

ACTS: THE STORY CONTINUES

Thursday Bible Study - Acts 12: The Story Continues

Looking Back

- **Last week we left the church in Antioch.**
 - What began with a handful of unnamed Jewish believers fleeing persecution had become a thriving congregation where Jews and Gentiles worshiped Christ together. Barnabas recognized the grace of God at work among them, traveled to Tarsus to find Saul, and together they spent an entire year teaching and discipling this young church (Acts 11:19–26).
- **During that year, something else happened... The church matured.**
 - How do we know?
 - Because by the end of chapter 11, Barnabas and Saul are able to leave Antioch and travel to Jerusalem with the relief offering collected for the believers in Judea (Acts 11:27–30).
- **Luke never tells us leaders were appointed in Antioch.**
 - The ability of Barnabas and Saul to leave together suggests that this young church had become established enough for its two primary teachers to leave it in capable hands.

Read Together

Acts 11:27–30

“Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.”

Continue reading immediately into Acts 12:1.

"About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church."

Notice Luke's opening words:

"About that time..."

Luke is not beginning a new story.

He is continuing the one we've already been reading.

Discovery #1: One Story

- **As Barnabas and Saul travel south from Antioch carrying the church's offering... another story is unfolding in Jerusalem.**
 - About the same time that Barnabas and Saul were making the journey to Jerusalem, King Herod Agrippa I began his persecution of the church.
- **Since the chapter ends with Luke telling us Barnabas and Saul remained in Jerusalem until they had "completed their service" (12:25), it is even likely that they were present in Jerusalem during many of the events of this chapter.**

Consider:

- **Why do you think Luke begins this chapter with the words, "About that time..." instead of simply saying, "Now Herod..."?**

Read Together

Acts 12:1–5

"About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews,

he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”

Discovery #2: Which Herod?

- The New Testament mentions several rulers named "Herod," and it's easy to confuse them.
 - This chapter is about **Herod Agrippa I**, the grandson of **Herod the Great**.
- A simple timeline helps:

Herod the Great

- Ruled when Jesus was born.
- Ordered the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem (Matthew 2).



Herod Antipas

- Ruled Galilee during Jesus' ministry.
- Executed John the Baptist.
- Questioned Jesus before His crucifixion.



Herod Agrippa I

- The ruler in Acts 12.
- Executes James.
- Imprisons Peter.



Herod Agrippa II

- The king before whom Paul will later give his defense in Caesarea (Acts 25–26).
- **Agrippa I had spent much of his youth in Rome and enjoyed close relationships within the imperial court.**
 - When he was given authority over Judea, he worked hard to gain the favor of the Jewish leadership.
 - Luke even tells us that after James was executed, Herod *"saw that it pleased the Jews,"* so he immediately arrested Peter as well.
- **His persecution was not only an act of cruelty - it was also political.**

Discovery #3: James Dies... Peter Waits

- **Luke records the death of James in a single sentence.**
 - *"He killed James the brother of John with the sword."*
- **One of Jesus' closest disciples...**
 - one of the Sons of Thunder...
 - one of the three who witnessed the Transfiguration... is gone.
- **Luke doesn't explain why... he simply tells us.**
 - **The church is forced to live with a tension that Christians still face today.**
 - Sometimes God delivers His people, and sometimes He calls them home, yet in both cases, His purposes continue.
 - **Peter now waits for the same fate.**
- **Notice**
 - Luke tells us Peter was guarded by **four squads of soldiers**.
 - Each squad consisted of **four soldiers**, making **sixteen soldiers** assigned to guard one unarmed fisherman.
 - **Herod was taking no chances.**

- **Contrast:** Luke quietly sets two kingdoms beside one another.

Herod's kingdom

- Royal authority
- Soldiers
- Chains
- Prison
- Political power

Christ's kingdom

- Ordinary believers...
 - gathered together...
 - praying.
- Luke doesn't comment. He simply lets us see the contrast.

