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**A0901 – January 4, 2009 – Acts 12 – Herod Agrippa Persecutes  
The Church**

We've seen so far in Acts 6 how the widow's dispute was engineered by the Holy Spirit to eventually culminate in the rise of Stephen as the first deacon, a man who would straighten out the doctrine of the Church and lay the groundwork for the great commission to all nations. We saw Saul who wrote the rulebook for persecuting the Church go out and devour the Church in Acts 8 and how the Church was forced out into Judea and Samaria. And finally, chapters 9 and 10 we have the breakthrough to the Gentile world at Cornelius' house. This opens the door for world missions.

And in Acts 11-15 we are now getting our first taste of world missions. And we're drawing out the points of doctrine along the way. In the last part of chapter 11, verses 19-26 there is the formation of a strong base for missions which is always based on the teaching of the word of God. We saw the strategy of the Holy Spirit, by starting in the urban areas where you have the greatest number of people, and over time the gospel witness will trickle down to the remote areas, it's a strategy of influence and efficiency. And it was a strategy met with success. You now had large numbers of Gentiles coming into the Church and Saul, who has the gift of teaching, who has been out exercising his gift for fifteen years, is now brought in to disciple the new converts. They did not evangelize the world by sending some new believer who doesn't know one ounce of Christian doctrine. Paul taught about 12 hours a week, minimum. And this went on week after week after week after week and shows you why the early church changed the world. Most local churches if somebody has to sit through a Bible lesson more than 25 minutes that's straining the brain and that's simply because we live in a generation that is largely dumbed down, a generation that has been trained not to concentrate more than about 30 seconds, a generation that has been

de-educated to the point where critical analysis of any subject is virtually impossible, and therefore we have very poor understanding of many of the great doctrines of Scripture. But not the early church, they emphasized content, knowledge, intellectual strength against the opposition. This was not seen as unspiritual, this was seen as a means to spirituality, doctrinal content was seen as the means to maturity in the Christian life. And then at the close of chapter 11 we saw very briefly the doctrine of giving, once the disciples were trained and knew what God had done for them by means of the Jewish people then they could respond to His grace in the financial realm to relieve the famine in Judea. The point we learn out of that which is supported by Rom 15:26ff is that the church should be giving to Jewish believers first. The principle is that our salvation is from the Jews, Jesus Christ is a Jew, therefore we share in their spiritual things and are indebted to minister to them in material things, a simple principle, almost always neglected by the Church at large.

Now in chapter 12 today, the entire chapter 12 has to be taken as a unit. We are studying a State collision with the Jerusalem Church, the Jewish remnant or wing of the Church. There are really two stories, one large story and one minor story inside the major story. The major story in Acts 12 is the unprovoked aggression of the State against the Jewish wing of the Church. The reason I'm making this distinction between the Jewish wing of the Church and the Gentile wing is not to undo the unity of the Church. Jew and Gentile are one in the body of Christ, but there are racial and sexual distinctions at a secondary and tertiary level. But just because a Jew believes in Jesus does not erase his Jewishness anymore than when a man believes in Jesus Christ it does not erase his maleness. And so since Jewish believers are still racial Jews they fall under certain clauses of the Abrahamic Covenant which do not pertain to us as Gentile believers, case in point, Gen 12:3, those who curse you will be cursed. And as such, the State, represented by Caesar and his King Agrippa in Palestine, stuck their nose into this clause. And when they attacked violently the Jews who had truly come into the bond of the covenant by faith as Abraham, Jews who had completed their Jewishness by believing in the Messiahship of Jesus, the State came under divine cursing. And Acts 12 is a passage that shows you what happens when a State interferes. God is jealous to protect the apple of His eye and no matter how powerful the government may be, that government brings judgment upon itself for when it tampers with the Jewish remnant.

