

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 12:1-24 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 12:1-24 ESV

1 About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. 2 He killed James the brother of John with the sword, 3 and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 4 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. 5 So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. 6 Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. 7 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." 9 And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. 11 When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." 12 When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. 13 And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. 15 They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" 16 But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. 17 But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place. 18 Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. 19 And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there. 20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. 21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. 22 And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" 23 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. 24 But the word of God increased and multiplied.

STRUCTURE

- I. King Herod persecutes the church, but the church appeals to a greater King (12:1-5)
 - a. Herod's persecution (12:1-4)
 - i. He lays "violent hands" on the church (12:1)
 - ii. He kills James and imprisons Peter (12:2-4a)
 - b. The church's prayer (12:5)
- II. King Jesus dispatches an angel to answer the church's prayer and save Peter (12:6-19)
 - a. The angel rescues a sleeping Peter, but he thinks it's a dream (12:6-11)
 - b. Peter visits the praying church, but they mistake him for an angel (12:12-17a)
 - c. Peter escapes Jerusalem, but Herod's guards perish there (12:17b-19)
- III. King Jesus dispatches an angel to judge King Herod, and His Word multiplies (12:20-24)
 - a. Tyre and Sidon seek peace with King Herod (12:20)
 - b. Tyre and Sidon worship King Herod on account of his eloquent words (12:21-22)
 - c. King Jesus displays His supremacy by dispatching an angel to kill Herod (12:23)

- d. The eloquent words of the tyrant cease; the enduring word of God multiplies (12:24)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

This passage is a battle between two kings: the one people see versus the One they don't. The Son of David has reigned over all from the Father's right hand since He ascended there in Acts 1. However, Jesus is not the king that the world fears.

Instead, they fear the tyrant. Herod lays violent hands on the church (12:1), murdering one apostle and imprisoning another (12:2-3). He seems all-powerful, and Peter—the imprisoned apostle—sleeps helplessly in chains (12:4). As it turns out, Peter is not as helpless as it appears. The pinnacle of this first section centers not on Herod's power but on that of a praying church (12:5). God governs the universe through the prayers of His people.

In answer to the church's prayers, King Jesus dispatches an angel to Peter's cell. Peter sleeps on death row like Jesus in a deadly storm. It is the deep sleep of faith. Later in the story, an angel will strike Herod down (12:23), but here an angel strikes Peter up—to wake him (12:7). Angels figure prominently in this story. Besides the two already mentioned, Peter will follow his angelic escort out of prison and straight to the house of Mary, where people are praying for his release. The answer to their prayer is standing at the door! And they think it's only "his angel" (12:16). The theme of angels in this section emphasizes the might of King Jesus. Celestial beings operate at His disposal. They inflict death on whomever He pleases (12:23); they also save the life of whomever He pleases (12:6-11). In contrast to Jesus, who truly holds the power of life and death, King Herod pretends. The people of Tyre and Sidon fear his wrath (12:20) and worship him (12:22), but Herod is truly impotent. Not only does he fail to kill Peter; he fails to save himself from the angel of Jesus (12:23). In light of how the story ends, one can only conclude that Herod's power to kill the Apostle James was sovereignly permitted by King Jesus. The story never tells us why Jesus saved one apostle but not the other. No human can penetrate the mystery of God's Providence. All we know is what's been revealed: Jesus reigns over all, and Jesus is good.

Furthermore, His goodness in no way hinges upon ours. Peter displays faith by sleeping on death row but fails to understand his angelic experience until he departs (12:9, 11). The church displays faith by praying all night, but they fail to believe their prayers will be answered (12:12-16). In both cases, Luke highlights the "little faith" of His people. Jesus delivers anyway. Our faith may falter; His goodness does not.

When Peter explains himself to the unbelieving believers in Mary's house, he passes a message along to "James and to the brothers" before departing (12:17). This subtle movement conveys a transition in the Jerusalem church. Two apostles are gone—the Apostle James (one of the original Twelve) and now Peter (to an undisclosed location). A new James has arisen—the Lord's brother. He appears to become the new leader in Jerusalem (15:13ff; 21:18), alongside "elders" (11:30; 15:4; 21:18), who have at least replaced some of the apostolic leadership. In His sovereignty, Jesus rescues Peter from death, but He doesn't rescue the church in Jerusalem from transition. The church will get along with new leaders. It always does because Jesus remains the true Senior Pastor of His global church, no matter what transitions occur. When it comes to church leadership, this emphasizes the importance of equipping other leaders. The only things that never change are God and change. Wise leaders account for this. Jerusalem has wise leaders.

