

I. Introduction

Good morning! After Jesus was crucified, He rose from the dead on the third day and appeared to His followers in various places. Jesus would eat with them and tell them to touch Him so that they could be assured that He was truly alive and not a vision or a ghost. One time, as two of the disciples were walking on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, Jesus appeared and walked with them. And **Luke 24:27**, tells us that Jesus gave them a Bible lesson, **“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”**



It is important for us to remember that when Jesus explained the Scriptures on that day, none of the New Testament had been written yet. Jesus was explaining to them how the Old Testament foretold His coming and His mission, including His crucifixion and resurrection. Many people have trouble understanding the Old Testament at first, but when we realize that the Old Testament teaches us about Jesus, then, we begin to understand.



A few minutes ago, when we celebrated communion, we read **Matthew 26:26-28**, **“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”** If you are new to Bible study and to church these words probably seem very strange. Why would Jesus say that the disciples should eat His body and drink His blood? That sounds terrible.

But if we look at the context, we discover that it was the time of Passover and Jesus and the disciples were celebrating the Passover meal together. Every year at Passover, the Jews remembered the time when the Lord used Moses to perform great miracles and to deliver their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt. On the night before they left Egypt, each family roasted a lamb and ate it, and they used the blood to mark their home so that the judgment of God would not touch them. Of course, they had to believe and obey the word that God gave through Moses to be spared. So, the sacrifice of the lamb and the mark of the blood became signs of faith, and those who obeyed were passed over at the time of judgment.



At the time of Jesus, the Jews had already been celebrating the Passover for almost 1,500 years. Every year, the story was repeated and the people remembered the blood and the lamb. This is the background that would have been in the mind of the disciples when Jesus told them to eat His body and drink His blood. The statement is not intended to be literal; instead it is a powerful symbolic way of communicating to the disciples that they should place their faith completely in Him. The following day, on the cross, Jesus became the new Passover Lamb in fulfillment of the prophecy that was symbolically portrayed in the Passover celebration.

Do you remember what John the Baptist said about Jesus? In **John 1:29**, it is recorded, **“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”** These words were fulfilled on the cross, when Jesus gave His life as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Many artists combine these themes in their work to remind us of these things. In this Easter cross tapestry, the communion bread and wine are shown together with the cross, the lamb, and a dove to symbolize peace and the flowers commemorate the resurrection.



Easter is, of course, the celebration of Jesus' resurrection. So this piece of art

speaks of how we remember through communion that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, bringing peace with God through His death and resurrection. In other words, Jesus is our Passover Lamb, and everyone who places their faith in Jesus will be passed over at the time of judgment so that we can enter into God's presence in heaven with joy.

This is just a very brief introduction to these things, but I wanted to provide some background for today's reading. Now let's take a look at our Scripture passage for today, Acts 12:1-5.

II. Scripture Reading Acts 12:1-5, (NIV, 1984)

1 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 pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast 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.

III. Teaching

Our time is limited today, so we will take a look at the rest of this chapter next week. But in this short passage we see three key persons and we can learn something from each of their stories. The text tells us that it is the time of Passover, so I think we are encouraged to consider that also.

The first person mentioned is King Herod. There were actually several kings named Herod, but this King Herod is King Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of King Herod the Great who was ruling when Jesus was born. Anyway, this King Herod decided, for political reasons, to start persecuting the Christians. **Acts 12:1, "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them."**



This King Herod met a very sad fate. When the people, seeking to flatter him, acclaimed him as a god, he did not correct them. This was a great sin of pride; he should have immediately corrected the people and given honor to the One True God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. This pride and arrogance is the same arrogance that Pharaoh, King of Egypt had at the time of Moses and it is the same arrogance of every king or queen who makes themselves out to be a god.

For many reasons, God often delays judgment, but in the case of King Herod Agrippa I, the judgment came suddenly. **Acts 12:22-23, "They shouted, 'This is the voice of a god, not of a man.' 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."** The Jewish historian, Josephus, also recorded the sudden death of King Herod, writing that he was seized with sudden pains in the heart and stomach during his public appearance and died after five days. So, apparently, the worms ate King Herod from the inside out and that the severe pain and symptoms appeared immediately, but his death took five days.

King Herod suffered immediate and public judgment when he added the sin of accepting praise due only to God to his long list of sins which included persecuting others for political gain. King Herod did not give glory to God and therefore he was not passed over from judgment and the angel of the Lord struck him down like the firstborn of Egypt were struck down in the time of Moses. The story of King Herod is a severe warning to all who do not give glory to the One True God, because if we do not honor God, then we are ruling our own lives and are in danger of developing the same kind arrogance that King Herod had.

Acts 12: 2 tells us regarding King Herod, **"He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword."** So, the second key person mentioned is James, who is called James the Greater by church historians. This is the same James and John that Jesus appointed to the twelve and that he affectionately nicknamed, "the Sons of Thunder." **Mark 3:17, "James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder)."**

King Herod killed James and then the angel of the Lord struck down King Herod. But there is a huge difference, because King Herod died under the judgment of the Lord and James died as a martyr for Christ and a hero of the church. If King Herod suffered for five days before dying, as the historian Josephus recorded, then King Herod had the opportunity to repent of his sins and seek forgiveness from God. For his sake, we hope that he did this. To fall under judgment in this life is terrible, but to fall under judgment before God in eternity is far, far worse.

On the other hand, James died swiftly and, as a man of faith, James was assured of a wonderful welcome home in heaven. Borrowing the words from the parable of the talents, we can imagine James homecoming to Jesus. **Matthew 25:21a, "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!'"** James suffered death, but he did not suffer judgment because he had placed his faith in Jesus, the Lamb of God. Like the ancient people of Israel who painted the blood of the Passover lamb on their doors in Exodus 12, James was under the blood of the Passover Lamb and saved from judgment.



The final key person in today's passage that I want to mention is Peter. After he had James beheaded, King Herod had Peter arrested and thrown in jail. **Acts 12:5, "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him."** Peter was in prison, but as we will see next week, he was not going to stay for very long. The Lord sent an angel to deliver Peter from prison and he was rescued and he returned to the disciples served in the ministry for many years before eventually being martyred in Rome. Peter also was passed over from judgment because of His faith in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.



IV. Conclusion

King Herod refused to give glory to God and he was struck down in judgment. But James and Peter experienced Passover, not just as a festival, but as a reality in their lives as they were both passed over from judgment because of their faith in Jesus, the True Passover Lamb. For the Christian, the important thing is not whether we live or die, the important thing is that we walk with Jesus our Lord and that we are assured of a joyous homecoming to heaven when we leave this world.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Philippi, expressed the attitude of Christian faith in these words. **Philippians 1:21, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."** It is my prayer that all of us would learn this attitude and experience the Passover in our lives. And not only us, but all of our family, friends and loved ones and our neighbors in this city and in this land, as well as around the world. May we all come to know Jesus and experience the joy of Passover.



Let's pray.

V. Prayer