Let's read at Acts 12:1 for some of the background. **<sup>1</sup>Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. <sup>2</sup>And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. <sup>3</sup>When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup>When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. <sup>5</sup>So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.**

Now, the Herod mentioned here is not Herod the Great, this is Herod the Great's grandson. Herod the Great had ruled Judea during the time of Christ. He was called Great because he was a great builder and if you go to the land of Israel today you can still see all the great engineering projects of Herod. Caesarea has a great theatre that seats 7,000 a hippodrome that seats 22,000, a promontory palace and a seaport, all engineered by Herod, the great fortress of Masada on the Dead Sea was basically engineered in its final form by Herod as a getaway because he created all kinds of enemies, he was not a well-liked individual, he was so hated he hired professional mourners before he died just so people would go to the funeral. He also built a fortress at Herodium, south of Bethlehem, this is actually where he was buried, I was there in 2006 and the mausoleum has been uncovered by archaeologists since then. But his greatest building project, what he wanted to be remembered for, was the Temple Mount. He greatly enlarged and embellished the smaller second Temple of Zerubbabel and it was the Temple that all the disciples marveled about in Matt 24. That great architectural feat was destroyed by the Roman armies in AD70. So Herod the Great was a great builder. As to birth He was an Idumean, which means he was a descendant of Esau, Paul said, "Jacob I loved Esau I hated," well Herod was from the hated side, the non-elect side, a Gentile but he married a woman named Mariamne I who was a Hasmonean princess, she was a Jew and so this Gentile-Jew mix had a son named Aristobulus and he had a son mentioned here in Acts 12, Herod Agrippa. So Herod Agrippa is the grandson of Herod the Great. Now, Herod the Great persecuted the Jews, he was a horrible man, he was the one who in Matt 2 sent out to kill all the baby boys around Bethlehem under two years of age. He turned a little senile in his older age, always thinking someone was

trying to knock him off and take his throne and the baby boy incident is one of his typical ploys to do away with any attempts to take his throne. And thus he died a horrible death, you can read it in Josephus, he had about a hundred diseases all overtake him about the same time, it was a gruesome way to go and today we see his grandson Agrippa who also persecutes the Jews and the consequence, another gruesome death. You think this family might learn a lesson. You think we might learn a lesson. Both persecuted the Jews and both died horrible deaths. Principle of Gen 12:3, those who curse you I will curse. And curse them God did.

Now, Acts 12:1 begins Herod's great curse. By the end of this chapter Herod himself gets cursed. You notice in the Book of Acts things have escalated rather slowly. The first persecution is in Acts 4 and 5 and it was mere political threats, "Don't use the name of Jesus." But during that period the Church enjoyed great popularity among the common people so therefore the pragmatic politicians did not think it wise, politically, to viciously attack them. There was just too much sympathy publicly for Christians. By Acts chapters 6 and 7 the Church falls out of popularity because of Stephen and you have the first martyr in the Church, the first murder was of a deacon. Today in Acts 12 you have the second martyr, the second murder was an apostle. So Satan begins to turn up the persecution against the Church and the contest of the ages start, the battle is on and it intensifies. Can the force of almighty Rome through Herod the king wipe out the Church by destroying the apostolic leadership? That's the question here.

Verse 2, **And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.** What this means **with a sword** is he was beheaded. This could be done two ways under the Roman Empire. If you were rich you could pay the executioner to make a clean cut, just sever the head from the body with a single swipe. If you were poor it took a little time, it was one chop at a time till the head fell off. Turn to Matt 20:20-23 because this beheading was prophesied by the Lord Jesus Christ. So what we have in v 2 is fulfillment of prophecy, one of the roles of Christ in addition to priest and king is that He's also a prophet and here's one of his prophecies. Matt 20:20 is James' mom trying to get her hand into the plan of God, trying to instruct God on how He should run the universe, and by doing this secure certain favors for her two boys. <sup>(20</sup>Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. <sup>21</sup>And He said to her, "What do

you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left." <sup>22</sup>But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to Him, "We are able." <sup>23</sup>He said to them, "My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.") So what Jesus is doing there, He's predicting the violent deaths of James and his brother John. James will be the first apostle to die, and John the last apostle to die. The baptism wherewith Jesus was baptized was the violence of the cross and Christ said you men too will suffer physical violence. So in Acts 12:2 when he killed James with the sword he unconsciously is fulfilling prophecy, prophecy that James would share in the baptism of Christ. But the intriguing thing about this passage is the background it gives us on the character of Herod Agrippa.

