

ANTIOCH BIBLE CLASS

LESSON SUBJECT

HEROD'S TERROR

SCRIPTURE TEXT: ACTS 12:1-25

MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 12:24. But the word of the Lord grew and multiplied.

INTRODUCTION

“About that time (when Paul and Barnabas brought relief to the elders), Herod the king stretched forth his hand to vex certain of the church”. There have been several Herod’s ruling in Judea. This one is “Herod Agrippa”, not Herod the Great. Throughout this chapter his reign is shown to be one of terror. And not just against the church, but also of his own guards and with those of Tyre and Sidon (V20). Dr. Clarke describes the family of Herod’s as being greedy, immoral, not leaders and full of jealousy and murder. You can see those traits in this chapter.

The church seems to always be the focal point of persecution and ridicule. It started as soon as the church was established and has, unfortunately, been one of its hallmarks throughout all of its history. The chronicles of persecution and hate and destruction vented against the humble followers of Christ, fill more pages of her history than perhaps any other element. This chapter is only a small representation of that whole story.

Herod killed James the brother of John with the sword. The narration of Herod’s terrorizing of the church comes over almost as if it was a thing of sport to him. Everywhere and in every age those who have truly stood up for Christ and a righteous life, have found little favor with an ungodly society. The church has been boldly and unashamedly preaching Christ and his glorious resurrection and that he alone should be worshipped. The message of an exclusive savior, with a separated life is unwanted and acceptable. In today’s society, including some of the church, there is a broad proliferation and a growing advocacy of “toleration”, “diversity” and “political correctness”. Paul’s declaration that, “thou we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel than that which we have preached, let him be anathema”, does not have a very large audience today.

Nevertheless, the Lord does not forsake his cause. He can work and no one can stop it. James is killed and Peter is thrown in jail no doubt awaiting the same fate. This lesson is a powerful testimony to the hand of God working on behalf of his kingdom. You have to wonder how far the news of Peter’s escape from jail spread and how it impacted the spread of the gospel. Then, again, you don’t have to wonder, because as the memory verse says: “The word of God grew and multiplied”. In spite of “Herod’s Terror” the church and its message of truth marches on.

DAILY SCRIPTURE READINGS AND THOUGHTS

MONDAY. ACTS 12:1-4. HEROD TERRORIZES THE CHURCH.

SCRIPTURE

V1. Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church: 2. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. 3. And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.) 4. And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.

COMMENTS.

About that time --. The previous chapter ends with Barnabas and Paul bringing relief to the brethren in Judea. The time is approximately 10 to 12 years into the church era. Paul's conversion was approximately 8 to 9 years earlier. Herod stretches forth his hand to vex the church. The apostles apparently are still watching over the mother church in Jerusalem. Herod has James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. This pleased the Jews which opposed Christ, so Herod then took Peter and put him in jail with 16 guards (4 at a time) guarding him. The church is a peaceful institution, and besides they have no effective, physical power against the Romans.

This was done during the feast of Passover and Unleavened bread, approximately April. "Easter" in Verse 4, by all opinions, is not a good translation. The original word here means Passover. Herod intended to do the same with Peter as he had done to James, but he would wait until these feast days were past. By all calculations, Peter, the main leader of this despised sect, had only a short time to live. This would be a horrific blow to the church, and surely they must assume, the terror would not stop with Peter. What could the church do?

TUESDAY. ACTS 12:5-11. PETER IS MIRACULOUSLY DELIVERED FROM PRISON.

SCRIPTURE.

V5. Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him. 6. And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains and the keepers before the door kept the prison. 7. And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. 8. And the angel said unto him, gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals, and. And he saith unto him, cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. 9. And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision. 10. When they were past the first and second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him. 11. And when Peter was come to himself, he said, now I know of a surety, that the

Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.

COMMENTS.

Peter was kept in prison, “but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him”. They could not storm the prison and the idea of a court of justice to obtain his relief was out of the question. But they could and they did pray, without ceasing. Somehow I don’t think this was a “prayer list” petition with a little lip service given to it. This was a desperate situation, not just for Peter’s physical safety, but for the preservation of the whole church and the gospel of Christ.

So they prayed and a strange miracle happened. While Peter slept between two guards, bound with two chains, and with guards at the prison door – the angel of the Lord came upon him and a “light” shined in the prison. He awakened Peter and told him to rise up and put his clothes on, while the chains fell off his hands. And the guards did not wake up; in fact you can easily conclude that a bomb explosion would not have awakened them. The same power that awakened Peter, kept them asleep. In all of this Peter thought he was having a vision. That is, until he was out of the jail, watching as the great iron gate to the city opened without anyone to assist it. And Peter is free! Finally Peter awakened and realized that God had miraculously delivered him from prison and from the expectation of the Jews. The empire of Rome with its legions of soldiers is helpless before the purposes of God!

WEDNESDAY. ACTS 12:12-17. THE HOME PRAYER MEETING.

SCRIPTURE.

V12. And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying. 13. And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda. 14. And when she knew Peter’s voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate. 15. And they said unto her, thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, it is his angel. 16. But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished. 17. But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place.

