

THE JERUSALEM CHURCH IS MIRACULOUSLY PROTECTED: GOD'S PATTERN FOR DELIVERANCE FROM PERSECUTION ACTS 12:01–25

Introduction

God always delivers His people either through or from the trials of this life, including persecution and martyrdom. This passage gives a picture of God's pattern for deliverance through persecution.

- I. There was the first political attack against the church (vv. 1-4).
- II. There was God's pattern for deliverance (vv. 5-17).
- III. There was God's sovereign wrath, His vindication of the church (vv. 18-23).
- IV. There was the church's triumphant march (vv. 24-25).

ACTS 12:01–25 HEROD AGRIPPA I (A.D. 41–44)

The facts concerning Herod Agrippa I are interesting.

- => He was the grandson of Herod the Great who had tried to kill the baby Jesus by murdering all the children (see *Herod the Great*, Mt. 2:3-4).
- => He was the nephew of Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist killed (see *Herod Antipas*, Mt. 14:1-14; *Herod the Tetrarch*, Mt. 14:1-14).
- => He was born about 10 B.C., reared and educated in Rome.
- => He became king over Palestine and ruled between A.D. 41-44.
- => He sought the popularity of the Jewish people by pretending to be a Jewish convert. He publicly kept the Jewish law and feasts, seeking the support and loyalty of the people. It was this that caused him to turn against the church. He was seeking the favour of the people, their approval and loyalty (see Acts 12:3). Herod was a shrewd politician, able to manoeuvre and manipulate people to his advantage.

Note this: for some time the Jewish people had begun to turn against Christian believers. The public misunderstood the teaching and the evangelistic fervour of Christians. The idea of reaching out to Gentiles and converting the whole world to Christ was just unheard of. Apparently a terrible animosity had built up against the Christian church. Herod sought to capitalize upon the animosity to gain more support and loyalty of the people by destroying the leaders of the church. He felt such action would gain their favour and help tremendously in maintaining peace throughout Palestine — all of which would solidify his power and esteem in Rome. □

I. *Acts 12:01–04 The First Political Attack*

There was the *first political attack* against the church. It had been about eight years since Stephen's death and the first persecution against the church. The persecution had been squelched by the hand of God in converting the arch-persecutor himself, Saul of Tarsus (see notes, Acts 9:1-9). However, throughout the eight years, feelings against the church had been growing until they reached the present peak (see "everything the Jewish people were anticipating," v. 11). The people were filled with animosity toward Christian believers. There were two primary reasons for their hatred. The public just did not understand...

- the teachings of Jesus and His followers: how the teachings fulfilled the law; how they could be reconciled with Jewish religion.
- the evangelistic outbreak of the church: that Jewish believers would be so full of fervour for Christ that they would reach out to convert the whole world. Apparently, the conversion of Cornelius and the founding of churches throughout the Gentile world upset some of the Jews to no end.

Herod, being the shrewd politician he was, saw an opportunity to please the Jews by persecuting and seeking to destroy the church. If he could please the Jews, it would help...

- keep the Jews quiet, keep them supporting Rome's policies.
- solidify his own prestige and power with the authorities back in Rome.

Herod launched the government's attack against the leaders of the church. (See *Herod Agrippa I*, Acts 12:1-25.)

1. Persecution. The word *persecute* (kakosai) means to oppress, to torment, to harm, to do evil against. Certain leaders in the church were arrested and imprisoned and apparently tortured. A person can just imagine the believers being man-handled and molested as the persecuted of every generation so often are, their homes and property being destroyed and confiscated or stolen.
2. Murder. One of the persons killed was James, the brother of John, one of the three leading apostles of the Lord (see *Apostles*, Mt. 10:2; *Disciples*, Mt. 10:2). Nothing is said about James in the book of Acts except that he was martyred. But the fact that Herod would attempt to silence him is clear evidence that James was very active in serving Christ. Christ had told James he would suffer martyrdom (Mt. 20:23). God makes a glorious promise to the believer who is persecuted.