One of the neat things, sort of the fringe benefits, of studying the Bible is that it gives you, after a while, a great deal of common sense, and one of the things that the Bible is always insistent upon is that the most satanic of people are the pragmatists. The most satanic of people are not the people that deliberately plot and scheme evil; the people that do the most destruction are the people who are swayed by the masses, those that always follow the tyranny of the 51%. If 51% of the people say it's right, by definition it must be right. Pilate was one of those, the pragmatist who thought it was politically expedient to knock Jesus off. And so here in verse 3 we find Herod Agrippa having the same character. **When he saw it pleased the Jews**, there's your majority, **he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread.** Now if you just read that passage you think, "My, my, my, Herod Agrippa is a cruel old man, he's like his grandfather Herod the Great." Nothing could be further from the truth. Herod Agrippa was a nice individual; on the surface he was a towering community giant, always concerned with the good of the community. For example, once a year he would read Deuteronomy 17, that great passage in the Jewish Torah giving instruction to the king, and in the Mishnah which is a compilation of the oral tradition used in Jewish circles around the time of Christ, and it describes one day when this king went into the assembly, and here's what it says:

“The minister of the synagogue used to take a scroll of the Law and give it to the chief of the synagogue, and the chief of the synagogue gave it to the prefect, and the prefect gave it to the high priest, and the high priest gave it to the king, and the king would usually receive it standing and then sit down to read it. But King Agrippa received it standing and then read it standing and for this the sages praised him.” Now I told you one of the things about Herod’s family was it had Idumaeian blood in it, it wasn’t fully a Jewish family. So when he reached Deuteronomy 17:15, he wept as he read the words “thou mayest not put a foreigner over thee, who is not thy brother” (v. 15), for he remembered his Idumean ancestry. But the people, thinking rather of his Hasmonean descent, cried out repeatedly, “Be not dismayed; you are indeed our brother!” In other words, here he is crying, obviously a sign that he was a very, very politically sensitive man, sensitive to the Jewish religion. Now Josephus also describes the character of this Herod and we want to read a little bit of Josephus so that we understand that this man wasn’t some man that walked around in a red suit with two horns and a pitchfork. He was a very refined individual, very suave. “Now, this king was by nature very beneficent, and liberal in his gifts, and very ambitious to oblige people with such large donations; and he made himself very illustrious by the many chargeable presents he made them. He took delight in giving, and rejoiced in living with good reputation. He was not at all like that Herod who reigned before him; for that Herod was ill-natured, and severe in his punishments, and had no mercy on them that he hated...But Agrippa’s temper was mild, and equally liberal to all men. He was humane to foreigners, and made them sensible of his liberality. He was in like manner rather of a gentle and compassionate temper. Accordingly, he loved to live continually at Jerusalem, and was exactly careful in the observance of the laws of his country.”<sup>i</sup> Now, this is not at all like Herod the Great. This man was smooth. And this is I suggest exactly how the anti-Christ will be, he will not be one of these in your face nasty people, he will be a man who is well-loved, nice, does what the majority of people want. And so that’s what you want to look for in an Antichrist, a pragmatist.

Notice at the end of verse 3, he **arrests Peter also, Now those were the days of Unleavened Bread**. Now why do you suppose he took Peter during the **days of Unleavened Bread**? If you’re a politician you want to get exposed, you want to get on prime time TV on the big channels, you want to get interviewed by the journalists. What ancient parallel does the feast of

Unleavened Bread serve? Every Jewish family was there in the city of Jerusalem. He had a million Jews to play with politically. What better time to gain some political popularity? And not only that, but of all the apostles he takes who does he pick but **Peter**. Can anyone think of what **Peter** did very recently that might provide him with a little ammunition for a Jewish population. Of course, Peter was the one that went in to the Gentile Cornelius' house, went right in and violated the Jewish dietary standard; want to get some more votes from the majority? Publish the dirt on Peter, "This guy went into Gentiles and ate. Let's kill him, that would be very good for my political image," said King Agrippa. So that's the plan.

So, Acts 12:4, **When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him,** Here's the situation: inside the prison there was the gates of the cell and inside the cell was Peter. A squad of soldiers means that Peter was chained to one man on his left, he was chained to one man on his right, and he had two Roman soldiers sitting outside the door. So needless to say, we could say in modern parlance, this was maximum security. Probably it was in the Antonia fortress on the NW corner of the Temple Mount, this was the Roman command center in Jerusalem, and therefore if there was anything unlikely it would be an escape from this place, of all places. Surely the Church was now going to suffer the death of Peter like the death of James.