The story ends with the end of King Herod. The all-powerful tyrant dies after receiving worship from an adoring crowd, which also relied on Herod for food. Their sin of "King worship" has been repeated throughout history; John warns severely against it in Revelation. We must never place our hope in politicians. Our hope is not in a dead Herod but a living Jesus.

The closing verse of this section emphasizes the enduring and life-giving power of God's Word, over and against the words of Herod, who had just completed his eloquent "oration" (12:21). Herod stopped speaking and "breathed his last" (12:23); Scripture is "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16), and it "remains forever" (1 Pet. 1:25). Scripture points to Jesus—the true King in this story—and the only One worth hoping in

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. 2 He killed James the brother of John with the sword, 3 and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 4 And when he had seized him, he put him in prison,

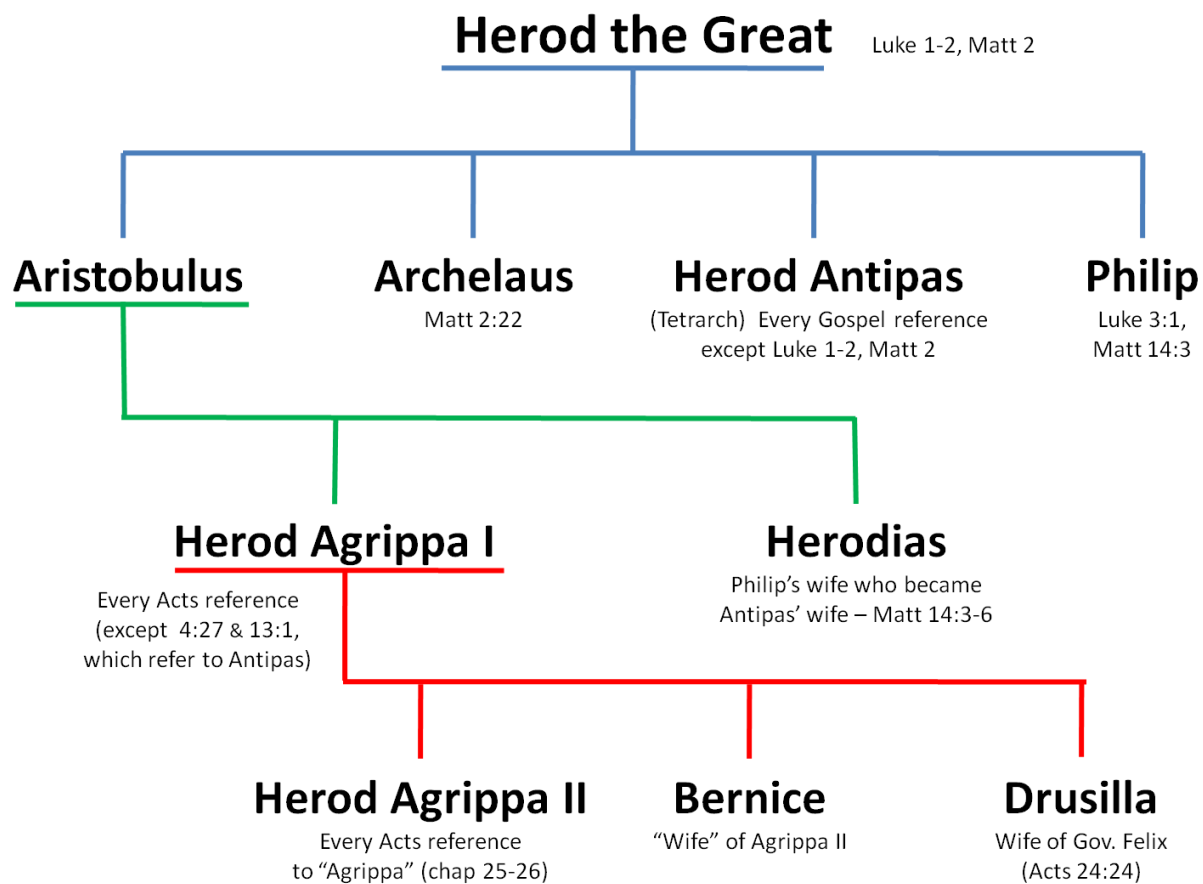
delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.

