched forth his hand and killed James. He tried to kill Peter, but Peter escaped. The Bible actually said he took off somewhere. It doesn't tell us where he went, but he escaped. The angel delivered him, but now it's time to use some common sense and go hide somewhere for a while, yet God is the one who deals with our enemies. He takes care of Herod. He deals with Herod and wipes him out.

Josephus, the ancient historian, (it's not in the Scriptures) says that this happened in that amphitheater I showed you the picture of last week. Now, we don't know for sure, but it says that Herod was on his throne. I don't know how his throne got in the amphitheater, but it's a beautiful amphitheater there in Caesarea, and you can see the ocean. These men of Tyre and

Sidon, which is up the northern coast in the area today of Lebanon, wanted to make peace with Herod because they needed him. The country was subsidized by the Romans. They needed his help, so they kind of made friends through his chamberlain, Blastus, and desired peace with him, so there was a gathering together. It was a political gathering, and Herod was going to give a speech. Herod gave this oration, this speech; and to butter him up to win his favor, the people started clapping for Herod and said, "Oh, it's the voice of a god and not of a man!" Josephus said that Herod had this beautiful robe on with sequences, and the sun was reflecting off of it—it's this beautiful day there on the beach and the sunlight hitting him. You can stand in that amphitheater, by the way, and when you speak, your voice just echoes in that amphitheater. They said, "It's the voice of a god and not of a man!" They're cheering and buttering him up.

The Bible actually says that Herod was smitten by an angel of the Lord not because he had killed James but, it's interesting, because he failed to give God the glory. You know, there's a lesson to be learned here, right? Give God the glory! Don't take the glory that belongs to God and to God alone. Whenever God uses you, you need to make sure that you give God the glory and that you realize God's the One doing the work. This was, though, divine retribution—he was eaten of worms. This is a story that you can read to your kids before you tuck them in bed at night. "Now, little Johnny, be sure always to give God the glory because you don't want to be eaten by worms." They'll not sleep all night.

In closing, I have one last point (verses 24-25), remember that God's Word and God's work will increase and go on. God's Word and God's work increased. Jesus said, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." So, "the word of God grew and multiplied. 25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem," now, while this was going on, by the way—Peter's in prison, James is beheaded or killed with the sword—guess who was in Jerusalem? Saul and Barnabas. After this, they make their way back to Antioch. When it says in verse 25 that "Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem," they returned to Antioch (this Antioch of Syria, where this Gentile church has started which becomes this missionary-sending church), and "when they had fulfilled their ministry," which was taking the offering to these suffering saints, these poor saints in Jerusalem, "and took with them John, whose surname was Mark." They left Jerusalem and took John Mark with them. (John, whose mother, Mary, owned the house where the prayer meeting was going on at the time that Peter was released from prison.)

This would've given Saul and Barnabas a new confidence and a new boldness to go out and preach the gospel—that God will take care of our enemies, that God is on the throne, that God answers prayer, that God will protect us, and that God's Word will go on. Sometimes we get discouraged and think the Church is going to die and the world is going to win. We need to remember that God's on the throne, God answers prayer, God sees, God knows, God will take care of our enemies, vengeance belongs to God, and that one day God's Word is going to continue to grow and increase. He's adding to the church, "the word of God grew and multiplied." Verse 25 is a transition verse into Acts 13, where we begin the first missionary journey of Paul. Barnabas and Saul take off on their first missionary journey with John Mark who eventually comes back from the missionary journey.

This story of Peter's release from prison, I believe, gives us a reminder of how God saves the sinner. God gives us a reminder in this story of how sinners are delivered. We are all dead in our trespasses and sins and bound in the prison of our own sin, and God comes to us in His mercy and grace. His light shines and He opens our heart and opens our eyes. We trust Him as Savior, and He brings us salvation. Then, the chains drop off—He sets us free and the prison doors open. It's a picture of conversion when we're saved, how the prison doors are opened and we're set free from our sin. I'm sure that Charles Wesley, the great hymn writer, had this in mind when he wrote this song:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay

Fast bound in sin and nature's night;

Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,

I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;

My chains fell off, my heart was free,

I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

I'm sure Charles Wesley had this story in mind when he was writing that beautiful hymn of how God came in His mercy and God came in His grace and God revealed Himself to me and set me free. He freed me from my chains. He opened the prison doors, and He sets the captives free. Amen? Let's pray.