So we shift now into the minor story, it begins in verse 5 and runs through verse 17, the minor story of the escape of Peter from prison. Again, set it in the major story which is the confrontation of Church and State. Now, watch because there's a lot of humor in here and it's deliberately that way. God has a sense of humor and this is part of the humor as His church, His sheep wander around like a bunch of bumbling idiots. But it's the story of all of our Christian lives. He gives grace upon grace despite our bumbling along.

Acts 12:5. **So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.** Obviously with Peter in prison, tied up behind the walls of the Antonia Fortress, the Church is forced to do what it never does till it's in a jam—pray. Pray! Hey, let's try that since our hands are tied, somebody around here get praying, let's call out the prayer warriors. So faced with the crisis now, now we go to prayer; couldn't have done it in verse 2 when poor

James was sitting there, and poor James got the axe, literally, because no one prayed. All right in verse 5 it says that they prayed “fervently,” but the Greek word there means “constantly,” this is constant intercession. The NT says “pray without ceasing” and that’s exactly what they’re doing. As long as Peter was kept in prison prayer was being made for him, this went on for six or seven days, day and night, continual prayer meetings, all night prayer meetings.

Verse 6, **On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward**, and here’s timing again, for six days nothing happened, people prayed, nothing happened, people prayed some more, nothing happened, people prayed some more, still nothing happened. It wasn’t until 4:00am the morning that Peter was going to be led forth to his execution that God finally acted. See God is never in a hurry, He’s always right there, even though we panic, what are we going to do, what’s God going to do? Just stand back and watch what He’s going to do, let’s watch, be front row spectators. So as he did this, **Peter was sleeping between two soldiers**, notice the relaxation, it’s the day of his execution, it’s at hand and Peter is sleeping. He’s got a relaxed mental attitude. He knows whose hand He’s in, he knows he’s justified before God, he knows he’s eternally secure, but there’s another reason here and that’s because Jesus prophesied in John 21:18 that Peter would live to be an old man, Peter was not an old man at this time. Peter just had a promise so what did Peter do? He trusted the promise. He believed the word of God. So he just sat back and relaxed, “Somehow God is going to work this all out. I don’t know how He’s going to do it, but He said He’s going to do it.” Now, that kind of trust doesn’t come overnight. You can’t make yourself believe the word of God, you have to have constant exposure to the word of God to build your faith. And that’s why we train in the word, train in the word, train in the word, to build our faith. So it’s a tremendous picture of a believer who had matured to the point where he could trust the promises of God under extreme pressure.

Continuing, **Peter...sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison**. Again, maximum security situation. This guys not getting loose or so says the State. **And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter’s side and woke him up, saying, “Get up quickly.” And his chains fell off his hands.**



That's an amusing point in the text because it literally says when that **angel** came into Peter's cell he punched him, this is no small punch and I'm not sure exactly why he gives Peter such a punch. Maybe Peter was a hard sleeper and when he was a kid his mother could never get him out of bed so the angel knowing that really slugged him one. Or it could be that angels don't really know their own strength and commentators have pointed this out but in any case he doesn't come in and say, "Hey Pete, wake up!" He could have done that but he didn't do that. And needless to say, at 4:00am in the morning if someone comes along and punches you full blast in the ribs you kind of wake up in a daze. And that's what all the rest of verse 7-8 is about; Peter is sort of wandering around like a 3 year old. And we observe in the original text that the verbs are all aorist imperatives meaning, we've got an urgent situation here. It's just like you would talk to a child in an emergency situation, "Get up now, get dressed now, put on your shoes on, alright, now put your cloak on, come on, this way, follow me." Its step by step baby instructions. And Peter's the picture of a bumbling believer, doesn't have a clue what's going on, verse 11 confirms that, Peter was in a dream world, so he has to be told every little thing to do. And we note in passing the **chains fell off his hands**, that's a Houdini if I ever saw one, he's chained to two Roman soldiers, one on each arm and his fall off but there's don't, what's going on here? What's going on is a divine jail break.