—“About that time”:

- The wording is vague, but it appears to refer to the journey of Saul and Barnabas to Judea with financial support for the churches during the famine (11:30).
- While the church in Antioch is flourishing with growth, the church in Jerusalem faces both an impending economic crisis and a present political one. Throughout Acts, the movements of Satan and God come in waves. As the church remains faithful under fire, God sends fresh waves of the Spirit. This chapter will end in gospel multiplication.
- Churches face tests. Satanic attacks do not prove that a church is in the wrong. They might prove the opposite.
- American churches suffer from “triumphalism”: the idea that we must always be cheery and have good news to report. We thank God for those seasons, but “triumphalism” causes the church to “spin” hard news in a way that fools nobody. Worse, by sticking our head in the sand and pretending all is well, we will never respond like the church does here—with urgent corporate prayer (12:5, 12)—and we’ll miss out on the Spirit’s next wave. Every Satanic attack has a silver lining. God providentially allows them because they sharpen and prepare us. Jesus experienced this in His wilderness, which He exited “in the power of the Spirit” (Lk. 4:14). God prepared Him through pain for a new and fruitful ministry. He does the same with His children and our churches.

—“Herod the king”:

- This was Herod Agrippa I, grandson of the murderous tyrant who slew toddlers in Bethlehem in an effort to kill Jesus. Herod’s dynasty was soaked in blood.
- Here is a chart of “the Herods”:



—“laid violent hands”:

- The hand of the Lord Jesus blessed the church plant in Antioch (11:21); now the “hands” of a rival king threaten the throne of Jesus—ostensibly. The story will not end as it began. King Jesus will make His enemy suffer for the suffering he inflicted on the church.
- This language sets up the Battle Royale between the hand and throne of Jesus and those of Herod. Luke especially emphasizes this rivalry at the end of the passage by multiplying royal terms to describe the monarch Jesus dethrones.
- Schreiner: “The whole account is framed by references to Herod’s kingship (12:1, 20-21). In the closing verses, it speaks of Herod’s servant, his country, his royal robes, and his throne. Readers know only one throne will rule.”

—“some who belonged to the church”:

- Here we read about James and Peter, but the language suggests there were more who suffered.
- In the back of our minds, we remember Luke’s prior statements about “persecution” resulting in church growth (8:1; 11:19). Nothing can stop the Lord Jesus. He sovereignly allows the church to suffer, but the devil never wins anything but apparent, temporary victories.

—“killed James the brother of John... arrested Peter also”:

- Jesus allows James to die a martyr’s death, but he rescues Peter. The text never explains why God does not intervene for one but does for the other. Providence operates this way. Providence refers to God’s sovereign oversight of all things, which He directs for our ultimate good and His ultimate glory. Even martyrdom can fit within those categories.
- As human beings, we question providence. We ask why God would allow one to suffer and the other not to. He rarely if ever answers our “why” questions. Faith does not demand answers; rather, it leans on God’s goodness.
- Peter is rescued here, but he will one day suffer martyrdom (John 21:18).
- The martyrdom of James and rescue of Peter reminds me of Hebrews 11:32-40: *“And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”*
- Sometimes God gives grace for rescue; sometimes He gives grace to endure. Which is better? Rescue feels more comfortable. But is it better? How do we define “better”? They both bring glory to God. One displays God’s power while the other showcases His worth. He is worth suffering for. And our suffering comes with a reward that far outweighs any pain that preceded it (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17). I would not doubt that after the final assessment, those who endured terrible suffering will feel glad—not in spite of it, but on account of it. It increases their eternal reward, and therefore also, their eternal joy. Is it hard to imagine “increased” joy in paradise? Think of it like this: in the age to come, everyone’s cup will overflow. But our faithfulness in this life determines the size of our cup. O Lord, grant us faithfulness! Especially under trial!