Rom 8:17 *Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

3. Imprisonment. The persecution of the church's leaders pleased the Jews, especially the murder of one of the Lord's leading apostles. Herod's plan seemed to be working. Note three things.

- a. It was the Passover season, the days of unleavened bread. (See *Feast of Unleavened Bread*, Mt. 26:17.) Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims had flooded into the city of Jerusalem. As on any festive occasion, there was a party-like atmosphere hovering over the city. The people were filled with a festive, merry spirit. Herod had a unique chance to really gain popularity among multitudes of people.
- b. Herod was so elated with the response of the Jews, he lurched forward with the boldest plot imaginable: the arrest and jailing of *the leader* himself, Peter the apostle. Note: Herod was planning to execute Peter after the Passover. Jewish law did not allow executions during the Passover Feast. Also note: this was Peter's third imprisonment for the sake of his Lord (see Acts 4:3; 5:18; 12:4-5).
- c. Herod had Peter heavily guarded (see *Prisoners*, Acts 12:3-4).

Mat 10:17 "Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues."

Mat 24:9 "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me." (see Lk. 21:12-13)

John 15:20 "Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also."

John 16:1-3 "All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me."

2 Tim 3:12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Rev 2:10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Psa 7:1 O Lord my God, I take refuge in you; save and deliver me from all who pursue me.

Psa 31:15 My times are in your hands; deliver me from my enemies and from those who pursue me.

Psa 119:86 All your commands are trustworthy; help me, for men persecute me without cause.

ACTS 12:03–04 PRISONERS

Peter was probably guarded by sixteen different soldiers. Four soldiers at a time served two separate three-hour watches within a twenty-four hour stretch. One wrist of the prisoner was usually chained to the wrist of a guard. Note the extra security with Peter: both wrists were chained (Acts 12:6). The reason for the extra security with Peter was the huge throng of pilgrims visiting the city during the Passover. In the midst of the mass confusion within the city, Herod felt some of Peter's friends might attempt a rescue. □

II. *Acts 12:05–17 Deliverance from Persecution*

There was God's pattern for deliverance. Note a significant point: God's providence saved Peter but not James. Why? Very simply, it was time for James to join his Lord and receive the fruit of his labour for work done here on earth. Peter's work was not yet done. Believers must always remember, the day when they are to go to their Lord does come. God's will may be for the believer to suffer and bear martyrdom for His name's sake. God's plan may be to use the persecuted believer's faithfulness as a testimony to reach others.

God's pattern for delivering believers through or from persecution is fourfold.

1. There is the pattern of prayer. Church-wide prayer delivered Peter (v. 5). Note three points.
 - a. The whole church was praying.
 - b. The church was doing all it could do, praying *specifically* for Peter's deliverance.
 - c. The word *earnestly* (*ektenes*) means fervently and earnestly continuing in prayer. The idea is intense prayer, prayer that captivates and focuses a person's concentration. The root meaning of the word is "to stretch out." The picture is that the church was stretched out, prostrate before God, earnestly and fervently crying out to Him for God's sovereign deliverance of Peter. The church could do nothing and they knew it. Peter's only hope was God.
2. There is the pattern of confidence. Confidence in God's will and care delivered Peter (v. 6). Note that Peter was asleep, and it was the very night before his trial. Christ was meeting His dear servant's need, infusing him with His very special grace and peace. Peter sensed the very special trust and care of his Lord.

Thought 1. The Lord infuses His strength, peace, care, understanding and marvellous grace to go through whatever trial confronts His dear servant.