Verse 9 **And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.** <sup>10</sup>**When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself;** And the Greek reads, "which opened automatically for them," it's where we get our word "automatic." We have electric gates today but can you imagine 2,000 years ago this tremendous iron gate, Peter walks up to it and the thing just swings open, "Electronic gate, what a great idea." Here's the background for the invention, God thought that up millennia ago, nothing new under the sun. So he goes out and the Western text says they went down "seven steps" which seems to suggest the Antonia Fortress as the prison location, **and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.** The picture is the angel led him along down one street, just to get him directed

and the angel was there and he just disappeared, his job was finished, jail break successful and he was on his way.

Verse 11, **When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.”** And it’s not a strange thing to have angels protecting and guarding believers, this is one of the angelic functions for human beings, they’re involved in our lives and if we could see that dimension we’d be amazed at all they do for us. And so with this angelic prison release Herod Agrippa’s big political plans were spoiled.

Verse 12, **And when he realized *this*, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark,** this was the big meeting house in the Gospels and early Acts. This house was in the wealthy district of Jerusalem, in what was called the upper city. And apparently John Mark who wrote the gospel of Mark, this is his mother’s home, we don’t know what happened to his father, if he was dead by this time or what, but his mother was wealthy and she had this big house, it was a two story house, if you’ve heard of the upper room in the NT where Jesus and the apostles had the last supper, that was this house, they all met in the upper room because the large rooms in the ancient world were on the second story. They’d build the lower story with several rooms and the walls of the rooms would provide support for a large upper room where lots of people could meet. They also had the first big prayer meeting in Acts 1 in this room when they chose the 12<sup>th</sup> apostle, Matthias, he replaced Judas when Judas died his horrible death. And by the way, notice in this chapter we lost another apostle in v 2, James, but in this case did they replace him? No they did not? Why not? Because the apostolic base has already been formed and the door of the church has already been opened for Jew, Samaritan and Gentile. So much for apostolic succession. The office of apostle died when the apostles died. There are no living apostles. Alright, so they’re meeting in this large upper room, verse 12, **where many were gathered together and were praying.** This is their big prayer meeting, they had been gathered for some time in this prayer meeting and now we get to some more humor. But you’ve got to understand one thing, that this all happened before the sun rises. See, the sun doesn’t rise until verse 18, and so all of it’s still dark in the wee hours of the morning. And the whole point is that the police may be out after Peter, he doesn’t know what

happened, all he knows is he's busted loose and they're going to be after him any moment. So the least that Peter wants to do is start a noise in the wealthy district of Jerusalem out on the street at 4:30 in the morning, because this just simply attracts attention. The whole thing is Peter's trying to be cool and get out of the city before the police find him. Now faced with that situation watch what happens; just a comedy of errors, a great parallel to how all believers bumble around like a bunch of idiots but God works with us anyway. Grace, grace, grace.

The first thing, verse 13, **When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer.** <sup>14</sup>**When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate.** Now, women have certain emotional tendencies when they get excited, some cry, some yell, some pass out, some get up and holler but this girl tended to forget. Here's Peter out on the street at 4:30 am and he's knocking, she here's his voice, she doesn't see him, which shows you she was well-acquainted with him, she just hears his voice and runs inside, totally forgets about Peter out on the street. Last thing Peter wants is to draw attention to himself knocking, waking up the neighbors, what's all the commotion outside. And she's inside, "Hey, Peter's out front." And the men, "What are you crazy!" They're just brushing her off like a lot of men do the women. Same story happened with Mary Magdalene when she reported seeing the empty tomb and the risen Christ, "What are you crazy, we saw Him die!" And it's a testimony men, oftentimes the women have the truth first and we won't listen. **But she [Rhoda] kept insisting that it was so.** Over and over and over she insisted, it's the imperfect but **They kept saying**, over and over and over **"It's his angel,"** another imperfect. So they're going back and forth, "Peter's at the door." Rhoda, "Get real, it's just **his angel.**" But what do they mean, **"It's his angel?"** That's a strange response by the men. Does everybody have their own personal angel that looks just like them, sounds just like them? What is this? Well, it was a Jewish idea at the time of a guardian angel, who when you died, the guardian angel would show up like you and announce that you'd died to your closest friends, and so when it says **his angel**, they're saying "Oh, Peter's dead and we've gotten the announcement of the funeral." But if it had been me sitting in the room I still would like to have gone out and seen what the angel looked like. But even that doesn't seem to move them, that's just his angel, you know, it happens every day at the front door.