—“when he saw that it pleased the Jews”: Herod was a people-pleaser. It ran in the family. Herod’s uncle (Herod Antipas) murdered John the Baptist to please a young stripper (who also happened to be his stepdaughter, which is both weird and wicked).

—“during the days of Unleavened Bread”:

- This was Passover, which contributes to the ominous tone of the passage thus far, for Jesus too had been crucified over Passover.
- At the same time, the mention of Passover conveys light and hope in the midst of darkness. Passover celebrated Israel’s deliverance from an Egyptian tyrant and the deliverance of Jesus from Satan and the grave on our behalf.

- Dr. Schreiner observes strong parallels between the story of Peter and Israel's Passover. I modified his chart a bit to produce this:
 - Famine in Rome (11:28)→Famine in Egypt
 - Herod's opposition (12:1-5)→Pharaoh's opposition
 - Angel of the Lord leads Peter (12:6-10)→Angel of the Lord leads Israel
 - Peter's deliverance to a house of prayer (12:11-19)→Israel's deliverance to a mountain for worship
 - Judgment on Herod (12:20-23)→Judgment on Pharaoh
 - The word of God multiplies (12:24)→Israel multiplies
 - Saul and Barnabas sent out (12:25)→Caleb, Joshua, and others sent out
- Considering both the parallels and the timing (Passover), I agree with Schreiner that Luke interprets Peter's experience as another "exodus." The same Lord who set His people free from Pharaoh and set Jesus free from Satan and death continues to set His people free. No tyrant can stand against us. Jesus is the Lord of freedom.

—"four squads of soldiers": soon, Peter finds himself "sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains," with "sentries before the door" (12:6). Luke is at pains to depict the high security that Herod has subjected Peter to. The tyrant treats Peter like El Chapo. He is Jerusalem's Most Wanted. Like El Chapo, he will escape, but not by bribes or insiders. Peter escapes because Jesus reigns more supremely than Herod. Herod thinks he holds the power of life and death, but Jesus gives life to Peter and death to Herod. No amount of extra precaution can safeguard Herod's illusory stranglehold on the church. Herod can't even control his next breath.

5 So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

—Herod wielded the power of the sword (12:3); Jesus wields the power of angels (12:7-10, 23); the church wields the power of prayer (12:5, 12).

—Luke is our New Testament theologian of prayer. He consistently links prayer with power. Jesus is the sovereign King, but we cannot take His throne for granted. Prayerlessness does that.

—If we truly believe Jesus is the sovereign King over all, we will pray all the time. Faith in sovereignty leads us not to passivity but to passionate prayer. If sovereignty leads us to pray less, we have mistaken fatalism for sovereignty. Fatalism says, "God controls the future, so nothing I do matters." Sovereignty says, "God controls the future, so I will go to Him in prayer!"

—"So... but": the "so" references Herod's intense effort to prevent Peter's escape (after all, Peter had a reputation for jailbreaks!). The "but" references the church's intense effort at prayer. Prayer is effort. Like Herod re-arranging the schedule of "four squads of soldiers" (12:4), the church arranges an all-night prayer meeting at the house of Mark's mother (12:5, 12). The efforts of the church pay off; the efforts of Herod do not. The church brings life; Herod brings death—ultimately killing the soldiers "responsible" for Peter's escape.

—"earnest prayer for him":

- "constant prayer" (NKJV); "praying fervently" (CSB); "prayer... being made to God intensely" (NASB); "unceasing prayer" (DBY).
- The word "earnest" (Gk. *ektenos*) correlates with Jesus' prayer in Luke 22:44, where we read, "And being in agony he prayed more earnestly (Gk. *ektenesteron*), and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground."
- In the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples failed to pray like Jesus. Now they do. With Peter on his way to the executioner, the church prays earnestly.
- Churches must pray, they must pray together, and they must pray earnestly. Constantly. Corporately. Intensely.
- How do we maintain this level of fervor? One way is to pray *responsively*. While it's holy and biblical for us to maintain allotted times for prayer (i.e., Convergence's Wednesday and Monday prayer meetings), it is also right to pray in response to crises. The church prays fervently because Peter is about to die. When the devil attacks, church leaders and hospitable homeowners (like Mark's mother) must call on the people to pray.

6 Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.

—I commented on this verse above (see v. 4).

