

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

**DHW BIBLE CLASS
LESSON 13
THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
CHAPTER 12**

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 12 concludes the section on the Apostle Peter's role in God's plan for the establishment of the church and world evangelism. Let us briefly recall Peter's role. The leadership of the first early church fell on Peter. He led the early disciples to elect Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot as the twelfth Apostle (1:15-26). On the day of Pentecost, when the disciples were misunderstood for being drunk with wine, Peter stood up and defended them. He then preached his first powerful sermon to the multitude in Jerusalem. About three thousand souls were converted and baptised (2:14-40). Peter healed a cripple at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. He preached to the Jews again which resulted in the conversion of another five thousand men, not counting the women and children (3:1-4:4). When the Jewish religious authorities arrested and charged him for disturbing the peace, he defended his fellow disciples (4:8-22). Peter was concerned for the purity of the early church. He openly rebuked Ananias and Sapphira for lying to God and God punished them with death which struck fear upon the church (5:1-11). Peter was so filled with the Holy Spirit and mightily used by God that

those who brought their sick to him were healed (5:15-16). The religious authorities who were filled with jealousy arrested and imprisoned the apostles. But the angel of the Lord miraculously set them free and encouraged them to continue to preach the Word. Peter once again stood up and defended the apostles for their actions (5:29). Peter was again the spokesman when there was dissatisfaction among the early disciples regarding the distribution of food. Peter was one of the apostles who taught the disciples to appoint suitable men who were filled with the Holy Spirit to manage the relief work (6:1-7).

When the Samaritans were converted to Christ, Peter and John were sent by the Jerusalem church to investigate and witness. And, through their prayers and the laying of hands, Samaritan converts received the Holy Spirit (8:14-17). Simon Magus, a magician, pretended to be a believer for personal gain. Peter, who discerned that Magus' heart was not right in the sight God, rebuked and told him to repent (8:20-23). Peter was instrumental in the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and a Gentile. God directed Peter in a vision to meet with Cornelius and his household. Peter witnessed the wonderful way in which Cornelius and his family and friends were filled with the Holy Spirit (Chapter 10). Then Peter was criticized by Jewish Christians for associating and eating with the Gentiles. Peter explained to them that God was extending to the Gentiles the same blessings that the believing Jews had received (11:1-18). In Chapter 12, we see that persecution against the apostles and the church intensified.

Peter was again prominent in encouraging the disciples.

Chapter 12 can be divided into four sections: (1) the intensification of the persecution against the church (12:1-5); (2) the release of Peter in prison (12:6-18); (3) the judgement upon Herod (12:19-23); and (4) the continued expansion of the Word of God and increase in the number of converts (12:24-25).

COMMENTARY

Persecution of The Apostles Intensified

At that time, Christianity was spreading beyond Palestine. A Gentile church was growing very fast in Antioch, Syria. Saul and Barnabas were preaching and teaching uninterruptedly to crowded meetings for a whole year. Herod the king was King Agrippa I. He was the grandson of Herod the Great, the king who wanted to kill the babe Jesus when he was born. He was the nephew of Herod Antipas, who was the king of Galilee during the whole period of the Lord Jesus Christ's life on earth. Herod Agrippa I was of Edomite ancestry (of Esau, Genesis 32:3) and had some Jewish blood for his grandmother was Mariamne, the Jewish Maccabean princess. When Herod Antipas was banished by the Roman Emperor Claudius, Herod Agrippa was given jurisdiction over Galilee in A. D. 41.

King Agrippa I tried to do everything to gain popularity with the Jews. He proceeded to persecute the church and beheaded the Apostle James.¹ He saw that his killing of

James pleased the Jews. He then had Peter arrested and imprisoned. This is a case of political discrimination against the disciples on religious grounds. The reason why the Jews were pleased when James was killed and Peter was imprisoned by the king was probably their objection to the apostles who were recently involved in the breaking down of barriers that divided the Jews and the Gentiles. Jewish privileges were accorded to Gentiles without requiring them to become Jews. This explained why the Jews were beginning to be against Christianity. They began to see what the Christian gospel really was – the abolishing of all special Jewish customs.

Peter could have been executed immediately by Herod to further placate the Jews in strengthening his popularity with them. But at that time, the Jews were observing “the days of unleavened bread” which was the Passover Feast (14th to 21st Nisan; March/April). The Passover Feast was a celebration of the nation for God had delivered them from bondage in Egypt. They should be happy in celebrating their great deliverance instead of inflicting a harsh punishment on one of God's messengers! But Peter was put in prison. They intended to bring him out for his execution after the Easter celebration. In prison, Peter was heavily guarded. Four “quaternions” or four sets of four soldiers were ordered to watch over him. They took turns to keep watch over him each time. In his prison cell, Peter was chained between two soldiers. Two soldiers guarded the inner door and the outer gate. The remaining twelve soldiers rested until their turn came. So many soldiers were

¹ James was one of the three who were very

deployed to guard one man! The reason could be that they remembered the previous incident when Peter was set free from prison (5:17-19).