Read Together

Acts 12:6–11

“Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, “Dress yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”

Discovery #4: A Prison Strong Enough for Men... but Not for God

- Luke wants us to appreciate just how impossible Peter's escape would have been.
 - The night before his public trial and likely execution, Peter is:
 - Sleeping between **two soldiers**.
 - Bound with **two chains**.
 - Guarded by sentries outside the cell.
 - Confined within a prison secured by multiple guard posts and an iron gate.
 - Humanly speaking, there is no possibility of escape... yet God needs only one angel.
 - The chains fall away.
 - The guards never stop Him.
 - The iron gate opens "of its own accord."
 - The kingdom of God is never threatened by human prisons.
 - Did You Notice?
 - Peter is sleeping.
 - Not pacing. Not praying aloud. Sleeping.
 - Jesus had once told Peter that he would live to old age before glorifying God by his death (John 21:18–19).
 - We don't know whether Peter was consciously resting in that promise, or if he just knew that even if he was killed he would just get to see his Lord Jesus all the sooner..
 - *Either way, it's amazing that Peter was able to sleep the night before his execution*
- Luke's Wonderful Realism
 - One of the things that makes Luke such a great historian is his attention to ordinary details.
 - The angel tells Peter:

- "Dress yourself."
- "Put on your sandals."
- "Wrap your cloak around you."
- **Peter isn't portrayed as a hero.**
 - He's a sleepy man trying to wake up and get dressed in the middle of the night.
 - Even as God performs a miracle, Luke helps us to feel how ordinary and human Peter was in the midst of it.
- **Consider**
 - **What details in this account make the story feel like the recollection of an eyewitness rather than a legend?**

Read Together

Acts 12:12–17

"When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, 'You are out of your mind.' But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, 'It is his angel!' But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, 'Tell these things to James and to the brothers.' Then he departed and went to another place."

Discovery #5: The house of Mary

- **Peter immediately knows where to go.**
 - He heads to the home of **Mary**, the mother of John Mark.
 - **This tells us something important.**

- The believers must have gathered there regularly.
- **Remember, the early church had no church buildings.**
 - Faithful believers opened their homes for worship, prayer, teaching, and fellowship.
 - Mary's home appears to have been one of those places.
 - It was large enough to hold many believers and well known to Peter.
 - Luke introduces her almost casually, but there are interesting details here.

Discovery #6: Meet John Mark

- This is the first time we meet **John Mark**. (Luke simply mentions him in passing.)
 - But, in reality, he is introducing someone who will become one of the important figures in the New Testament.
 - **Follow his story.**
 - **Acts 12**
 - A young man living in Jerusalem.
 - His mother's home serves the church.
 - **Acts 12:25**
 - Travels to Antioch with Barnabas and Saul.
 - **Acts 13**
 - Accompanies them on the first missionary journey.
 - **Acts 13:13**
 - Leaves the mission and returns to Jerusalem.
 - **Acts 15**
 - Paul refuses to take him again.
 - 'Barnabas insists on giving him another opportunity.
 - Their disagreement becomes so sharp they part ways.
- **What we know of John Mark:**
 - **Colossians 4:10**

- Mark is with Paul and is identified as Barnabas's cousin (or close relative).
- **Philemon 24**
 - Paul calls him a fellow worker.
- **2 Timothy 4:11**
 - Near the end of Paul's life: "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry."
- **1 Peter 5:13**
 - Peter affectionately calls him: *"My son."*
- **From these brief references, we see a remarkable story unfold.**
 - **A young disciple... a nephew or cousin of Barnabas who**
 - stumbled...
 - would become a point of contention between Paul and Barnabas
 - was patiently restored...
 - became useful to Paul...
 - beloved by Peter...
 - **and, according to the consistent testimony of the early church, became the author of the Gospel of Mark.**
 - God was preparing him long before anyone realized how greatly He would use him.
- **A Possible Connection**
 - *That relationship helps explain why Barnabas later fought so strongly to give Mark a second opportunity.*
 - **It also raises an interesting possibility.**
 - Since Barnabas and Saul were in Jerusalem delivering the Antioch offering during these events, and since Barnabas had family in this very house, it is entirely possible they spent time here during Peter's imprisonment.
 - **Luke never says so.**
 - But the chronology certainly allows for it.