—“two soldiers... two chains”: it seems like Peter was chained to the actual soldiers. This practice has been historically called, “custodia militaris,” which of course means “military custody.”

—This scene makes me laugh. I’m picturing Peter sound asleep between two men (already uncomfortable) with chains attaching them all (more uncomfortable) and with sentries on the lookout. Despite the anti-supernatural bias of critical scholars, there’s no way Peter escaped by means of a human messenger (“angel” can be translated “messenger”). Luke’s point is that no human could have rescued Peter from such a predicament.

—“Peter was sleeping”: later, Paul and Silas stay up late singing hymns in prison (Acts 16); here, Peter sleeps in prison. Sometimes staying awake is an act of faith; sometimes *sleep* is. Peter’s sound sleep on death row portrays the faith of a man not worried about losing his head.

7 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." 9 And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. 11 When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

—The timing of Passover, the earnest prayers, and the persecution of a tyrant have each paralleled the Passion of Jesus. Here, the angel strikes Peter’s side like the soldier who pierced our Lord on the Cross. Why does Luke convey these parallels? Because the spiritual body of Christ suffers in the same way as the physical body of Christ. The triumphalistic ra-ra Christianity that we so often find in American churches is not what we find in the Bible. We worship a crucified man who calls us to follow Him with crosses—not applause.

—Notice how passive Peter is: he is sleeping; he is abruptly wakened; he is commanded to get up; he feels chains fall off; he is told to dress and put on sandals (he’s going somewhere!); he is not even aware of whether this is a dream or reality; guards are made ignorant and gates are made to open. What is Luke trying to convey? Peter’s passivity magnifies the Lord’s activity. Later, Peter will describe the angelic rescue as the Lord’s doing (12:17). Jesus rescues us even while we sleep. We don’t have to do it all. We can play a role—the church prays—but even then, we are more passive recipients than active go-getters. We cry out like hungry babies, and God takes care of us. He is the go-getter. We just cry out (like the church) and sleep (like Peter).

—“did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing it in a vision”:

- Scripture rarely distinguishes dreams from visions. Peter thought he was having a really wonderful dream. His ignorance highlights God’s omniscience and loving care.
- Sometimes we struggle to classify supernatural experiences. Paul says something similar in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4: *“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.”*

—“When Peter came to himself, he said, ‘Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.’”

- Peter “came to himself”. Supernatural experiences can “take us out,” in a sense. We might feel like we are wandering in a Twilight Zone.
- Peter began with uncertainty about the nature of his experience, but gradually that dawned on him. Supernatural experiences require space and time to interpret.

—“many had gathered together and were praying”: Luke ties the angelic appearance to prayer, as in 10:2-4 and Luke 1:10-11. If we want God to hear God’s voice—through angels or other means—we must be people of prayer. God talks to those who talk to Him. He wants a friendship.

12 When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

—Had Peter known about this secret prayer meeting?

- That is doubtful. How would they have alerted him of it? I doubt Roman prisons allowed phone calls.
- More likely, Peter knew that people were always praying at Mary's house. The New Testament church is a praying church. They "devoted themselves to prayer" (2:42)—not just at official hours of prayer but at odd hours; not just in the temple courts but in peoples' homes. They prayed regularly but also as a response to crisis.
- Where would you first visit after a miraculous jailbreak? I think I'd join Andy Dufresne on the beach in Mexico (old movie reference!). Peter went to the house of prayer. O Lord, make us a people of prayer! May our first response always be turning to You!

—"many were gathered together and were praying": I've participated in weekly prayer meetings for years. It's easier to recruit people to almost anything else. We are people of activity. We are pragmatists. We'd rather be assigned a role in a ministry than sit in a room, telling God what He already knows. The first-century church was different. "many... gathered" for prayer—not just the faithful few retired folks. Isaiah prophesied that the church would be a "house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:7). Not a house of teaching or a house of fellowship or a house of evangelism. Each of those is crucial, but they flow out of prayer. Why? Because friendship with God empowers all ministry. "I will give them joy in my house of prayer," the LORD says through Isaiah. When your deepest joy is in friendship with God, prayer is about more than answers. It's about being with Him. Even if He doesn't answer us (in the way we wish), we at least get closer to Him. If He's your #1 desire, that makes every prayer meeting a win.