Peter was Set Free

During the period of the Passover Feast, Peter was kept in prison. The church gathered together to pray for him. The celebration was now over. In the morning, Herod would have Peter brought out for execution, but that very night before dawn, the angel of the Lord came to Peter in prison. Peter was asleep. How peaceful he must have been for he trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ, and he was not afraid to die! He had seen his resurrected Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who can raise him from the dead. Death has lost its sting. The angel of the Lord came to the prison cell where Peter was held. His presence lit the place and he touched Peter to wake him up. As Peter rose up, the chains around his wrists fell off. Observe the details: Peter was told to gird himself and wrap his clothes three times around him, for he had loosened his garments to sleep; then he was told to put on his sandals, and to hurry and follow the angel (vv. 7-8). The angel led Peter through the inner door and the outer iron-gate, which led to the city. The iron-gate just opened by itself. Having passed through one street, the angel left him. All the time Peter thought it was a dream. But now alone in the street, it dawned upon him that his release was real, that it was really an angel of the Lord who came to rescue him from “the hand of Herod” and from the intention of the Jews.

Peter’s release from prison was not a fairy tale as some so-called modernist Christians would try to explain. They said that Luke was writing

poetically, and that the warden of the prison was sympathetic to Peter, and later released him. This is not plausible if the facts are considered. Herod Agrippa I seized Peter in order to please the populace and strengthen his position with Rome. It was a very serious offence, which would be punishable with death if Peter escaped, let alone release him on the grounds of sympathy without the proper authority. James the apostle had been executed and Peter was next in order to please the Jews. Peter’s release by the angel was God’s direct intervention to fulfil His plan and purpose.² The death of Peter would inflict a great damage to the cause of world evangelism.

Praying for Peter

Peter then went to the home of Mary, where many Christians had gathered to pray for him. In the face of powerful political opposition, the church’s only weapon was prayer. They prayed “without ceasing” suggesting that the Christians spent long hours praying fervently and earnestly. They prayed corporately. On reaching the house, Peter knocked at the door, calling them to open it. Rhoda, a young girl, came to answer. She immediately recognised Peter’s voice and was so happy. Instead of quickly opening the door, she ran in to tell the rest that Peter was at the door. They did not believe her. They thought it was Peter’s angel. Rhoda insisted that it was Peter. While they were arguing who was right, Peter kept on knocking at the door. Eventually

² God uses His angels as His agents to fulfill His plan and purpose. The roles and functions of God’s angels are varied: directing people (Acts 8:26; 10:36); helping in times of trouble (Acts 5:19); agents of judgment (Acts 12:23); as representative of the churches (Revelation 1:20); representing children (Matthew 18:10); helping saints (Hebrew 1:14).

they opened the door, and they were astonished when they saw him. How familiar to us that the church did not believe that God could set Peter free even though they had been praying for his release!

When Peter entered the house, he told them to keep quiet. He then shared with them how the Lord had set him free from prison. He then told them to inform James and the other brethren. He would like all the brethren to know of his deliverance. Surely many other disciples too knew of his imprisonment and had also been praying for him. Peter personally singled out James and this suggests that James had already become an important leader in the church in Jerusalem. This James was the half brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19). Peter departed after that and went to another place. Luke did not tell where he went, and till today no one knows.

God's Judgement against His Enemy

As soon as it was day, there was a great commotion in the prison. The soldiers must have discovered that Peter was missing or had escaped. Herod was so angry that he ordered the soldiers who were assigned to guard Peter to be put to death. Herod's plan to further please the Jews to increase his popularity was thwarted. His pride and ego were hurt and he hoped to regain it by executing all the guards. He left Jerusalem for Caesarea. Caesarea was a city on the shore of the Mediterranean. It was situated on the great road linking Tyre in the north to Egypt. It was the capital of the Roman province of Judaea, where the seat of Roman governors or procurators was stationed. It was a great Gentile city which boasted of spacious artificial

harbour. This was the city where Cornelius the Roman centurion, who became a Christian, stayed.

Tyre and Sidon were two coastal port towns northwest of Palestine by the Mediterranean. They were not under the jurisdiction of Herod. By some unknown reasons, Herod was displeased with the people of Tyre and Sidon. The people in these two towns had their food supplied by Galilee, which was under Herod. Knowing that Herod was angry with them, the people of Tyre and Sidon sent their representatives together to placate Herod. They first won the friendship of Blastus, Herod's economic adviser. They then persuaded him to negotiate a peace agreement with Herod. The king agreed to the terms but wanting to demonstrate his authority and power, he subjected the emissaries to a great show.

