

Theme: Violence to the Church, but God answers prayer!

<sup>12:1</sup> Now about that time Herod the king stretched out *his* hand to harass some from the church. <sup>2</sup> Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. <sup>3</sup> And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was *during* the Days of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> So when he had arrested him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

<sup>5</sup> Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. <sup>6</sup> And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. <sup>7</sup> Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by *him*, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, “Arise quickly!” And his chains fell off *his* hands. <sup>8</sup> Then the angel said to him, “Gird yourself and tie on your sandals”; and so he did. And he said to him, “Put on your garment and follow me.” <sup>9</sup> So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup> When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.

<sup>11</sup> And when Peter had come to himself, he said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and *from* all the expectation of the Jewish people.”

<sup>12</sup> So, when he had considered *this*, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. <sup>13</sup> And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. <sup>14</sup> When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of *her* gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. <sup>15</sup> But they said to her, “You are beside yourself!” Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, “It is his angel.”

<sup>16</sup> Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened *the door* and saw him, they were astonished. <sup>17</sup> But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, “Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren.” And he departed and went to another place.

<sup>18</sup> Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup> But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that *they* should be put to death.

And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed *there*.

<sup>20</sup> Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king’s personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king’s *country*.

<sup>21</sup> So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. <sup>22</sup> And the people kept shouting, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” <sup>23</sup> Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.

<sup>24</sup> But the word of God grew and multiplied.

<sup>25</sup> And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled *their* ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark.

<sup>13:1</sup> Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. <sup>2</sup> As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” <sup>3</sup> Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent *them* away.

### **Introduction**

Acts Chapter 12: v. 1 – through to Acts Chapter 13: v. 3 is the end of the first section of the book of Acts.

The rest of the book of Acts mainly deals with the Apostle Paul’s Missionary Journeys. However Paul’s Missionary Journeys are very important because they give us a foundation for our own missionary journeys and help us to continue serving Jesus, even in difficult times.

When you are preaching the Gospel, or sharing your faith, through the power of the Holy Spirit, you will always get opposition. When you are moving forward in your own personal walk with Jesus, you will get opposition also.

The reason for this is that although the devil is a defeated enemy, he is like a bee without a sting. Yes he can cause lots of problems, but he can't affect our eternal Salvation through Jesus.

Christians can be killed through what seems to be a victory for Satan, but God always has the last word. God judges according to His time scale.

God is sovereign in the lives of His people and they will have divine protection according to His purposes. This point is very encouraging when we come to this chapter.

I will divide the passage into four sections.

In Chapter 12: v. 1-4 we learn about **King Herod's violence toward believers**.

In Chapter 12: v. 5-19 we are encouraged by **God's work, through an Angel** to protect Peter and release him from prison.

In Chapter 12: v. 20-24 we see **God's judgement upon Herod**. And finally we are encouraged from Chapter 12: v.24 – Acts 13 : v.3 that **God's work, through the Holy Spirit continues** and two missionaries are sent out to take the Gospel to the rest of the world.

These missionaries were Barnabas and Saul.

#### **1. Herod's violence towards believers in Jesus Christ. – Chapter 12: v. 1-4.**

We are taught from the Bible that the Christians in Jerusalem had been relatively free from persecution since the death of Stephen. (Acts Chapter 7: v. 54-8: v.3.)

Although the Apostle Paul had received threats on his life (Acts 9: v.29), he had been allowed to move about freely in Jerusalem.

Since this time of persecution there had been at least two years of relative peace.

We are introduced to King Herod.

##### **Who was this horrible man?**

His full name was Herod Agrippa No. 1.

(There would be another Herod the Agrippa later – Acts 25: v. 13, he was No. 2)

Herod Agrippa No. 1 was a Grandson of Herod the Great.

His Uncle Antipas had known and tried Jesus. ( Matt. 2: v.1)

Jesus and His followers and the Jewish Church were well known to this King.

He also had a Jewish Grandmother called "**Mariamne**" who arranged for him to be educated in Rome.

Through "**Mariamne**", Herod could **claim Jewish ancestry**.

Herod fully exploited his Jewish ancestry. He did everything to appease the Jews.

The Jews who didn't believe in Jesus as their Messiah, honoured this man who got involved in Temple worship and the public reading of the Old Testament scriptures.

It is important to have some background about this man because then we can better understand his actions when we read in v.3.... **because he saw it pleased the Jews...**

King Herod Agrippa was a very **ambitious man** and desired to have the same power as his Grandfather.

He was already ruler of lots of areas of the Roman Empire but **requested to control Judea and Samaria, which was granted to him.**

When Herod took over this new area he wanted to stamp his authority and power.

The first thing he did was to **persecute the Christians**.

He **killed James the brother of John** with the sword.

##### **Who was this James?**

James was a very prominent disciple who belonged to the inner circle of Jesus' followers. He was very important in the Church in Jerusalem and was probably the leader, which is why Herod killed him first.

The context of this situation was during the Jewish Passover Festival.

Thousands of Jews had gathered in Jerusalem for this important event.