—Mary was Mark's mother. We don't know much about her outside of this. She did own a large home, considering it had a "gate." If God has blessed you with a nice home, it's not just so you have room to roam. It's so you have room to host God's people. God blesses us to be a blessing.

—Schreiner: "Herod was in his palace, Peter in prison, but the church was in their home praying to God for his presence (12:12). While Herod wields the ritual of the sword (12:3) and economic power (12:20), the Christians respond with the ritual of prayer."

—Stott: "Here then were two communities, the world and the church, lined up against one another, each wielding an appropriate weapon. On the one side was the authority of Herod, the power of the sword and the security of the prison. On the other side, the church turned to prayer, which is the only power which the powerless possess."

13 And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. 15 They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" 16 But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.

—Earlier, we observed the parallels between Christ's Passion and Peter's prison. Here, the parallels continue beyond Christ's Passion to His resurrection. Peter experiences a sort of "death and resurrection." Here's another list of comparisons from Schreiner. This time he compares the literal resurrection of Jesus and the symbolic resurrection of Peter:

- Both Peter and Jesus are first witnessed by women, whose reports are not believed (12:13-15; Luke 24:11).
- Both Peter and Jesus appear to a gathered community (12:16; Luke 24:36).
- Both go to "another place" (12:17; Luke 24:51).

—Why would Luke want to show this parallel? Just like Jesus, the church suffers. But just like Jesus, the church overcomes. We should not read this story as isolated. It is one of many "rescues" in the Book of Acts (it's Peter's second angelic jailbreak!). God characteristically delivers His people.

—This story makes me laugh. Rhoda forgets about Peter, who must feel anxious to escape public view. The church is praying for Peter's rescue but clearly doesn't believe their own prayers. Finally, they dismiss Rhoda's claim with the suggestion that it's just "his angel" at the door! Even if they were right—wouldn't that make you want to see the angel?! The irony of this humorous episode communicates that King Jesus sovereignly gives grace to overcome our deficits. The church was faithful to pray but lacked faith that God would answer. Their "little faith" did not hinder Jesus from acting mightily on their behalf. What a gracious God we serve!

—"It is his angel":

- The early church apparently believed in what we would today call guardian angels. "his" angel suggests that Peter—and perhaps all of us—have our own attendant angel. That they expected

the angel to sound/look like Peter suggests that “our” angels might manifest themselves in ways that resemble us.

- Stott (quoting Bruce): “The angel is here conceived as a man’s spiritual counterpart, capable of assuming his appearance and being mistaken for him.”
- Further support for “guardian angels” can be found in Ps. 34:7 and Matt. 18:10.
- It seems to me that there is more at play to this mention of an angel. In this passage alone, an angel sets Peter free (Acts 12:7-11), Peter is thought to be an angel (12:15), and an angel strikes Herod down (12:23). Three unique instances in a single chapter reference these celestial beings. What is Luke communicating through this repetition?
- The first and last angels in this passage serve God and His people in different ways—one by rescuing Peter from death and the other by causing Herod’s death. The Lord Jesus could have easily performed these acts on His own, but He sent His angel. First, this creates a link with the exodus story, as we observed earlier, where the angel of the Lord delivers Israel and judges Pharaoh. God continues to deliver His church by the aid of angels, for He is a God of rescue. Second, the Lord’s employment of an angel in divine tasks reveals just how high above the situation He is. He can send bright celestial beings—far more glorious and powerful than Herod—to do His dirty work. Herod thinks he’s a god. He can’t even stand before the true God’s messengers. Finally, the second reference to angels conveys that the early church believed in angelic activity and was not surprised to encounter it. “Oh, it’s just his angel,” is the response of someone who has encountered this phenomenon before. Paired with the other two references—not to mention the many references in Acts—Luke communicates that God’s people should not be surprised to encounter angelic activity. Angels are everywhere. They serve God and God’s people. Each of us probably has an angel assigned to us.
- I’m not suggesting that we should obsess over angels—a real danger (Col. 2:18). But the solution to “obsessing” over angels is not “ignoring” their existence. The early church rested somewhere in the middle. They believed in angels. When they encountered angels, they did not dismiss the phenomenon. They welcomed it. It seems they even expected such encounters to occur at least occasionally to church members.
- I’d like to elaborate on the dramatic irony of this scene. The reader knows that a “guardian angel” just rescued Peter, but the praying church does not. By dismissing Peter’s presence—and God’s answer—as a guardian angel, they have no idea how close they came to reality. Indeed, a guardian angel *had* rescued Peter from human guards, but this was *not* Peter’s guardian angel. It was Peter himself! The church’s ignorance highlights the smallness of their faith and the power of prayer.