1 Cor 10:13 *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

2 Tim 4:18 *The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

2 Pet 2:9 *If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.*

Psa 31:9 *Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief.*

Psa 34:22 *The Lord redeems his servants; no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him.*

Psa 37:5 *Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this:*

Psa 118:8 *It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man.*

Isa 26:3 *You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.*

Isa 26:4 *Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal.*

3. There is the pattern of God's miraculous work and the believer's obedience. Both were involved in delivering Peter (vv. 7-10). Note the Scripture and outline.
 - a. The angel did not do for Peter what Peter could do for himself. Peter had to act; he had to obey the commands of the angel.
 - b. Once Peter was safely delivered out of danger, he was left on his own, left to work out his own deliverance. He was to continue his "walk by faith"..
 - to return to the church and to the believers on his own.
 - to seek the Lord about remaining or leaving Jerusalem and in making any other decisions that needed to be made.

The point is this: God's miraculous deliverance involved only *what Peter could not do for himself*. When Peter was helpless, God then took over. This is the point of miracles. Miracles are acts of God, acts that men cannot do for themselves. They are worked by God and by Him alone; therefore, He and He alone gets the praise and honour.

4. There is the pattern of God's sovereign will (v. 11). It was God's sovereign will for Peter to be delivered. It was not His will for James to be delivered. The true believer rests in God's sovereign will, knowing that God's will results in the greatest blessings. Peter thought he was having a vision (v. 9), that he was in some semi-conscious state, dreaming of God delivering him. Peter was startled; it took a moment to collect his thoughts and grasp what had happened. When he did, he realized..
 - that God had delivered him by His sovereign will
 - that God still had a purpose for him on earth
 - that he still had a ministry to perform for the Lord

He quickly sized up the situation and fled the city, for he knew Herod would have the soldiers searching for him as soon as his escape was discovered. But before fleeing, Peter decided to quickly visit the house of Mary (the mother of John Mark), hoping some of the believers were gathered there. He needed to let them know God had delivered him and where he was fleeing.

Thought 1. Again, note how God expects His people to *work out their own salvation* (deliverance) when it is in their power to do so. Now note the result of God delivering His dear servant. The Scripture and outline points are sufficient to see the results. Every miracle performed by God causes the same results — of course, all to varying degrees.

Note how the church had been praying ever so fervently, yet not really expecting a miracle. We must not be too critical, however. They had already witnessed the death of some outstanding leaders, two of which are named, Stephen the deacon and James the apostle.

Mat 18:19 “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”

Mark 11:24 “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

John 15:7 “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”

1 John 3:22 And receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.

ACTS 12:12 MARY, MOTHER OF JOHN MARK

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Acts 12:12

Mary was also the aunt of the missionary Barnabas (see Col. 4:10). This is the only clear mention of her in Scripture. She was probably a widow, for her husband is never mentioned. She was apparently wealthy, the owner of considerable property. She owned a huge house large enough for believers to hold services there. There was also a gate and a portress to greet guests who entered the home. This may point to a palace-like house (v. 13. See *The High Priest's Palace*, Jn. 18:16.)

Apparently Mary was a very godly woman, a dynamic example for all women of every generation. As will be seen she was also a godly mother, rearing her son John Mark in the gospel. She eventually encouraged him to commit his life to missions just as Paul and Barnabas, his cousin, had done. □

III. *Acts 12:18–23 Death of Herod*

There was God's sovereign wrath. His vindication of the church. God never has and never will allow the persecution of His followers to go on and on. God is patient, wanting all to repent and to turn to Him, but He tolerates evil for only so long. Every man has to give an account for his evil deeds. Herod's time had now come. The judgment of God fell and fell swiftly.

