

## Church in Prayer – All things are Possible (Acts 12)



The first church in Antioch came into existence by the unsung heroes of faith from Cyrus and Cyrene, who had no knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures. But preaching Christ to the pagans brought explosive growth of the church and as the result, and the Greek-speaking church was birthed in Antioch. From this young church, the ripples of the gospel went out to the world and reached Rome. Who planted the Antioch church? To this day we do not know. Most of the great work is done by the nameless and faceless people. But they are famous in heaven.

Another notable thing about the Antioch church was the great love they had, not only within the church but also toward the Jerusalem church. It was love between Jews and Gentiles. When the young Gentile church in Antioch heard Agabus' prophecy that a great famine was coming to the whole world, they took up a special offering to help their poor Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. They mostly did not know each other, but the Antioch church practised love not in words only, but in action. This was the picture of the early church, and I believe that is also the picture of the last day church.

### A. Herod Kills James

Acts 12 shifts back to Jerusalem briefly before focusing on the Antioch church's call to mission. It is during the Passover season in Jerusalem around the year 44AD when King Herod Agrippa I died.

#### **1. King Herod Agrippa I – of the Wicked Herod Family**

- i. 'Herod the Great' was this man's grandfather. The Herods were a godless family. Herod the Great murdered hundreds of babies in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. He feared one of those babies might one day grow up to challenge his throne (Matt 2:1-17). What an insecure man!
- ii. 'Herod Antipas I' was Herod the Great's son, who beheaded John the Baptist to please a dancing girl, Salome (Mark 6:21-25). Salome was his brother's granddaughter, Herod Aristobulus. Herod Antipas I married Herodias, the wife of Herod Philip I, another brother of his. Jesus called Herod Antipas I 'that fox'. He was a sly character. Later 'Herod the fox' dressed Jesus in a purple robe and mocked Him in his palace. Jesus had nothing at all to say to him. How did this Herod Antipas I die? His nephew, 'Herod Agrippa I' accused him of conspiring against the Roman Emperor Gaius (Caligula). This younger 'Herod from hell' finished off this 'Herod the sly fox' who killed John the Baptist and ridiculed Jesus.
- iii. 'Herod Agrippa I' is the Herod of Acts 12. This Herod became a close pal to the mad emperor Gaius. With bribery and sly political tactics, he bought his way to the throne of Judea. An ambitious, luxury-loving, and lustful man, he decided to adopt a different policy than his uncle he replaced – to please the Jews and stay in power. By 41AD, Herod Agrippa I exceeded all his seven power-hungry uncles and rose in power comparable to that of his grandfather, Herod the Great. People with an insatiable hunger for power like to find a 'scape goat' to blame for the things that go wrong. So he made some inquiries and quickly found out that the apostles were not very popular in Jerusalem.

#### **2. Apostle James – the First Martyr among the Apostles**

Herod quickly got hold of James, John's brother, and killed him with a sword. James was the first apostle to be martyred, but not the last one. When the disciples said yes to the call of Jesus on the shores of Galilee to follow Him, they signed their death warrant. It was now just over 10 years since Jesus' death and resurrection. James was one of the three inner core apostles.

Why did God let James die and Peter live? James and John, the two brothers answered the call of Jesus, and yet God let one die and the other live. James and John had different paths. James was the first martyr among the apostles. John was to live out his natural life. God knows what He is doing. We can rest in His sovereign will. God is glorified through martyrdom. God is also glorified through supernatural rescue.

In 1956 the Auca Indians killed Jim Elliott and four other young missionaries who came to share the gospel with them. Many asked, 'Why?' Today the Aucas are strong Christians reaching out to other tribes because Jim Elliot's widow, Elizabeth Elliot went back with her daughter Valerie, and other women, and continued

the work her husband left behind. God has different callings and pathways for everyone. One day we will understand when all our lives are unfolded like a scroll before all our eyes to see.

## B. Herod Arrests Peter

After successfully arresting and killing James, Herod quickly became popular in Jerusalem. So he went after Peter, the leader of the Jerusalem church and managed to arrest him. But he could not execute Peter just yet, because it was the Passover season.

1. Peter was put under '4 squads of 4 soldiers', 16 soldiers in 6 hourly rotations - maximum security prison. Normally they put a chain on the right wrist of the prisoner to the left wrist of the guard. But in Peter's case, both of his wrists were chained to the guards on his left and right, and two other guards guarded the door. This is Peter's third arrest in Jerusalem, most likely in the *Fortress of Antonia*. They must have remembered what happened in Acts 2 – an angel of the Lord took Peter and John out of the prison.
2. It was the last night of the Passover, the night before Peter's trial (12:4). What was Peter to do? They had just killed James. What would you do? Pray all night? Peter slept through the night between the two soldiers with his arms in chains. *No insomnia for Peter*. Peter did the same on the night of Jesus' arrest (Luke 22:42-45, Gethsemane). Peter fell into such a deep sleep (delta phase) that it took quite a bit of work for the angel to wake him up. The angel entered the prison cell full of God's glory; then he struck Peter on the side and picked him up; then the angel told him to get up and get dressed (12:7-8). It is like waking up a teenager during the school holiday! How could Peter sleep so soundly in such circumstances? *Peter must have been at peace within himself*.
3. What else did Peter have the night before his execution? A praying church on their knees! The church met in Mary's house, John Mark's mother, and held a special 'breakthrough prayer meeting.' The Greek imperative indicates it was an unceasing prayer during the Passover season (12:5). What were they praying for? Peter's release. Prayer looks like the weakest thing in the world, but it is the mightiest weapon in the hands of believers. Prayer of faith can move the mountains. A man on his knees has the divine resource on his side because the angels move with the prayer of the saints. The chains, the locked doors, iron gates, and the guards mean nothing when the angels of God are on the move. They are far superior in strength, beauty, and wisdom than us humans. God's holy angels are all around us the believers if our spiritual eyes are opened to see them.