COMMENTS.

Peter proceeded to the house of John Mark’s mother’s house. What do you suppose led him there? He certainly didn’t stumble upon it by accident; it was probably a home where prayer (and preaching) regularly occurred. Many were gathered there praying, as previously stated, for deliverance from this desperate situation. This is the “church” of verse five, where prayer was being made for him without ceasing. The fact that Peter went straight there suggests that it was known as a gathering place for the disciples of Christ.

Peter knocked on the door and Rhoda answered. She recognized the voice of Peter and it excited her so much, that she ran to tell the others without opening the gate to let Peter in. The people in the house praying could not grasp the fact that their prayers were being answered. (How often do we pray and are totally astonished when they are answered?) When they finally let Peter in they were all astonished. Other feelings such as being overjoyed, thankful, amazed, praises, etc., could also have been on their lips and in their hearts. Rather than criticizing them for not readily realizing that Peter really was delivered from prison and standing at the door, I would instead magnify the miraculous work of God that is always beyond our deepest imagination and perception. As Eph. 3:20, says, God is able to do “exceedingly abundant above all we ask or think”. When God works, everyone should be amazed. It isn’t like we already know what and how God will help us in our times of distress. We should never cease to be amazed and astonished at what God does.

Peter told those gathered in this house to “go shew these things to James and the brethren”, which tells us they were not present at this house. Peter departed to another place, apparently for his safety.

THURSDAY. ACTS 12:18-23. LEAVE YOUR SPIRITUAL ENEMIES TO GOD: I WILL REPAY SAITH THE LORD.

SCRIPTURE.

V18. Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter. 19. And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and there abode. 20. And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king’s chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king’s country. 21. And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. 22. And the people gave a shout, saying, it is the voice of a god, and not of a man. 23. And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory; and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.

COMMENTS.

Can you imagine the scene the next morning at the jail? All the guards are in their places, the doors are shut and the chains undisturbed. Then one of the guards awakens and sees that Peter is gone. Bedlam breaks out immediately. When Herod couldn’t find Peter, he had the guards killed. Herod himself left town, no doubt deeply humiliated by these events. He goes to Caesarea where his feud with the people of Tyre and Sidon surfaced. There was a meeting and old enemies were reconciled and Herod gave a great oration. The people acclaimed him as a god, and he apparently reveled in the adoration. But God smote him and he died an inglorious death. The terrorist has been destroyed and the church marches on.

FRIDAY. ACTS 12:24-25. THE WORD OF GOD GREW AND WAS MULTIPLIED.

SCRIPTURE.

V24. But the word of God grew and multiplied. 25. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark.

COMMENTS.

That was the great underlying purpose and mission after all. In the process of spreading the gospel there will be hardships, suffering and sacrifice. The marvel of it is, that on the other side of these problems and their discouragements, the church could rejoice that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus (see ch. 5:41). Their spirit was undaunted and their focus was like a laser on their mission and God was working in such miraculous ways to aid their progress. The result was that the word of God grew and multiplied. What an unusual way to talk about Christian success. Instead of talking about great crusades and large crowds with the “Mayor” welcoming them to the event and professions of faith being made, we are told that the word of God grew and was multiplied. The blessed story of the gospel of a resurrection through Christ advances like the beach heads of Normandy, Okinawa or Iwo Jima. The truth of this message is slowly but surely invading the strongholds of Jewish stubbornness and Roman Pagan culture. And these strongholds are falling at the power of the gospel and the work of God. What a glorious picture this presents to us today as we try to carry on this mission. The advance of the gospel, providentially borne by the power of God, marches on.

And Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch where they shall soon hear God’s call to regions beyond.

SUMMARY

Herod’s terrorizing of the church ended with him dropping dead in an ignominious fashion. He had lifted his unrighteous hand and power against James and Peter. More than that, he had lifted his defiant and taunting regime against God and his church. No one ultimately succeeds with such diabolical schemes against God and his kingdom. The end of this story is that “the word of God grew and multiplied”.

The church is about ten to twelve years old at this time. Her journey has been marked with many hardships, great sacrifice and suffering. However, it has also been marked with rejoicing, resolve, unceasing prayer, courage and a perseverance that was unflinching. Above all of this their journey had been marked with the magnificent works of God, without which the church and the gospel would have miserably failed.

In that fact there is great hope. If we remain true to the message of the gospel and don’t cave in under the pressures against it, and if we seek his face, God will put a wall around us which no power can scale. But we must keep it in true perspective. While we may experience severe hardships in our individual or corporate lives, yet the gospel and God’s kingdom marches on under his sure hand. We must always remember that the gospel and the kingdom of God is much bigger than you or I as individuals.

QUESTIONS.

- 1. Give your thoughts as to why James was killed by Herod and Peter was delivered.**
- 2. What part did the church have in Peter's deliverance and the outcome of it all?**
- 3. Paul and Barnabas were in Jerusalem at this time; why were they not also apprehended?**
- 4. Discuss how and why the word of God grew and multiplied under these conditions.**