The Early Church: Challenges, Sacrifices and Problems

Part Three: Angel Jailbreak

This is part three in a series of studies in the ‘Acts of the Apostles,’ looking at challenges and problems the early church went through: challenges to their thinking; sacrifices they made to maintain their faith; problems they encountered because of their commitment to the gospel of Jesus. Along the way we consider what those problems, and the Church’s response, say to us.

One note to consider: these studies aren’t necessarily to be completed in one go. Take as long as you like, answer as many questions as you like. But the main point is, talk about it.

**Overall text: Acts 12 verses 1 to 24**

**Opener:** Have you been to a mission, perhaps a tent mission - or watched some Christian event and thought, ‘I can’t believe that’s the same faith as mine. I can’t believe those people read the same book.’ Diversity in the body of Christ can be a strength with the right attitude. But sometimes it seems crazy.

**Question: Do you find that some Christians are so different in their faith that it’s hard to understand their view? Why?**

The man we’re talking about today would give you that feeling. If you were a Jew in those days, and saw his behaviour, you would say, ‘Is that what Judaism has come to?’ His name was King Herod, and he had a double life many people don’t know.

**Background:** This Herod is reported in historical documents as being over-the-top. He liked to portray himself as a zealous religious conservative Jew; zealous for God. But he lived a double life as a secular man that many other zealous Jews couldn’t accept. When in Rome, he would go fully Roman, accepting their religion and ethics. It seems to be because he loved power above all, and would adapt himself to achieve that. He was an absolute narcissist, manipulating the masses to get his desire.

That’s King Herod. But, don’t get confused. This is Herod Agrippa. Two other Heroes are mentioned in the bible: Herod the Great, who lived at the birth of Jesus, and Herod Antipas, who lived at the death of Jesus. Herod Agrippa said he wanted to get the country back to God’s word, and tried to do that using politics and power, partnered with religion.

**Question: Do politics, power and religion ever mix? If not, why not?**

The Roman Emperor Caligula said Herod could call himself king, a title the previous Herods never officially held. He was raised in Rome, loyal to Rome, and didn’t really care about religion. But he said to Caligula, ‘Keeping Israel in line is expensive. The Jews have a mythology that one day a Messiah will deliver their people. They’re waiting for him to kick you Romans out. So how do you establish peace with them? Hand me the power and I’ll give them the impression that we’re getting the country back to God, without the Messiah thing. They will become content under Roman rule.’ Caligula loved the idea.

One story tells of when Caligula wanted to put up a statue of himself: not just in Israel, or Jerusalem, but in the temple. So, every Jew who went to pray to God would meet an image of Caligula. This was known as the Abomination of Desecration.

**Question: The Abomination of Desecration was a phrase also used in the Old Testament. Where? Do you know the story?**

Herod was astute, and he knew Caligula’s plan was politically nuts. So he rode out to meet Caligula’s people, as they brought the statue towards Jerusalem. He stopped them and said, ‘This won’t work. The Jews would rather die than let this happen. If you put up the statue, you would have no nation to rule.’ He talked sense into them, and Caligula changed his mind. Herod returned to Israel as a national hero.

**Imagine: You live as a conservative Jew in Israel during the time of Herod Agrippa. What would you think of him?**

Herod’s in charge. He tries to play the religious conservative and partner that with political power. Yet, whenever religion and politics come together, with the zeal of God and power of the state, what happens? That’s church history.

## Verse Study, Part One

**Read Acts 12 verses 1 to 5**

Acts 12 verse 1:

‘About this time King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.’

**Question: At the time, they had no official church buildings. So how can they be called ‘the church’?**

The church is not an institution or building. It’s the gathering of people with a purpose.

Acts 12 verse 2:

‘He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.’

We first meet the brothers James and John in Matthew 4. They were fishermen. They interacted with Jesus on several occasions in the gospels. Perhaps you can remember some occasions. Famously, we meet them when their mother intercedes on their behalf.

**Think: Remind each other of the story about James and John and their mother. If you can’t remember it all, see Matthew chapter 20.**

Notice that this killing of James is not the same as the killing of Stephen in Acts 7. Stephen was martyred from religious zeal. James appears to be the first political martyr.

**Question: How are those two deaths different?**

James dies by the sword, which probably means beheading - an official execution.

Acts 12 verse 3:

‘When Herod saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.’

Notice that the crowds had begun to turn against Christians. At first, the religious leaders hated Jesus, but the people loved him. The early Christian movement also had the public vote. But something happened to turn the Jewish people against the Christian movement.