Meanwhile, verse 16, **Peter continued knocking;** and the verb there indicates that while all this argument is going on inside the house, and

Rhoda can't get these guys to come around and they're calling her crazy, Peter's outside wearing his knuckles out, knock, knock, knocking...no response and he's trying to be quiet and not cause a commotion but c'mon, I'm a fugitive on the run here and I'm out on main street making racket, so he's wanting inside. And finally she prevails on them **and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed.** <sup>17</sup>**But motioning to them with his hand to be silent,** So they wander outside, "Peter's here, Peter's here, Peter's here," and he's telling them, "Would you please shut up, I don't want the whole city to know I've escaped, I've come to tell you what's happened but just cool it." And in verse 17 he finally calms them down and **described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren."** And obviously this is another James, not the one killed in v 2, this is James the half-brother of Jesus. He'd risen in prominence in the early church by this time. You might remember though, that none of Jesus' siblings believed in Him during His life. And this is a point of encouragement for those of you who have unbelieving family members. Jesus' own siblings didn't believe until after His resurrection. And you can't fault His witness in the home. The Lord Jesus was the greatest witness there ever was but still they didn't respond. I'm sure He prayed for them, loved them, gave them the truth but they weren't buying it, "Yeah right, big brothers the Messiah, ha, ha, ha, the guys deluded." But then they did believe. And it goes to show don't give up on your family members, they may not believe while your still alive but there's still time as long as they're alive. And James eventually did believe. And now he's risen in prominence. So Peter wants James to know, "James, you're the man now, I'm out of here, I'm in exile now, and I turn things over to you, you're the main man in Jerusalem" and tell all this to **the brethren.**

**Then he left and went to another place.** And we don't know really where he went, no one knows where he went, he apparently went underground for the time being and he told absolutely no one where he was hiding out. Later he becomes the apostle to the circumcision, to the Jewish wing of the Church, but most of the Jews he ministers to are of the Diaspora, so he's basically moving out of Jerusalem at this point of his ministry. And this is another point to the doctrine of missions here as led by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was officially forcing Peter out of Jerusalem. You get out there and do something, My plans for you are out there not in here. And so **he left and went to another place.**

Now, verses 18-19 are the HVP interpretation of the jail break. We've already seen the DVP which is what really happened. From Herod's view point this was an inside job, the soldiers plotted. Let's read, **Now when day came,**

**there was no small disturbance**, that's a litote, it means there was a big argument going on and on **among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter**. And quite obviously there was, in a maximum security cell, two soldiers, trained under the Imperial Guard chained to the guy, two other guys standing at the door, how can you lose a prisoner in that kind of a situation? Herod wondered that, and so Herod in verse 19 conducts an investigation, "What is going on with you guys?" **When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution**. And what this shows is that you can be a soldier for the national government but when that government is violating its proper sphere of operation you better follow the word of God and not the government. These soldiers, operating under the Imperial Guard were executed for operating against God's people. When a soldier has to follow either the word of God or the state, he better follow the word of God. Had that been done these soldiers lives would have been spared. **Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there**.

Now we have the last scene, verses 19-25 close out the story, they pick up the major story, we've seen the minor story now of Peter's escape; we've seen that in that minor story, obviously the Christians didn't execute it, they didn't pull it off, good night, when it happened they didn't even know what was going on. In fact, have you notice, Peter, when he was led out by the angel can't believe it's real and when he comes knocking on the door the people who were praying can't believe it's real. So if it's left up to Christians and the resources we have we could never pull it off. That's the theme of this small story. But now the bigger story. The bigger story can't conclude without one last detail. Herod must be taken care of. The curse must fall on Herod Agrippa.