We are told that the killing of James pleased the Jewish people.

Therefore King Agrippa arrested Peter also and put him in prison.

King Agrippa planned to bring charges against Peter but delayed his court case until after the Passover.

It was the Jewish Law, **not to allow any trials or sentencing during the Passover period**. However people could be held in prison awaiting trial.

Peter was put in prison and **16 soldiers were appointed to stand guard** and protect the prison. We are told that Roman soldiers faced execution if they let a prisoner escape, so they would be very vigilant in their work.(v. 19)

So King Agrippa was feeling very pleased with himself.

He had murdered , or got executed, the head of the Jerusalem Church and put the best evangelist in prison, awaiting trial and execution.

Q. What was God going to do in this situation?

Q. What were the believers going to do?

Q. How could they help Peter now?

Q. King Agrippa was a very powerful man. Was there any hope for the Church in Jerusalem?

The answer comes in the rest of our passage.

## 2. **God answers prayer and works through an Angel. – v. 5-19.**

It was the night before Peter’s trial. Since Peter was arrested the members of the Church **constantly prayed for him.**

The most powerful weapon that believers in Jesus have at their disposal is **“PRAYER”**.

I will talk more about this in my application later, but it is important that we notice v. 5 in its context.

In the original Greek translation of v. 5 there is a special emphasis on the **continuousness of the praying.**

From the context in our passage we do know that they were having an **all night prayer meeting** on the night prior to Peter’s trial.

Members of the Jerusalem Church were having an all night prayer meeting at the house of Mary, the mother of John.

Peter was exhausted and sleeping in prison. He was chained to two soldiers, and there were guards on the inner and outer doors of the prison.

There was absolutely no way in which Peter could escape.

**It was an impossible situation.**

Impossible situations call for a supernatural God to do impossible things!

God wonderfully answered the prayers of His people and sent an angel to rescue Peter from prison.

We are told that Peter thought that he was seeing a vision, as he didn’t really know what was happening. He just obeyed and followed the Angel.

When Peter was led to a safe place in the city, the Angel departed.

It was at this point that Peter fully woke up and realised that God had sent an angel to deliver him from prison, and from the possible execution by Herod and the Jewish people.

Peter decided to go to the home of John Mark to report his situation.

Peter knocked on the door of the gate entrance to the home of John Mark and was greeted by a girl named Rhoda. **She recognised Peter’s voice** and was so excited that she forgot to open the gate which was clearly locked.

Rhoda reported back to the all night prayer meeting that Peter had arrived in answer to their prayers.

**The people at the prayer meeting didn’t believe her.**

However Peter kept knocking at the door and eventually they opened it and found Peter standing there.

Peter told them the story of what happened in prison and then departed to another place.

In the morning Herod discovered that Peter had escaped. Although they searched for Peter everywhere, they couldn’t find him.

The soldiers were put to death for neglect of duty. This was the strict Roman Law concerning soldiers who were guarding prisoners.

So 16 Roman soldiers were executed, but Peter was out of prison and in hiding.

### **Application.**

The application I wish to draw out from this section of the passage concerns prayer.

A girl named Rhoda recognised Peter’s voice, but the believers at the all-night prayer meeting didn’t believe her.

It was very clear that the people at the all-night prayer meeting were perhaps not really praying in faith.

There are three important things about prayer that we must understand if we are to be motivated and encouraged in our own personal prayer life.

- a) We need to pray **in faith**.
- b) We need to pray believing in the **promises of God**.
- c) We need to pray believing in the **sovereignty of God**.

**Let us first look at the prayer of faith.**

Before we do that we need to understand what the word “faith” means.

**Hebrews Chapter 11: v. 1-7 in the N.L.T.**

Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see. <sup>2</sup>Through their faith, the people in days of old earned a good reputation.

<sup>3</sup>By faith we understand that the entire universe was formed at God’s command, that what we now see did not come from anything that can be seen.

<sup>4</sup>It was by faith that Abel brought a more acceptable offering to God than Cain did. Abel’s offering gave evidence that he was a righteous man, and God showed his approval of his gifts. Although Abel is long dead, he still speaks to us by his example of faith.

<sup>5</sup>It was by faith that Enoch was taken up to heaven without dying—“he disappeared, because God took him.” For before he was taken up, he was known as a person who pleased God. <sup>6</sup>And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.

<sup>7</sup>It was by faith that Noah built a large boat to save his family from the flood. He obeyed God, who warned him about things that had never happened before. By his faith Noah condemned the rest of the world, and he received the righteousness that comes by faith.

So praying in faith involves believing the God of the Bible actually exists, and sincerely asking him for things, even though you can’t actually see Him.

When you pray in faith, you have the assurance and confidence in the God of the Bible. You do not doubt that He loves you and that He will answer your prayers.

**Secondly we need to pray, believing in the promises of God.**

It is no use praying to God for something that the Bible prohibits. It is also a good thing to understand the context behind promises that are made in the Bible.

Let me give you an example.