*'Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?'* (Heb. 1:14).

*'You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday...No evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways...'* (Ps 91:10-11).

## C. Peter Released by an Angel

1. **Awakened Peter** - Peter was still half asleep as he followed the shining angel out of the prison cell. The chains fell off Peter's arms by themselves, the prison doors and the prison gate opened by themselves. These are the first automatic doors, and they are in the Bible. The massive outer gate called the 'iron gate' which was tightly shut, swung open by itself. Conveniently the guards were in deep sleep at every checkpoint! Only when Peter was on the street in the cold air and the angel vanished into the thin air, he realised that this was real life and not a vision (12:9-11). What mighty God we serve!

*'Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.'* (Eph 3:20-21)

2. **Awakened the Church** – Now comes the funny story of the church in their special 'breakthrough prayer meeting'. Peter was standing outside knocking on the door as believers prayed on their knees in prayer vigil deep into the night. Rhoda, the housemaid, went to the door but when she heard Peter's voice, she got so excited, she forgot to open the door and ran back into the room and told the mighty intercessors, *'Pastor Peter is standing at the door! God has answered our prayer!'* The praying church's unbelieving

response - *'Rhoda, you are crazy (besides yourself).'* (12:15) Their explanation - *'You did not see Peter, but you saw Peter's guardian angel.'* They found it easier to believe Peter's guardian angel was standing outside knocking on the door than Peter for whose release they were praying!

They were so spiritual! It doesn't look like they had great faith. But God still answered their prayer. Here is an encouragement. Their prayer of 'little faith' still moved God's hand! You do not always have to possess great faith to pray. Even a prayer of weak faith can release God's angels, break the chains, open the prison doors and iron gates, move the mountains, and rescue our loved ones. How gracious is our God! Isn't it interesting to note that the early church believed Peter's guardian angel had the same voice and appearance as Peter? (C.f. Matt 18:10)

**3. Leadership passed to James, the Lord's brother** – After this, Peter disappears into the night. Where did he go? Nobody knows. Most likely Peter went abroad to preach the gospel. We know Peter went to Antioch (Gal 2:11-14), Jerusalem (Acts 15:7ff), and later Rome. Why was Peter rescued from death? His assignment wasn't finished. God's will for Peter was to stay and complete his mission. James, Jesus' brother – who was one of the three pillars of the church (Gal 2:9) - stepped up to take the leadership of the Jerusalem church. What happened to the sixteen guards who fell asleep on the job? Herod mercilessly executed them all.

#### D. Herod Eaten by Worms

**1. Herod's death** – Herod Agrippa I made a fatal mistake. He went too far in his ambition and pride, and he was struck by an angel of the Lord in divine judgement.

i. Josephus gives us some detail on this incident. Herod was in Caesarea when a great festival was held throughout the Roman Empire in 44AD. He was angry with Tyre and Sidon, who were self-governing cities but economically dependent on Judea's food supply. The people of Tyre and Sidon wanted to appease Herod, so through his aide Blastus they secured an audience with Herod during the festival (12:20). Herod strutted before them in a *silver robe* which shone in the sun and as he spoke, the people flattered him, *'It is the voice of a god, not of a man.'* (12:21-22)

*'May you be propitious to us, and if we have hitherto feared you as a man, yet henceforth we agree that you are more than mortal in your being.'* And he [Herod] accepted this flattery...he was seized by violent internal pains and was carried into his place where he died after five days of illness.' (Josephus., Ant. 19:343-350)

ii. Herod Agrippa I, at the peak of his popularity, accepted the worship as a god. This is the ultimate height in human pride and presumption. He was struck dead by the angel of the Lord. What an end! This was the last of the Herod's, guilty of murder, lust, ambition, who tried to hunt down the apostles to bolster his throne, but finished up being eaten by worms. Not after he died, but before he died (12:23). *Appendicitis leading to peritonitis? Cyst produced by a tapeworm?*

This is a picture of hell, where *'the worms do not die, and fire not quenched,'* (Mark 9:48). This family of Herods who loved to give themselves great titles, thirsty for power and guilty of every sin described in the Bible, finished up judged by God. The worst of them died being eaten by worms. So is everyone who set themselves against God and exalt themselves instead of giving glory to God.

**2. Word of God** - But what happened to the word of God that Herod tried so hard to oppress? *'But the word of God grew and multiplied.'* (12:24) The Word of God cannot be stopped. No man, no devil can stop the Word of God from going forth. Nor can they stop the church of God who stands and proclaims God's Word! They may kill the apostles and persecute the church, but the word of God will always multiply, and the true church of God too will continue to grow until one day the saints of God rules and reigns with Christ - forever!

How exciting to belong to the church of Jesus Christ! Empires may rise and empires may fall. Dictators may come and dictators may go. But *'of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end.'* (Is 9:7 C.f. Dan 2:45)

## E. Questions to Consider

1. How could Peter sleep through the night before his trial and possible execution? Do you have a problem sleeping?
2. Do you believe your prayer can break the 'chains' and open the 'iron gates' of your life? What are your 'chains' and 'iron gates'? Fear of Covid? Impossible circumstances? The salvation of your loved ones?  
Do you believe that God hears even the prayer of weak faith?
3. Do you believe that you have your guardian angels watching over you? How can Christians partner with angels?
4. Why did God rescue Peter but not James? Do you trust God? That your life is in His sovereign hand and God will preserve you until His will is done?