—“amazed”: their emotive response highlights the disbelief that preceded it.

17 But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, “Tell these things to James and to the brothers.” Then he departed and went to another place.

—“motioning to them with his hand to be silent”: their amazement erupted in a chorus of voices such that Peter could not even speak without gesturing. He likely feared the ramifications of a loud Christian meeting in a city that killed Christians.

—“the Lord had brought him out”: by means of an angel, the Lord Jesus rescued Peter.

—“tell these things to James and to the brothers”:

- The Apostle James had been murdered by Herod, which means this is a different James. Everyone agrees—it must be our Lord’s earthly brother and author of the epistle of James. James assumes the most prominent role in the Jerusalem church after Peter departs, which Luke reflects by giving James the conclusive speech in the Jerusalem council (15:13). See also 21:18 for James’s prominent role in Jerusalem.
- Peter’s departure represents a leadership transition in this chapter. First, one of the twelve apostles is martyred, and they don’t replace him. When Judas was killed, they replaced him because we needed twelve apostles to launch “new Israel”—consisting of twelve apostles just as old Israel had twelve tribes. Now that James is gone, however, the church does not replace him because that redemptive-historical moment has passed. Jerusalem has already begun moving on from the apostolic circle, with Peter running for his life and James having died. Saul and Barnabas are

bringing an offering from Antioch "to the elders" of Jerusalem (11:30). As the apostles die off and fan out to the ends of the earth, new leaders rise up, and the work of Jesus continues.

- Jesus reigns supreme over leadership transitions. Jesus sits on His throne by the power of an "indestructible life" (Heb. 7:16). As long as Jesus lives, the church has a leader. Earthly leaders come and go, but Jesus remains. He is the church's true Senior Pastor.
- As Peter departs, his concern is with the flock he leaves behind. He wants the church to know why the planned execution did not come to pass; he especially wants them to know why he can't remain with them.

18 Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. 19 And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

—"no little disturbance": the soldiers knew what this meant. If you watch a prisoner who goes free, you pay for it with your life. That's exactly what happens here. Hopefully, Peter had the chance to witness to them before they suffered death.

—Herod continues to think he holds the power of life and death, now killing his sentries. The tyrant comes across as blind, ironically blaming the watchmen for his own failure to see. Luke tells the story in such a way as to highlight Herod's spiritual ignorance. Soon it will cost him his life. In the end, it always does.

20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food.

—We're not told why Herod was angry, but he comes across as an irrational despot. Tyre and Sidon fell under his jurisdiction. They should not have had to persuade a public official to convince the king to let them eat. Good kings care for the needy (Pr. 31:4-9).

—The theme of famine, introduced by Agabus's prophecy (11:27-28), previewed the present scene. The church relied on the Lord's word and each other's generosity for provision; the world relied on a king who fancied himself a god.

—God's people must beware, lest we fall into the trap of looking to a politician for provision or protection. While we expect the government to provide an environment in which its citizens flourish, we must resist placing our hope in the government. Our hope is in Jesus, the King of every President. Jesus reigns from heaven, and He reigns through His church. He intends that we care for one another by the wisdom and power of the Spirit. Let us place our hope in Jesus, allowing Him to meet our needs—and using us to meet others' needs—within the church.

—The folly of their misplaced hope is immediately apparent in that they "asked for peace" from Herod, of all people. The one who laid "violent hands" on the church, who murdered the apostle James, who imprisoned Peter, who killed prison guards on account of his own blindness, and who had an international reputation for cruelty—they placed their hope in this man for peace!

21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. 22 And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" 23 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.