And so we read in Acts 12:20, **<sup>20</sup>Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country. <sup>21</sup>On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. <sup>22</sup>The people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" <sup>23</sup>And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died. <sup>24</sup>But the word**

**of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied. <sup>25</sup>And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with *them* John, who was also called Mark.**

Now this tragic scene of Herod was set in the middle of an economic war. Caesarea is one of the great ports on the Mediterranean, built by the Romans as an eastern cargo place. Out from Palestine came things like dates, wine, grain. This was the production; that production had to go to Europe, to Italy, to Greece, to Lebanon and there were two ports of exit. One port was Caesarea and the other one is up here, what is now Lebanon, Tyre. They both shared business of the exports of the Levant, but what had happened is that Tyre was making a lot of money in transportation and not in agriculture and they got in cross purpose with Herod and so what he did, he just cut off the produce and he was waging an economic war against the city of Tyre and their businessmen. So they come up and they make it good with Blastus, his chamberlain, they bribe him to get into Agrippa, that's verse 20. Now there's nothing wrong, this may startle some of you, but there's nothing wrong in Scripture with offering a bribe; that is never stated to be a sin. What is stated to be a sin in Scripture is the accepting of a bribe. You say that may be quibbling; no it isn't. The Church is given the freedom in times of persecution to bribe the officials to look the other way and we can do so without sinning. That is a built in control, a degree of freedom that Christ has given His Church. It's being used today in Tibet by missionaries who are desperately trying to get Bibles in there. So you come up to some guard and they bribe the guard, and lots of money we give to support these people goes to bribe guards and it's being done as unto the Lord. There's nothing wrong with offering bribes, accepting them, that's the wrong. So they got into Agrippa through bribes.

On this particular day Herod arrays himself and allows himself to be deified. It's the ultimate idolatry of the State to permit itself to be called a "god" and that's exactly what happens.

Now you may say that's a nice interesting story, but fortunately for us as Christians somebody else was there in the stadium that day; his name was Josephus. He saw the same thing. Here's the report from his eyes of what we read in Acts 13. "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 theatre 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; (345) 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.” (346) Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery... A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. (347) He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, “I whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life;”<sup>ii</sup> And it goes on to describe that within five days the man died, his body being eaten while he was dying, of worms, in perfect harmony with Luke’s account.

Now we have to, as Christians, when we read something like verse 23, we wonder, it sounds almost like the word of God relishes the violent death of people like Herod Agrippa. It’s magnifying the blood and the guts of it. You read a similar account early in the Book of Acts. Whose violent death is rejoiced in Acts 1? Judas. Remember how his body was cut down and fell about three stories, landed headlong and burst open, his intestines spilling all over the ground, and its blood and guts, its gore. Why does the Bible go into all this gory detail? Just tell me the guy died. Uh, uh, that’s not good enough for these people. This is part of the judgments against Satanic movements in history, all those that lay a hand on God’s people will wind up that way; that’s what it’s saying. It’s a description of God’s fierce wrath unleashed against Satan. It happened against men like Antiochus Epiphanes IV who was a forerunner of the Antichrist. It happened to Agrippa’s grandfather, Herod the Great, and it happened to Agrippa as well. God likes to pick out certain one’s who really go after the Jews and make an example of them. So Christians down through the years have rejoiced in the violent deaths of the persecutors of the Church.

I realize some of you who don’t quite understand the nature of God and the angelic conflict, I’m sure verse 23 strikes you as unnecessary. No it is necessary, it’s justice, it’s giving a foreview of the final judgment. The Christian must be assured that justice will win out, that good is absolutely superior to evil. So therefore thank God for the violent death of Judas, it shows who is in charge.

Now the last verse, Acts 12:24 is a major theme of all of Acts, **But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.** Persecution always, always, always results in growth; numerically growth and spiritual depth growth, you can’t create growth by marketing gimmicks, it occurs when

the church is persecuted and when the word of God is taught. So the persecutors are killed but the word of God advances.

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<sup>i</sup> Josephus, F., & Whiston, W. (1996, c1987). *The works of Josephus : Complete and unabridged*. Includes index. (Ant 19.330-331). Peabody: Hendrickson.

<sup>ii</sup> Josephus, F., & Whiston, W. (1996, c1987). *The works of Josephus : Complete and unabridged*. Includes index. (Ant 19.346-347). Peabody: Hendrickson.

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