**Philippians 4: v. 19. in N.K.J.**

<sup>19</sup> And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Paul told the Church at Philippi that God would supply all of their needs, according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

We need to understand that the people in this Church gave sacrificially towards the needs of the Apostle Paul, **and because of that**, their needs would be met.

God promises to meet our needs if we are honest and sincere in our own personal giving. This means our tithe to the Church where we worship, and other offerings as and when they are needed to support God’s work through His servants.

We can certainly pray in faith, trusting in God’s promises to meet our needs if we are in fact sincerely and maybe even sacrificially giving ourselves.

**Thirdly we need to pray, believing in the sovereignty of God.**

**Q.** What do I mean by this?

Well what I mean by this is that God has a greater understanding about everything. He may say, yes I will answer that prayer immediately. He may say wait, it is not the right timing for this, or He may say NO, this is not the best for you, because He knows the future and also what He desires to do for us in any given situation.

In other words because we know that God loves us, He will ALWAYS do the best for us, **even though we may not understand it at the time.**

Even when God says NO, it will always be the best for us.

I left Japan in 1992, and God promised my wife Wendy that one day He would bring us back to Japan. When we returned to the U.K. for a one year assignment.

God closed the door for our return to Japan. I prayed but God said NO.  
However 23 years later, God opened the door for Wendy and myself to return to Japan for 5 years ministry at O.I.C.  
As I look back I can honestly say now that I thank God that He said NO, 23 years ago.  
We understand and apply these three principles in our prayer life.  
If we do, then I believe that we will be like the girl Rhoda in the text, believing it was Peter at the door and not like the other believers who were at the prayer meeting, who didn't believe that God had done the impossible.

### **3. God's judgement upon Herod. V. 20-23.**

We are not sure about the time scale, but at some late date Luke records the judgement of Herod. It is clear that Herod had set himself up like a god. People were worshipping him like a god and not a man.

#### **Suddenly an Angel of the Lord struck Herod, and killed him.**

We are told that Herod was eaten by worms and died.

Although Herod did some very bad things, we are told that his final sin was trying to take God's Glory for himself.

#### **Application**

It is a very dangerous thing to take credit for something that God has done in your life.  
God will not share His glory with anybody.

#### **(Isaiah 42: v. 8 in N.K.J.)**

<sup>8</sup> I am the LORD, that is My name;  
And My glory I will not give to another,  
Nor My praise to carved images.

There are lots of evil people in the world.

There are lots of dictators and rulers who set themselves up like a god.

Nevertheless God will judge them one day, and they will receive eternal punishment in Hell, separated from God forever.

Make sure that you will not be there with them. Put your faith and trust in Jesus.

Trust Jesus to take your sin away, believe in the God of the Bible, not in the idols of Japan.

### **4. God's work continues – Saul and Barnabas separated for God's work.**

#### **(Acts 12: v. 24 – Acts 13: v.3.)**

We are encouraged by v. 24 because in spite of the efforts of a very powerful man, he was not able to stop the spread of God's Word, nor able to stop people believing in Jesus as their Messiah, Saviour and Lord.

#### **The people were not discouraged about the possibility of persecution; they were encouraged by the certainty of Heaven.**

There was a prayer and fasting time in the Church at Antioch.

It was during this prayer and fasting time that the Holy Spirit told the leaders to **separate Barnabas and Saul for a special work** that God had called them to do.

The leaders had further prayer and fasting and then sent them away on their first Missionary Journey.

#### **Application**

There is one important application that we must not miss here. The application concerns **discouragement**. Saul and Barnabas knew about the death of James, they knew about Peter being put in prison.

They also knew about the **certainty of persecution and hardship in their future ministry.**

Nevertheless after prayer and fasting, they were **willing to obey God and go out on a mission to proclaim the Gospel.**

They were **not discouraged about what man could or would do.** They were **encouraged about what God was going to do!**

I read an interview about an evangelist who was retiring this year.

I know him personally. His name is Trevor Matthews.

For more than 40 years he has served God in the U.K., mainly in Northern Ireland.

**One question he was asked was this.**

“What advice would you give to a young evangelist starting out in Christian work?”

This was his reply, “Ask God for a tender heart towards the lost. (Non -Christians)

Meditate deeply on Psalm 126: v. 5 “**Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.**”

Maintain a good devotional life, read widely to understand the people you are reaching, and ALWAYS RESIST DISCOURAGEMENT.”

It was all good advice, but it was the last comment that helped me to pray for a Christian worker who was discouraged.

Discouragement will come to all Christians who serve God, but it needs to be resisted. The Bible says **resist the devil and he shall flee from you!** ( James 4: v. 7)

So in closing, our challenge today is to Pray in faith, believing in the promises of God, and the sovereignty of God. It is to resist discouragement and just get on with the work of taking the Gospel to a lost world. At the same time know that God is going to judge everybody in the end. Therefore make sure that your sin has already been judged by Jesus.

Make sure that your sins have been forgiven and that today, you are in a right relationship with God.