**Question: What was it that turned ordinary Jewish people against the Christian movement?**

The majority of Christians today are Gentiles - non-Jews. Understand the great price paid for Gentiles to follow Jesus. As long as the early church simply disagreed over whether Jesus was Messiah, they could still be considered a Jewish sect. But, once they started to say, ‘Gentiles can become our brothers and sisters, and not convert to Judaism. We will also give up following aspects of the Torah, so that we can have tighter fellowship with them,’ that caused a rift. By Acts 12, Jews are saying, ‘This is no longer Jewish.’ The influx of Gentiles pushed them out of Judaism, and led to mass rejection. So, to answer the previous question: Gentiles turned the ordinary Jewish people against the Christian movement.

Remember, Herod wants to please the people, in the name of religious zeal. He says, ‘This is how I can become a hero - slaughter Christians.’ So he arrests Peter.

‘This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread.’

Herod waited until the end of the festival to execute Peter, so that he didn’t offend religious conservatives.

Acts 12 verse 4:

‘After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each.’

**Why would they use so many soldiers for just one man?**

Four at a time, four squads, rotating 24 hours a day. Verse 6 says there’s one soldier either side of Peter, chained to him. Two sentries guard the door. Herod is taking no chances that the followers of this Messiah movement would try to bust Peter out.

‘Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.’

The original text simply says ‘bring him out to the people.’ But English translations - in order to explain more clearly - say ‘bring him out for public trial’ or ‘bring him out for execution,’ or similar.

Acts 12 verse 5:

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

That word ‘earnestly’ is from the Greek ‘atenos’ which means, ‘To stretch out to your full capacity.’ They’re stretching out to God, praying for Peter’s release.

**Review verses 1 to 5. Has anything surprised you?**

## Verse Study, Part Two

**Read Acts 12 verses 6 to 15**

Acts 12 verses 6 to 8:

‘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. 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. Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.”’

**Question: Why give these mundane instructions about cloak, sandals etc?**

His cell shines with the light of a glowing person, and the angel has to say, ‘Get up. Come on. Get dressed. Don’t forget your cloak. Shoes. Okay, let’s go.’

Perhaps Peter is simply stunned by the vision. Or perhaps Peter is the sort who wakes slowly. Do you have trouble waking? How many of you are at your best when first awake? For some people, nothing makes sense before noon. They need coffee, toast, coffee and a few hours.

Acts 12 verses 9 to 10:

‘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. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city.’

This is probably the Antonia Fortress, next to the Temple. So the gate led into the city streets.

‘It opened for them by itself…’

The Greek word there is ‘automaté’, it opened automatically. Perhaps the world’s first automatic door.

‘…they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.’

Acts 12 verse 11:

Then Peter came to himself…

Presumably the night air woke him up.

‘…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.”’

**Question: What were the Jewish people hoping to happen?**

Remember the animosity of normal Jewish people against Christians.

Acts 12 verse 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.’

This is the first house group identified with a person. This time it’s Mary, the mother of John Mark - a different John to the brother of James. Some scholars feel this is Mark who wrote the gospel.

**Question: For what are they praying?**

They were probably praying for Peter. What? Praying he will survive prison. Then Peter shows up.

Notice, it’s a comedy of errors. Ray Steadman writes, ‘Nothing in scripture is funnier than this scene.’ So, picture it. They’re praying earnestly for Peter, through the night.

Acts 12 verses 13 to 14:

‘Peter knocked at the outer entrance…’

Knock, knock!

‘…a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognised Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed…’

She forgot to open the gate.

‘…she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”’

They don’t believe her. Remember, they’re having a prayer meeting for Peter’s release. Peter is released, so their prayers are answered. But they don’t believe it.

**Discuss: Have you been involved in prayer at church that gets answered? How did people respond?**

Acts 12 verse 15:

‘“You’re out of your mind,” they told her.’

Then they start to have theological debates about what it could be.

‘When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”’

Jewish tradition said each person had a guardian angel who looked like them. They’re inventing explanations - ‘Maybe it’s that, or this’ - whilst Peter is going, ‘Hello…’ The simplest explanation - that it really is Peter - never occurs to them.

**Review verses 6 to 15. Has anything surprised you?**

## Verse Study, Part Three

**Read Acts 12 verses 16 to 24**

Acts 12 verses 16 to 17:

‘But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison.’

**Question: Why mention Peter’s hand?**

Here is another small detail that seems to be irrelevant. But writing was expensive at the time, and only the most important detail was included.

