

Growing Pains

The early church grew out of Jerusalem and began to spread through the Eastern Mediterranean region. Starting with Stephen's death, the Jews' general persecution caused many to scatter, making their way to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (Acts 11:19). They taught only Jews until some of them journeyed from Cyprus and Cyrene to Antioch of Syria, preaching to the Gentiles. Many turned to Jesus because of their preaching (Acts 11:20-21). *"The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch"* (Acts 11:22).

Sending Barnabus to Antioch set in motion the reunion between Barnabus and Saul. That reunion set the stage for the preaching journeys that occupy much of the remainder of Luke's narrative. When Barnabus saw the new converts, he encouraged them, *"for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord"* (Acts 11:24). He then went to Tarsus and brought Saul to Antioch, where they spent one year with the church, and *"the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch"* (Acts 11:26-27).

With Barnabus and Saul at Antioch, the church grew and impacted the gospel's spread significantly. The elders there were responsible for three of Saul's missionary journeys (Acts 13-21), where he used his Greek name Paul. The Antioch church also gives us the first example of brethren in one area helping brethren in another region. A great famine was prophesied. The disciples at Antioch collected funds and sent them to the elders of the church in Jerusalem. The elders there distributed to the needs of the saints in the Jerusalem assembly.

As the church grew in Antioch, a new source of trouble arose in Jerusalem. Following his custom, Herod Agrippa I came to Jerusalem for the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread. *"Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword"* (Acts 12:1-2). James, who had asked to be at Jesus' side in the kingdom (Matthew 20:21-23), was the first apostle to go on to his reward as a follower of Christ. The Jews responded to Herod's actions with approval, so he made plans to kill Peter also.

Before Herod's orders were carried out, an angel released Peter from prison, allowing him to return to the brethren (Acts 12:6-19). When Peter realized that he was free, he went to the home of John's mother, *"the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying"* (Acts 12:12). It must have been an all-night prayer meeting since it would be near morning when the angel freed Peter. *"Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there"* (Acts 12:18-19).

People question why Jesus would allow James to be put to death but save Peter. James, Peter, and John were closest to the Savior while He was on earth. They seem to be most

prepared to spread the gospel. But God knows best how to accomplish His plan. As He said to Jeremiah before the Babylonian Captivity, *"For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope'"* (Jeremiah 29:11). Jesus knew the heart of Judas and allowed him to betray the Savior. Jesus knew the heart of Saul and appeared to him on the Damascus road. Jesus knew the heart of Peter and that he would explain the acceptance of the Gentiles into the church. And Jesus knew the heart of Herod, that he would bring upon himself his own destruction.

For some unknown reason, Herod *"was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon"* (Acts 12:20). While he lingered in Caesarea, the coastal people used Herod's chamberlain to intercede for them. And when the day of the meeting came, Herod, prepared in all his royal attire, spoke with them. The people of the coastal cities depended on the King's lands for their food and wanted to impress the King with their praise. They cried out, *"The voice of a god and not of a man!"* (Acts 12:22). It is one thing to praise the gifts that God has bestowed upon people. It is a serious sin to praise people for those gifts and ignore the giver of all things good.

As the people praised Herod and not God, he did not correct them but accepted the honor. And the only God, who is a jealous God (Deuteronomy 5:7-10), showed His displeasure against the one who acknowledged the people's praise as their idol. *"Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died"* (Acts 12:23). Thus, ended Herod Agrippa I's first effort to end the church of Christ.

To whom or what do we give honor, praise, and glory?