On an appointed day, Herod appeared in his royal robe. According to Josephus, the Jewish historian, the occasion was a feast in honour of the Roman Emperor Claudius, Herod's patron. He sat on his throne and delivered his address to the people. They met in the magnificent amphitheatre, which was built by his grandfather, Herod the Great. Josephus described the scene: "Herod put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre 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 after a surprising manner" (from MacArthur, *Acts 1-12*, p.327). The people seeing Herod with such splendour shouted saying to Herod: "It is the voice of a god, and not of a man." And immediately, the angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory.

Herod was “eaten of worms” and died. Observe that Herod was struck by the angel. He was struck with an illness. He did not die straightaway. He was taken away and died five days later of abdominal pains.³

The Church Continued to Grow

Luke recorded that the Word of God grew and multiplied. Herod and the angry Jews tried to destroy the church or cut its growth. But God is greater. His plan cannot be thwarted.

Luke then reported that Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch from Jerusalem having completed their mission in bringing relief to the church there. Luke also mentioned that they took John Mark with them. Remember John Mark’s house where Peter went after his miraculous release from prison (v.12). John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas.⁴ Saul is re-introduced for the rest of Acts which features his missionary work to the rest of Europe and eventually to Rome.

PRACTICAL VALUE

Herod’s persecution of the church was motivated by his own political ends. His action in putting James to death and seizing Peter for the same purpose to please the circumcised Jewish party could have threatened to destroy the Christian movement in furthering the work of evangelisation of the Gentiles.

³ Josephus Antiquities XIX, vii, 2.

⁴Colossians 4:10 Aristarchus my fellowprisoner saluteth you, and Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas, (touching whom ye received commandments: if he come unto you, receive him;)

Peter’s death would have created that effect. It is therefore dangerous and detrimental to the church when the State of a country favours the proponents of another religion. Combination of State and the religious body might not tolerate propagators of religious bodies other than that which is supported and recognised by the State. Martin Luther had to face both the State and the Roman Catholic Church in the medieval age when he preached and taught Biblical truths. Just as Peter was protected by God, so was Martin Luther who could have been killed by the authorities and powers in his country. There is a trend today to marry both State and religion. As Christianity is an exclusive religion which teaches that it is “the way, the truth, and the life” in Jesus Christ, Christians will not be long tolerated and persecution is inevitable. Christians must be aware of this phenomenon for they have been warned of it in the Bible. Christians ought to seize the opportunities and freedom they now enjoy and at the same time to remain steadfast and undeterred.

God has shown in this chapter that He will severely judge all those who are drunk with their own pride and ego, and who oppose Him, and who rob Him of the glory and honour that solely belong to Him. God is no respecter of persons. King Herod Agrippa I is an example. God has appointed a day when He will judge all people, princes and paupers, rich and poor, who reject Him and turn His truth into falsehood.

For Christians, who face opposition and persecutions, their only weapon is praying to God, the Almighty. God has promised that the earnest and fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. How much more powerful if the church which is righteous prays

fervently and earnestly to Him corporately! Peter's release from prison teaches the fine balance between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Where direct intervention by God is necessary, He acts accordingly; but where man can do for himself, He expects man to do it. Peter was released from the tight security that surrounded him in prison, making his escape impossible humanly speaking. So God intervened by sending His angel. But the moment Peter was in the street and out of harm's way, the angel left him. He had to find his way to Mary's house to which he chose to go. Yet God sometimes permits some of His servants to be killed and others He spares for His higher plan and purpose. He allowed James to be martyred whereas He saved Peter. These are God's ways. The earlier we Christians understand Him and His ways, the better it will be for us when we face trials and tribulations and the answers to our prayers. God knows best. AMEN

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

Monday: Acts 12:1-4; Daniel 3:15-30; Philippians 1:19.

Tuesday: Acts 12:5-11; 2 Corinthians 1:8-11; Ephesians 6:19-20.

Wednesday: Acts 12:12-17; Ephesians 3:20-21; Psalm 91:11-12.

Thursday: Acts 12:18-23; Proverbs 16:5; 1 Peter 5:5; 2 Thessalonians 2:4.

Friday: Acts 12:24-25; 1 Corinthians 10:31.

Discussion Questions

1. What motivated Herod to kill James and imprison Peter?

2. How did the church respond to Peter's imprisonment? What can we learn from the church in intercessory prayer that makes their prayer effective?

3. When Peter was released from prison how did the Christians who prayed for his release respond? What lessons might we draw from it?

4. Do you think that God dealt with Herod too harshly? Explain your answer. What does his death teach us about God in relation to despots?

5. How could an unbeliever be expected to give glory to God? Is he not dead in sin?
