

- A Study in Acts -

Chapter Twelve – Death of the Apostle James and Herod

ACTS 12:1-10:

As we concluded the previous chapter with the coming of the predicted famine in Judea and the brethren in Antioch of Syria sending relief to the brethren in Judea; **chapter twelve** comes back to Peter as the focus, and explains the martyrdom of James.

Text #1:

Acts 12:1-4 “Now about that time Herod the king stretched out *his* hand to harass some from the church. ² Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. ³ 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. ⁴ 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.”

Now About That Time: This is a direct reference to the previously mentioned famine that was the subject of the final **4 verses** of the previous **chapter**. Luke, as an able-bodied historian, is keeping an orderly record for us of these events.

Herod: This is Herod Agrippa 1, the grandson of Herod the Great (who was responsible for the killing of the children at the birth of Jesus – **Matthew 2:16**), and the nephew of Herod the Tetrarch who killed John the Baptist.

James: This is James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John – **Matthew 4:21**. He will become the first recorded Apostle of Jesus the Christ to be martyred for his service to the Lord.

Days of Unleavened Bread: The Days of Unleavened Bread was a seven-day feast in which no leaven could be used or even found on the premises. The first day of the feast was marked by the Passover meal, and from there the remainder was met out for the additional days – See: **Exodus 12:1-20; Deuteronomy 16:1-8**.

These events have occurred during the time when all devout Jews from every nation have assembled to honor this feast (**Acts 2:5**). Herod would want to secure political favor with the Jews to maintain control in order for him to answer to Rome for their peaceful conduct.

Four Squads of Soldiers: In most of your translations there is a reference to the original word used by Luke to describe these soldiers (“*Tetrads*”); which is from Greek word meaning groups of four (it was also referred to in antiquity as a ‘Quaternion’ – four bands of four soldiers). This would indicate sixteen soldiers to be responsible for Peter’s safekeeping, four for each watch. There could be little doubt concerning Herod’s intent for Peter based on the treatment of James; the only difference was he had to wait until after Passover to bring him before the people.

Text #2:

Acts 12:5-10 “Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.”

Constant Prayer: As we know that they are going to be surprised to see him alive, we should not just assume that they were praying for his release. Based on the actions of Herod against James, they would not think Herod had any other intention for Peter. However, they offered their petitions to God in trust and in earnest as all of us are commanded to do (**Ephesians 6:18; Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:17**).

Peter was Sleeping: All of us in the presence of anxiety know the difficulty of sleep; however, there seems to be a peace with Peter, even in these stressful circumstances. This offers us an example of the instruction to you and me as children of God, note:

Romans 13:3 “For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.”

This is not a mandate that harm will never come to the servant of the Lord, we know better based on James; it is a statement of comprehension and trust in the fact that our actions here on earth in service to the Lord are simply cultivating that which is truly of value to us, the afterlife. To die while doing the will of our Lord is to be advanced to our reward and His glorious presence; thus, there is nothing to fear.

The rest of this portion of the text describes the miraculous jail break, for which Peter considered it to be a vision (something miraculous, seen while awake).

This is a short chapter, so we will stop here and break it in half for two lessons instead of one massive one.