

God always delivers His people... either through ... or from ... the trials of this life - including persecution and martyrdom.

On Tuesday I posted the following on my FaceBook page:

Yesterday my dermatologist called me and told me that I needed to meet with him at his office that very day. I found out that I have melanoma and we have surgery scheduled for September 1st. He said that we are catching it very early (so it is not in any advanced stage) but he told us that if we waited just one more month before I finally saw a doctor (who discovered it and sent me to the dermatologist) we would be in much more dire circumstances. (After several years of not going to the doctor, I finally did, and she found it in the nick of time. God is good!)

Right after I posted that update on my status page (to which many of you have responded that you are praying...) ... I got to thinking about that last sentence: "God is good." ... I wondered if I was communicating a belief that if we did not catch this melanoma so early... that somehow God was not as good... or maybe not good at all.

Is God only good if He meets our expectations...? Is God only good as long as He answers our prayers and concerns in the way... and in the time... that we would like Him to...? ... I would like to believe that I would still affirm that He is good... beyond all comprehension... even if my melanoma was not discovered so early... and this aggressive cancer had spread throughout my body... (It would appear that former President Jimmy Carter... whose melanoma... it was announced this week... has spread to his brain... still clings to the goodness of God.) ... The reason for such hope is derived from the main principle of our passage this morning in the Book of Acts. ... So let me repeat it again – with a little expansion:

God always delivers His people... either through ... or from ... the trials of this life - including persecution and martyrdom... and cancer... and financial difficulty... and relationship problems with friends or family members... or whatever the current difficulty in your life happens to be.

We come to the 12th chapter of Acts this morning... where we will see the Jerusalem Church miraculously protected... and what I believe is a pattern of God's deliverance. ... Chapter 12 is set in a context of mounting persecution. It opens with the apparent inability of God's people to do anything to deliver themselves... but then depicts an amazing display of strength among seemingly helpless Christians... and reveals the source of that strength.

Here is what we will cover today in Acts 12:

1. The first political attack against the church's leaders **(vs. 1-4)**
(The church has been under attack before in Acts... It came from the Jewish religious leaders... and they left the Apostles alone. But now it comes from a Roman politician and it is launched against the leaders of the church.)
2. God's pattern for deliverance **(vs. 5-7)**
3. God's vindication of the church **(vs. 18-23)**
4. The church marching forward in triumph **(vs. 24-25)**

Now... before we turn to the passage... I think that we will better understand #1. on this list... (the first political attack against the church's leaders)... by gaining a little understanding of the politician who did the attacking - King Herod.

This was King Herod Agrippa I... His father (Aristobulus)... had been murdered by his own father (Herod the Great). You may remember Herod

the Great. He was the ruler who had ordered the slaughter of innocent babies at Christ's birth. ... King Herod Agrippa I... was also the nephew of Herod Antipas... who had John the Baptist beheaded. Nice bloodline, huh?

After his grandfather murdered his dad... the Herod of our passage today was sent to Rome to be educated. While he was there... he happened to grow up as a close friend of the imperial family. Two of Rome's future emperors were his childhood buddies. ... He became something of a playboy, and in a.d. 23 because of his loose living... he had to flee back down to Palestine... to escape his creditors. ... In Palestine he lived in poverty.

Eventually... he returned to Rome. He made a few critical remarks about the current Emperor (Tiberius)... and Tiberius had him imprisoned. His life had hit bottom. But then Tiberius died... and Herod's childhood friend... Caligula... came to power. Caligula not only freed him from prison... but Caligula gave him a gold chain weighing as much as his iron fetters in prison. ... Soon Herod was named ruler of some Palestinian provinces. When another childhood friend... Claudius... succeeded Caligula... Herod gained the rulership of Judea and Samaria... as well. ... Murder and intrigue had been the currency of his entire life.

