

A THRILLING STORY

Acts 12:1-19

This passage shows us how the early church had to meet and overcome opposition. It also shows the courage and faith of those early Christians; they were willing to go to their death rather than disappoint their Lord. The study of their struggles is always an inspiration to us, whether we regard them as individuals or as a group.

1. The Death of James. 12:1-2.

King Herod was also known as Herod Agrippa I, to distinguish him from Herod Agrippa II before whom Paul was tried. He was educated in Rome, but because of financial reverses, he was compelled to return to Judea. In time, he reigned over as much territory as Herod the Great. It would appear that everything he endeavored to do ended in failure. If any man ever suffered from frustration, it was he. He finally decided to try his hand at murder. "He killed James the brother of John with the sword." Thus the violent death of one of the favored three of the apostolic circle is dismissed with a single line. The daring crime of Herod was greeted with enthusiasm by the Jews.

2. The Detention of Peter. 12:3-4.

Herod shared the murderous propensities of his grandfather who slaughtered the infants of Bethlehem and of his uncle who beheaded John the Baptist. He became the third member of this bloody triumvirate by the martyrdom of James the brother of John. Having slain James, at the instigation of the Jewish leaders with whom he curried favor, he tackled the chief apostle of our Lord. He had Peter arrested under the false charge of being a disturber of the peace and of setting forth teachings which conflicted with Jewish traditions. He intended to kill him in some popular manner whereby he might manifest his special interest in the Mosaic institutes and gratify the rage of the Jews by putting to death the most prominent leader of the Christians. But not for a moment did he think of such a deed during the Passover Week.

Herod seized Peter and put him in prison "because he saw it pleased the Jews." Herod craved popularity more than anything else. He had Peter thrust into a dungeon for safe-keeping. It would seem as if Herod had heard of the mysterious escape of the apostles from the custody of the Sanhedrin and of the officers of the temple; and, determined that there should be no repetition of that experience, he took special pains to so bind and guard the spostle that escape should be impossible. Taking every precaution to keep his victim secure, sixteen soldiers were detailed to guard the prisoner. To two of each four Peter was bound by two chains and another two were stationed at the inner and outer doors of the prison. With such precautions Herod might well believe that the prisoner was secure and would be forthcoming on the day of execution. But he reckoned without God.

3. The Deliverance of Peter. 12:5-10.

This incident is a clear illustration of what happens when men leave God out of their plans. The orders for the death of Peter seemed to be final, but there came a hitch which the rulers had not anticipated. God laid His hand on the situation, and all the wheels of legal machinery stopped. The hand of God is over the affairs of men. For this reason, frequently the victories of men have turned to defeat and their glories have become their shame. And many times their defeats have proved to be their victories and their humiliations have become their honor. In the case of the infant Jesus, His destruction was purposed, plotted and ordered, but when the killers came, they found an empty cradle, for the murderers were fighting against God. When they put Christ

to death they had expected that this would end the whole Christian uprising, but it was only the beginning of it. In this case, the Romans had planned well, but they overlooked one factor of vital importance. They forgot Peter's God. They forgot the power of prayer.

The imprisonment of Peter was a big blunder. Satan had overdone himself. Herod had stumbled on in his blindness to his own undoing. The imprisonment of Peter was a great injustice. The only reason offered for it was that it pleased the Jews. Herod was willing to sell his honor just because it pleased them. What a price some men pay for popular favor! Being afraid of public sentiment, Herod sacrificed justice and honor for the approval of wicked men.

Hands of men often get into the affairs of God. Many times they do it to their own hurt and to the injury of others. Herod put forth his hand to vex certain of the church but it vexed him instead. Many times men become bold in their opposition to the work of the church, but such forces soon spend themselves and the opposition reacts upon the opposers. Herod put forth his hand and killed James, but the death of James gave new inspiration and courage to the rest of the disciples. For each murdered Christian a multitude of new converts sprang up.

Herod put forth his hand and arrested Peter and put him in jail, but he became the most embarrassing prisoner he ever had. Sixteen heavily armed guards stood watch over a lone prisoner who was not armed, who was bound hand and foot with shackles, who was chained to soldiers, who was locked within a dungeon and who was asleep.

If we regard the situation through physical eyes, Peter's deliverance seems impossible. But there was a forgotten factor. The church was on its knees in prayer. In an upper room in the home of a widow the little church was carrying their cause to God in earnest prayer. To the wicked men of the street it meant nothing. They considered it as a joke, but when men get the ear of God in their behalf, kings and kingdoms will tremble. Mary, Queen of Scots, said she feared the prayers of John Knox more than she feared the armies of England. God was the unknown factor in the situation. The Jews and the Romans had forgotten Him. The persecutors never counted on the Christians' God.

Herod intended to make a great spectacle of Peter's death, but he reckoned without God. The expression, "but prayer" altered the whole situation, and observe that this prayer was "without ceasing," "of the church," "unto God", "for Him." Their prayers were persistent, united, worshipful and definite.

On the very night before Herod planned to delight the Jews with Peter's execution, strange to say, the apostle lay sound asleep. How could any man sleep at such a time? Peter had committed the whole matter to the Lord, and resigned himself to whatever road the Lord had chosen for him. Would the morrow bring death or deliverance? Frequently one asks, "Why does God wait until the very last before He comes to the rescue of His children?" The answer is, so He can get the greater glory. He knew that He could trust Peter to be patient. He also wanted to have His people learn the lesson of believing prayer. Furthermore, He wanted to show the disbelieving Jews and Satan what fools they were to oppose His plan and purpose.

It is interesting to note that the deliverance of Peter came as a result of two things--intercessory prayer and angelic power.

Peter's friends in the church had an all-night prayer meeting for him. What a blessing when Christian people get together and pray for you! God sent an angel to awaken Peter. The angel rapped Peter on his side and awakened him to see a light in his cell, to feel his fetters fall from him, and to hear a voice bidding him to dress and gird himself and follow through doors and an iron gate which were opened as they came to them, until Peter found himself alone and free in the city which was familiar to him. There was no doubt in Peter's mind that he had been delivered in a miraculous

manner by the angel of the Lord. In answer to prayer the Lord had defeated Herod and fouled the murderous expectations of the Jews.

4. The Doubt of the Disciples. 12:11-16.

This part of the story illustrates how very human we all are. The disciples did pray for Peter's deliverance, and some of them did believe that God would hear and answer prayer. However, in a large gathering there are always some who are superficial and insincere. If God were to answer the prayers of many of his professed children in the exact way they requested, they would actually die of fright.

When Peter came to the house where they were engaged in prayer for him, he knocked on the door. When a young lady, Rhoda, came to the door and saw him, in her excitement she left him waiting at the door and ran back to tell those who were praying that their prayers were heard. They stopped their praying just long enough to declare that she was insane. "Thou art mad." When she insisted that she had actually seen him at the door they stopped their praying again long enough to say, It is not Peter whom you saw, "It is his angel." "But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished," that God should hear and answer prayer.

5. The Declaration of the Goodness of God. 12:17.

Then Peter declared to them how the Lord in His great goodness had delivered him from prison and the expectation of the Jews. Peter lived for years after that to preach Christ. The members of the church were delighted to have Peter returned to them.

6. The Disappointment of the Jews and Soldiers. 12:18-19.

When Herod learned of Peter's escape, he had the soldiers put to death because of neglect of duty, as he had imagined.