Discovery #7: The Prayer Meeting

- **Luke gives us one of the funniest and most human moments in Acts.**
 - The church is earnestly praying for Peter's release.
 - **God answers, sends his angel and releases Peter.**
 - Peter goes to Mary's and house and knocks on the gate
 - Rhoda recognizes his voice... and in her excitement forgets to open the gate.
 - She leaves Peter standing there outside.
 - **The believers hear Rhoda say, *'Peter is here!'*, but tell her,**
 - *"You are out of your mind."*
 - Even after she insists, they still do not believe her.
 - In their minds, there is NO WAY that God could have answered their prayers like that.
 - **Luke's real-ness here is refreshing, and gives him credibility**
 - He isn't portraying the church and it's leaders as super-human
 - He's showing us ordinary Christians.
 - People who prayed sincerely... yet were still astonished when God answered.
 - The truth that even the early church, with its Apostles and powerful leaders could be doubtful in prayer should comfort us.
- **Did You Notice?**
 - Peter tells them: *"Tell these things to James and to the brothers."*
 - **To which James is Peter referring?**
 - This cannot be James the son of Zebedee.
 - He has already been executed (Acts 12:2)

- This is **James, the brother of the Lord**, who is quietly emerging as one of the principal leaders of the Jerusalem church.
- **By Acts 15, James will preside over the Jerusalem Council.**
 - Luke introduces that transition almost without comment.
 - He must have expected the identity of this James to be obvious to the original readers of this book

Read Together

Acts 12:18–25

“Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there. Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king’s chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king’s country for food. On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. But the word of God increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.”

Discovery #8: The Soldiers Paid the Price

- When search was made and no one knew what had happened to Peter, Herod ordered that the soldiers be put to death
 - This wasn’t just cruelty
 - The Justinian Code – *“The Custody of Criminals”*

- ***If a prisoner escaped, the soldier who had the responsibility of guarding the prisoner would suffer the exact sentence meant for the escaped prisoner.***
- Because Herod had intended to execute Peter, that was the penalty received by the guards.

Discovery #9: Luke and Josephus

- Luke tells us that Herod accepted praise that belonged to God alone.
 - Immediately he was struck down.
- The first-century Jewish historian **Josephus**, (NOT A CHRISTIAN) writing independently of Luke, also records Herod Agrippa's death in ***Antiquities of the Jews* (19.343–361)**.

Josephus describes Agrippa appearing before the people in dazzling silver robes. The crowd hailed him as a god. Soon afterward he was seized with severe abdominal pain and died several days later.

***Antiquities of the Jews* (19.343–361).**

“Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city of Caesarea, which was formerly called Strato’s Tower; and there he exhibited shows in honor of Caesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety. At which festival a great multitude was gotten together of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province. On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theater early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun’s rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good,) that he was a god; and they added, ‘Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.’ Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was a messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him; and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, ‘I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what Providence allots, as it pleases God; for we have by no means lived ill, but in a splendid and happy manner.’ When he said this, his pain was become violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace and rumor went

abroad everywhere that he would certainly die in a little time. But the multitude presently sat in sackcloth, with their wives and children, after the law of their country, and besought God for the king's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the king rested in a high chamber, and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground, he could not himself forbear weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age..."

- **The details differ because the authors have different purposes.**
 - Josephus tells us **what happened** from the perspective of a historian.
 - Luke tells us **what it meant** from the perspective of God's revelation.
- **Together they remind us that Acts records real events involving real rulers in the first-century Roman world.**

Discovery #10: The Story Returns to Antioch

- **The chapter closes exactly where it began.**
 - Barnabas and Saul complete their ministry in Jerusalem.
 - Then they return to Antioch.
 - But this time... they are not alone.
 - **They bring John Mark with them.**
 - Why did John Mark's mother (Mary) let him go with Saul and Barnabas?
 - **The persecution?** (James killed, Peter imprisoned, Mary's house a key meeting place for the church)
 - **Family Relationship?** (Barnabas was possibly her brother, or cousin)
 - **She wanted John Mark to be discipled by the two men?**
- **The stage is now set for Acts 13.**
 - The church in Antioch will become the launching point for the first great missionary journey.
 - Luke has been preparing us for that moment for several chapters.