—"royal robes... throne":

- Luke emphasizes the elevated kingly status of Herod by painting him in royal terms.
- Herod's supposed royal status contrasts sharply with our ascended Lord's.
- Jewish historian, Josephus, reports this same event: *"On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theater 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 out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good,) that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature." Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery.. [Immediately afterward,] A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, "I,*

whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life..." When he said this, his pain was become violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace, and the rumour went abroad everywhere, that he would certainly die in a little time."

—"the voice of a god, and not a man!":

- In the first century, people thought that kings were gods. They commonly issued this compliment to public figures.
- Unlike Herod, the church consistently resists worship (Acts 3:12; 14:11-15), pointing people instead to Jesus.

—"Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down...":

- See comments above on the role of angels in this story.
- History did not observe an angel but rather a dramatic earthly demise. What we read in 12:23 is Luke's inspired interpretation of real historical events. When events "make history," books later report them in earthly terms. However, the Bible teaches history from heaven's perspective. Herod did not just die; an angel of the Lord struck him down.
- Scripture does not tell us why He allows some tyrants to remain elevated for a long time. What we do know from Acts 12, however, is that tyranny does not threaten His sovereignty. Just as Jesus sovereignly allows James to suffer martyrdom yet rescues Peter, Jesus sovereignly allows Caesar to remain yet strikes Herod down. One day, Jesus will return to strike down every wicked tyrant. In the meantime, He governs the governments as He sees fit, fulfilling sovereign purposes we know nothing about.
- Schreiner: "Peter was struck to life by the angel (12:6); Herod is struck to death by the angel."
- Schreiner (quoting Jennings): "God's judgment on Herod is the ironic reversal of Herod's judgment on James."
- The pregnant Mary sings of her baby, who is also her Lord: "He has toppled the mighty from their thrones" (Luke 1:52). Her prophetic song came true in Herod.

—"eaten by worms and breathed his last":

- Luke seems to be saying more than, "Herod died, and worms ate his body in the grave." In this case, the worms seem to have actually caused Herod's death.
- The angel caused Herod's death; worms caused Herod's death. Both are true. God employs earthly means of achieving heavenly ends.
- Schnabel cites Thomas Africa, author of *Classical Antiquity*, who wrote about "Worms and the Death of Kings: A Cautionary Note on Disease and History." The citation supports Schnabel's assertion that "being eaten by worms... [is] a Greek expression that is not a medical term, although the term appears to describe a form of phthiriasis as a terminal illness."
- Luke abbreviates the account to punctuate it, but worms do not instantly kill people.
- The mention of worms heightens the unceremonious conclusion of Herod's life. He did not die like a hero, valiantly storming the enemy's castle. He died as God's enemy.
- The mention of worms also highlights his earthly status. Worms belong to the dirt, and they don't feed on gods. Herod accepted the praise of God and returned to the dirt from which he came. This powerful "god" was conquered not by sword or spear but by little grubby worms.

24 But the word of God increased and multiplied.

—"But": in contrast with the final breath of Herod, the God-breathed Scripture still speaks; in contrast with "oration" of Herod, which led to death, the oration of God leads to life; in contrast with Herod's empty throne, the word of God reigned supreme; in contrast with the supposed words of a god, the true word of God is proved by its endurance; in contrast with the corpse of Herod, the word of God is a living and active agent on the earth; in contrast with the end of Herod's speech, the word of God not only remained but "increased and multiplied."

—Acts 12 reminds us that we still live in a world of enemies. The church suffers real attacks and temporary defeats. Tyrants continue persecuting saints, and they will until the end of the age. However, they won't last forever, and the word of God does.

—The church must cling to the word of God like a lifeline. When government pressure increases, churches fall into compromise. They kowtow to moral and economic pressure. What will the church in America do if a

tax-exempt status hinges on whether we bend on moral issues like LGBTQ and abortion? Or spiritual issues, like the exclusivity of Christ for salvation? If we compromise the word of God to “survive”—we die. —The word of God endures beyond every earthly government. The church endures by clinging to—by trumpeting—God’s word, even if it risks our lives (James) or our freedoms (Peter). What are these temporary losses compared to the eternal darkness suffered by those like Herod?

—Stott: “The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God triumphing. Such is the power of God to overthrow hostile human plans and to establish his own in their place. Tyrants may be permitted for a time to boast and bluster, oppressing the church and hindering the spread of the gospel, but they will not last. In the end, their empire will be broken and their pride cast down.”