

Thoughts on Acts Twelve

The persecutions that began with the stoning of Stephen continued to plague the disciples of Christ as they spread throughout the Mideast. About ten years after Jesus' resurrection, King Herod Agrippa I, Palestine, 42 to 44 CE, began to "afflict" or persecute the Christians. He was the grandson of Herod the Great and Mariamne the Maccabean princess and a friend of Caligula, the Roman Emperor. He tried to calm his Jewish subjects while remaining loyal to the Romans. Agrippa I built theatres, held games for the Romans and Greeks, and killed Christians to please the Jews. This King was the first political figure since Pilate to use his political position against the followers of Jesus. Luke summarizes it this way, *"Now about that time,"* the time of the famine (Acts 11:28), *"Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church"* (Acts 12:1).

The English Standard Version translates verse one as: *"About that time Herod the king **laid violent hands** on some who belonged to the church."* Verse three identifies that these things occurred during the week after Passover (Acts 12:3). The activities would place many Jews in Jerusalem along with the Christians that still kept the traditional feasts and the apostles and teachers who actively taught the resurrected Christ. Historically, the appointed King and the Roman governor would also be in Jerusalem to be available in case of trouble. King Agrippa I was the first to rule over all the territory once ruled by his grandfather. He worshiped and offered daily sacrifices and demonstrated his strong feelings for the Jews by influencing Caligula not to place his statue in the Holy of Holies. Agrippa's attitude toward the Jews set him as the enemy of Christians.

Luke does not include the details leading up to the arrest and execution of James but mentions it as it leads to further persecution. Because James was not Roman, he could have been crucified but was executed with a sword (Acts 12:2). Because the Jews were pleased to see a prominent apostle of Christ put to death, Agrippa tried to capture and kill more of them. *"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"* (Acts 12:3-5).

God answered the prayers of the saints assembled in Jerusalem by the miraculous release of Peter (Acts 12:6-17). Peter disappeared from the prison, and the Romans could not find him. Agrippa ordered that the guards be executed and departed to Caesarea, the center of Roman rule in Palestine. His position as ruler placed Agrippa into the disputes between Palestine and the nations around them. There is no record of warfare with Syria's port cities of Tyre and Sidon, but there were trade disputes. The coastal cities had many riches but no way to grow grain. They received large quantities of fruits and grains from the lands of the Jews. Agrippa had cut off the supplies, and the city officials came to Caesarea to discuss the situation.

On a specific day, a festival day when many people assembled in the theater, the King arrayed himself in all the royal spenders he had at his disposal and presented a very long speech to those who had gathered (Acts 12:21). The people, probably more to gain favor from Agrippa than enjoying the address, *"were shouting, 'The voice of a god, and not of a man'"* (Acts 12:22)! *"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"* (Acts 12:23). Luke gives only the information about the affliction and death of

Herod Agrippa the First that is necessary to the history he is writing. We can satisfy some curiosities by consulting other historians, such as Josephus (Ant. XVII. 6, 8; XIX. 8, 2), who gives us the time and occasion. He wrote, "It was the second day of the festival in honour of the Emperor Claudius, possibly his birthday...." There is no contradiction between the two accounts of Luke and Josephus. This comparison gives us confidence in the truth contained in all of Luke's writings.

The three events described in Chapter 12, the death of James, the release of Peter, and the death of Agrippa the First, led to the freedom of movement between Palestine and Syria. Supply caravans were re-established, and the disciples moved to continue the spread of the Gospel. *"But the word of God increased and multiplied"* (Acts 12:24). The royal persecutor was gone, his victim, Peter, was free, and there was a measure of peace to allow people to listen to the Word. When Barnabas and Saul completed the tasks they were to accomplish in Jerusalem, they returned to Antioch of Syria and brought John Mark with them. Everything was in place to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles and Saul to take his Greek name of Paul.

Does Acts 12:17 help us know how to react to persecution?