1. The sins of Herod were very serious. He was guilty...
 - of opposing God. He violently persecuted God's church, which was equal to persecuting the Lord Himself. He was determined to wipe the church off the face of the earth (vv. 1-4; see Lk. 10:16; Acts 9:4; 1 Cor. 8:12).
 - of murder: killing the servants of God, apparently plotting to kill them all (vv. 2-4).
 - of loving the world: its power, position and influence (v. 3).
 - of hypocrisy and deception: pretending to be religious — all for power and position.
 - of wrath and lack of compassion (v. 19): it was Roman law that the keepers of escaped prisoners were subject to bear the same punishment as the prisoner.
 - of hostile and unwise leadership (v. 20): the dispute with Tyre and Sidon is not explained, but Herod's nature is seen in the word *quarrelling* (*en thumomachon*). The word means to be inflamed, to be filled with violent hostility. It is very hot anger, an emotion that should never characterize the leader of a nation.
 - of pride: the pride of office, position and person (v. 21).
 - of self-glory and self-exaltation (v. 22): he willingly received the declaration that he was a god (v. 22).
2. The death of Herod was under the sovereign will of God. Herod's time had run out; his sin could not be allowed anymore. The day of God's wrath against a heart so hardened in sin had arrived. Sitting there on the throne, Herod was immediately stricken down with a severe stroke of some sort. His body was being eaten by worms (*genomenos skolekobrotos*). The word *skolex* was used by the Greeks to refer to intestinal worms. Josephus, the renowned historian of that day, reported that Herod lingered for five days, suffering great pain in the area of the stomach (Flavius Josephus. *Josephus Complete Works*. Translated by William Whiston. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1960. Ant. 19.8.2).

Rom 6:23 *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Heb 2:3 *How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.*

Prov 11:19 *The truly righteous man attains life, but he who pursues evil goes to his death.*

Ezek 18:4 *For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son — both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die.*

IV. Acts 12:24–25 A Flourishing Church

There was the church marching on triumphantly.

1. The words *increase and spread* (*euxanen kai eplethuneto*) mean that the church kept on growing and multiplying. The progress of God's Word could not be stopped. Men and governments might try to stop it. They might persecute, imprison and kill those who proclaim God's Word; but their efforts to silence the Word will always be to no avail. God overrules all and always will.

=> He has ordained His Word to be proclaimed, and it shall be by all those who are truly His.

Rom 1:16 *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.*

=> He has ordained His Word to bear fruit, to increase and spread, never to return to Him void (Isa. 55:11).

Psa 126:6 *He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.*

Isa 55:1 *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.*

2. A young man was discipled, a young man destined for greatness. Barnabas and Saul had brought relief goods from Antioch to the famine-stricken churches throughout Judea and Jerusalem (see Acts 11:27-30). They were now returning to Antioch, and note what happened. John Mark, a young disciple, had joined them. (See *John Mark*, Acts 12:25.) This was a young man who was destined by God...

- to be discipled by three of God's greatest servants: Paul, Barnabas and Peter.
- to write one of the four gospels of the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark.

Mat 28:19-20 *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

2 Tim 2:2 *And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. ■*

ACTS 12:25 JOHN MARK

When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark. Acts 12:25

John Mark had a godly mother (Acts 12:12). It seems that her home was the centre of the Christian church (Acts 12:12). In fact, her home may have been the Upper Room which Jesus used for the Last Supper (Lk. 22:10f) and for Pentecost (Acts 1:13). John Mark was related to Barnabas (Col. 4:10) and was a disciple of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25). As a young man and disciple something happened that caused his faith to weaken, and he forsook Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:13; 15:38). However, he later recommitted his life to missionary service and became so staunch in his commitment that he was willing to let Paul and Barnabas argue over his seriousness and divide their team efforts over him (Acts 15:36-40). Scripture is silent about what happened after this. Mark is seen only as a man who had redeemed himself in the eyes of Paul (Col. 4:10; Phile. 1:24; 2 Tim. 4:11). And Peter said Mark was serving with him (1 Pet. 5:13).

When writing to the churches of Asia Minor, Peter sent his special greetings from Mark. This points toward the churches knowing Mark personally. Mark apparently joined Peter on his missionary journeys. This is significant, for it means that much of what is in Mark's gospel probably comes from what Peter had told him. The Gospel of Mark, which Mark wrote, was probably the preaching material of Peter. (See note, Acts 13:13.) John Mark also may have been the man carrying the pitcher of water as a sign for the disciples to approach him in order to secure a room for the Passover (Lk. 22:10f). He was probably the young man who fled the scene of Jesus' arrest (Mk. 14:51-52). □