

Acts 12: The Power of Herod vs. the Power of Prayer

Context of Acts 12

Who was Herod and why was he desperate to please the Jews?

Herod the Great killed all the babies in Bethlehem after Jesus was born.

Herod Antipas murdered John the Baptist.

Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great, killed James and tried to execute Peter.

Why execute James and Peter? Politics. Like some politicians, Herod gave the people what they wanted and he did evil to maintain his political position and power. Herod Agrippa I was not Jewish. He wasn't born a full-blooded Jew. Herod the Great, his grandfather, was a Gentile proselyte who married a Jewish woman. According to Jewish law he could not be a king of the Jews (Deuteronomy 17:15). So, to please the Jews and legitimize his rule he had James, the brother of John, beheaded.

James & John were the Sons of Zebedee. James was the first Apostle to be martyred. My expectation is that all the Apostles would live long lives and be very productive. James must have fulfilled the purpose Jesus had for him. John lived the longest and died of old age. He received the vision and wrote Revelation.

During the "days of Unleavened Bread" he had arrested Peter for execution on Passover. Why Passover? Jews from all over the Roman Empire would be in Jerusalem and they would see how Herod protected Judaism - especially after Peter had baptized an uncircumcised Roman, Cornelius the centurion (Acts 10).

Herod placed Peter under maximum security. Peter was guarded by 4 squads of soldiers (4 x 4 = 16). Two guarded the gate. Peter was chained to two soldiers, one on his right and left. The four squads rotated through 6 hour shifts to cover 24 hours a day. Why? Because Peter had a previous miraculous angelic escape (A5:17-23).

The Herod family was influenced by a demonic spirit of death. Satan opposed the growth of the Church through Herod.

Now: The Power of Herod vs. the Power of Prayer

The Church responded with “earnest prayer.” 12:5: *So Peter was kept in prison, but **earnest prayer** for him was made to God by the church.*

Two facts about this prayer:

First, it was corporate. The whole church was unified in this prayer. Miraculous events happen when believers pray in unity because Jesus Christ is pleased with unity in His body. Jesus prayed for unity in his body. John 17:21: *I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.*

Second, it was “earnest.” The GR word is *εκτενωσ* = constantly, strenuously, fervently, earnestly. Jesus prayed earnestly in Gethsemane before His suffering (Luke 22:41). There was desperation in their unified prayer: “Lord Jesus, you know we need Peter! The church needs his witness!” A qualitative difference seems to occur between constant earnest prayer and the kind of prayer most of us do every day. This kind of praying is referred to as “intercession.” It is constant and more intense praying.

The Great Escape (12:6-11)

How did Jesus respond to their earnest praying?

The night before Peter was to be executed, *at the last minute*, Jesus sent an angel to break Peter out of maximum security.

Why does God wait until the last minute to rescue us from trouble?

The glow of the angel lit up the prison cell. The angel hit Peter and woke him up. The angel unlocked the chains. (I imagine it happened like using a remote to unlock a car.) The angel told him to get dressed and put on his running shoes. Peter thought he was having a vision or dream. *Did you ever wake up from a dream and say, “That seemed so real”?* The angel took Peter down a deserted alley and disappeared. Peter “woke up” and realized he had been saved by an angel. Peter was rescued from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting (12:11). The Jewish people were expecting an exciting execution. They probably bought tickets for the sold-out event. They lost their money. It was a big embarrassment for Herod!

The guards were executed. They were just doing their job. I hope Peter shared the Gospel with them while they were chained together.

Prayer Meeting @ Mary's House (12:12-19)

This story was told to Dr. Luke by eyewitnesses. Dr. Luke wrote it as humorous!

Peter went to the prayer meeting at Mary's house. He knocked on the door and probably said something like, "Hey, it's me, Peter. An angel rescued me. Your prayers were answered!" Rhoda, the servant girl, heard the knock and recognized Peter's voice. She was too excited to open the gate. She told the brothers and sister who were earnestly praying that Peter's outside. They said, "You're crazy!" Rhoda persisted. They said, "It's just Peter's angel." *(There was a Jewish belief in guardian angels and they could take on the features of the person they guarded.)* Finally, someone left the prayer meeting and saw Peter outside. They were amazed.