So, picture the scene. He’s escaped from prison. It’s the middle of the night. They’re dancing around, shouting, ‘It’s Peter!’ He’s going, ‘Shhh! Be quiet,’ using his hand to emphasise. It’s like Luke - the writer of Acts - was saying, ‘You had to be there. It was crazy. We prayed for a miracle, it happened, and we couldn’t believe it.’

‘“Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this,” Peter said, then he left for another place.’

He has to keep running. Perhaps he is concerned for his own safety. Perhaps he doesn’t want to bring trouble down on the small group in that house.

**Question: Some people say that Christians should never run, but should stand up for their faith no matter what. How do you feel about Peter’s actions here?**

Notice that Peter mentions James. James is always mentioned as a key leader of the church (see Acts 15 and Acts 21). But, again, don’t get confused. The James who died at the beginning of the chapter is a different James. This one is James the brother of Jesus, not James the brother of John.

Different denominations have theories about why Peter mentions James. Some say, ‘Peter was the first key leader, like a pope. This is the moment he hands the baton to James, ready for when he died. He went to Rome, to lead the church from there.’ It’s a theory. We don’t know where Peter went. But, we know that James played an important role.

My guess is they both functioned like team leaders. People with different gifts moving to the front when called upon. The apostles led as a team. Whenever Acts talks about a local church, it never refers to a ‘pastor.’ One person in charge, like many churches today, is not the biblical model. Local churches were pastored by a TEAM of gifted people. It’s always plural. Some took the lead, but always as part of a team.

**Consider: Is your church led by a team? Can you list the gifts of each individual that help that team work? Stop and pray for that team.**

Acts 12 verses 18 to 19:

‘In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. 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.’

That should be the end. But then Luke records the death of Herod. It seems an irrelevant extra.

**Question: Why do you think Luke doesn’t stop at verse 19?**

Acts 12 verses 20 to 23:

‘Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. He had been quarrelling 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. On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. 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 interesting fact about this section is that we can compare this with Josephus, the secular historian of the Romans. He records the story in his book ‘The Antiquities of the Jews.’ He writes:

‘Clad in garments woven completely of SILVER, Herod entered the theatre at daybreak. There the silver, illuminated by the torch of the first rays of the sun, was wondrously radiant and, by its glitter, it inspired fear and awe in those who gazed intently upon it. Straightaway his flatterers raised their voices, from various directions, and said, “We now agree that you are more than a mortal in your being, and the king did not rebuke them. Nor did he reject their flattery as impious. But, shortly after, he did feel a stab of pain in his heart, he also was ripped in his stomach, by an ache that he felt everywhere at once… They hastened therefore to convoy him to the palace, and the word flashed about to everyone that he was on the very verge of death. Exhausted after five straight days by the pain in his abdomen, he departed this life…’

Put the two accounts together, and most historians say Herod died by some ringworm or tapeworm that blocked his intestines.

Then verse 24:

‘But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.’

**Question: What is the word of God?**

Remember, the New Testament hadn’t been written at this point. Groups hadn’t even started collecting the documents that they found most helpful and faithful. Yet, notice, in the end, God is making decisions that help his word. The word of God, in the bible, normally refers to his message, to Jesus, the story of Jesus. It’s spreading, through all this.

**What does this teach us? Discuss these:**

**One:** It would be wrong to say, ‘I wish I lived back then, when they had miracles all the time.’ They didn’t. Acts collects together stories of specific people. Notice that the story started with James NOT getting broken out of jail. The church was probably praying for him as much as for Peter, but no angel rescued him.

**Two:** We skip over that as though we should expect miraculous experiences ALL the time. But, most of the first Christians died terrible deaths. Eusebius later preserves the tradition that James suffered so well the guard assigned to him as his keeper eventually became a Christian.

**Three:** God’s plan was accomplished through James IN his suffering as much as through Peter being miraculously released. So, God can accomplish great things through your life, whether a miracle or not. Sometimes we can be James, and it can be significant. Our calling by God is to suffer well, with faith and grace. What we pray for may not be answered.

**Four:** Prayer is not a means to some other end. Prayer IS the end. It’s the relationship with God. It’s what we’re saved to have. We talk to him and enjoy knowing him. That’s the point of prayer. Everything else is extra. Sometimes he overrides our prayers and says, ‘I want you to be James. You may suffer or die. But be faithful, and I will do something amazing through your suffering.’ We are still to be people who pray.