Why were they amazed? Is this unbelief? Is this a lack of faith? Is this prayer without expectation of an answer? Is it possible to pray without faith and still get the answer? Maybe they prayed for James also and he was martyred, so they had some doubts.

Herod Eaten by Worms (12:20-24)

Angels rescue, but they also kill. Herod received worship as a god, like the Roman emperors, and an angel killed him. Herod was killed on the spot because he didn't give glory to God. As far as we know the church didn't pray for Herod's death; God arranged that because of this pride and evil deeds. He was eaten by worms. There is a physical and spiritual component to this description. It is a gross description for an internal organ disease caused by tapeworms or roundworms and the spiritual component would be related to demonic possession. Jesus described hell as a place where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched (Mark 9:48). The maggots never stop eating burning flesh. The Herod family was influenced by a demonic spirit of death.

12:24 is the key verse: *But the word of the Lord increased and multiplied.* What caused the word of the Lord to increase and multiply?

The "word of the Lord" refers to the Gospel: the life, atoning death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

First, Pentecost, Acts 2, the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the power that increases and multiplies the word of God.

Second, victory in spiritual warfare caused by the earnest unified prayer of the church. If we knew the power of fervent unified prayer then we would do it more often to increase and multiply the Gospel. A prayer-less church is a powerless church.

Three, angels of the Lord who rescued Peter and killed Herod. Satan used Herod to attack and decrease the word of God. When the angel killed Herod the word of God increased and multiplied. God can and will remove wicked leaders allied with Satan who try to prevent the word of the Lord from increasing and multiplying. The power of earnest unified prayer and angels defeated the political power of Herod. In this contest “the power of Herod versus the power of prayer” - prayer won!

Application: Prayer Lessons

The key concept in this chapter is the earnest prayer of the church. Luke’s description clearly presents there was a *cause-and-effect relationship* between the earnest unified prayer of the church and Peter’s rescue from prison. Peter’s rescue is the effect, and then we do what is done in science, we move backward from effect to cause. The cause was angels responding to fervent unified prayer.

Is it correct to teach that a cause-and-effect relationship is effected between our human prayers and what God Almighty does? Yes it is correct. I hold these two truths to be self-evident: God is sovereign and our prayers change people and events.

There’s a cause-and-effect relationship between our prayer and what God wants to do according to his will. If God needs our earnest prayer participation to accomplish His will, then God will make the prayer happen. God will give the desire and power to pray. If you ever feel a sudden urge to pray for someone or some situation, then go with it. It’s probably the Holy Spirit giving you the desire and power to pray for the person or situation. You may not know what you’re accomplishing. Just be obedient.

Prayer must change people and events because we are commanded to pray.

Paul's command to Timothy: 1 Timothy 2:1-2: *First of all, then, I urge that entreaties, prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for presidents and all who are in authority...*

1 Thessalonians 5:17: *Pray without ceasing.*

Prayer is effectual. It's an offensive weapon in spiritual warfare: Ephesians 6:17-20: ¹⁷ *Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,* ¹⁸ *praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,* ¹⁹ *and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel,* ²⁰ *for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.* Praying in the Spirit refers to persistent intercessory prayer guided by the Holy Spirit as the church did for Peter's rescue.

Earnest unified prayer that lacks expectation will still get answered (if it is Jesus' will). Maybe you heard someone preach, "Your prayers will only be answered if you pray with zero doubt and perfect faith!" That's not what I see in this story. Imperfect praying still gets answered. God will answer a prayer even when we have doubts. Perfect faith is not a requirement for answered prayer. Faith is a requirement. Hebrews 11:6: *And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.* We must at least have faith that God exists and hears our prayers and rewards those who seek him. But sinful human faith is never perfect like Jesus' faith when he lived on the earth for 33 years.

Do you recognize the answer to your prayer? You pray about a situation. The answer comes 'knocking' but you don't recognize it or accept it even though it sounds like what you prayed for. (The prayer warriors at Mary's house didn't expect Peter to be rescued and knock on their gate.) You pray for something and the answer comes knocking and you say, "No, I don't think that's the answer. It's not the answer I expected. I'm surprised by that answer." Has that ever happened to you? I think that's how I got to the

churches I've served. Sometimes it wasn't the place I expected to be. I'm waiting for another answer and I hope I'm able to recognize it knocking at my gate.

Prayer changes people and situations. Pray! Expect it.