Herod was preeminently a politician. ... When he was with the Romans... he did as the Romans did. ... And since he had some Jewish blood in him... when he was with the Jews he acted like a Jew. *The Mishnah* records that during the annual procession bearing the firstfruits to the temple, "when they reached the temple Mount, Agrippa the king [Herod] would take his basket on his shoulder and enter as far as the Temple Court." He would do

anything to maintain his popularity with the Jewish people. ... But... he was part of a scheming and murderous family... and the Herods were all despised by the Jews. ... Of course... Herod knew this... so we find him at the beginning of today's passage... persecuting the church... in order to convince the Jewish people of his loyalty to them. He carried on a brutal, unfeeling persecution of the church.

Acts 12:1-5

Notice the opening phrase of verse 1... "*About that time.*" ... The phrase refers to the previous chapter... that we studied last week. You will remember that the church experienced great success in spreading the Gospel. ... The Lord's work was prospering. ... (And do you know what...?) That is very often the time the devil will attack. ... Any time we make some headway into Satan's territory... he will fight back viciously.

Also we saw that the prediction of a drought had just been given. The church at Antioch took up a special offering... and sent it to Jerusalem with Paul and Barnabas. ... Satan also likes to attack when we are down and struggling. ... When troubles weigh heavily upon us... Satan knows that then we can be very vulnerable to attack.

Herod had several believers arrested... among them James... the brother of John... whom he beheaded with a sword. Why is the detail mentioned in verse two that it was by the sword...? ... James was executed with the sword because... according to *The Mishnah* (Sanhedrin 9:1)... the sword had to be used for murderers and apostates. ... Herod was declaring

James to be an apostate. ... This action ingratiated Herod even further with the Jews.

James... the Apostle John's brother... was dead... and Peter was in prison... destined for the same end. ... God's people appeared utterly powerless in this grim situation.

James was the first martyr of the twelve disciples. His brother John was the last of the apostles to die. ... When you ponder James' death in the light of Matthew 20:20-28... it takes on special significance. In Matthew 20... James and John... with their mother... had asked for thrones... but Jesus made it clear that there can be no glory apart from suffering. "*Are you able to drink of the cup that I am going to drink... and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?*" He asked. (Matt. 20:22). Their bold reply was, "*We are able.*"

Of course... they did not know what they were saying... but they eventually discovered the high cost of winning a throne of glory: we are seeing that James was arrested and killed... and in Rev. 1:9... we learn that John became an exile on the Isle of Patmos... a prisoner of Rome (Rev. 1:9). Indeed... they did drink of the cup and share in the baptism of suffering that their Lord had experienced!

Herod was so elated with the response of the Jews... he lurched forward with the boldest plot imaginable - the arrest and jailing of *the leader* himself...the apostle **Peter**. ... If it pleased the Jews when James was killed... just think how delighted they would be if Peter were slain!

Herod had Peter arrested during the Passover celebration. This was a strategic move... since more Jews were in the city than usual... and Herod could impress the most people.

But God had even *bigger* plans to impress... God permitted Herod to arrest Peter and put him under heavy guard in prison. ... Sixteen soldiers... four for each watch... kept guard over the apostle... with two soldiers chained to the prisoner and two watching the doors. ... After all... the last time Peter was arrested... he mysteriously got out of jail... and Herod was not about to let that happen again. ... Herod intended to bring Peter out to the people... and with great drama sentence him to death.

Not knowing about God's bigger plans... The beleaguered Jerusalem church seemed overwhelmed and helpless. There was *nothing* they could do. Their despair undoubtedly moved to even darker levels because it was Passover week, the same week Christ had been earlier murdered. Grim associations inevitably flooded their minds.

The church prayed earnestly on behalf of Peter because this was a major crisis for the Jerusalem Church. James was now dead... and Peter was in danger of following right behind him.

Their apparent weakness was underlined by the fact that all they could do was pray. ... Sometimes Christians today feel the same way about situations they face—cancer in a loved one... unemployment and an inability to find a good job... trying to turn a straying son or daughter back to the Lord... seeking to reverse the tides of evil in our land (politics, abortion, murder, open immorality). ... Does anything look more ridiculous to

society's power-brokers than a ragtag... harried group of believers praying for God's help in the midst of oppressive darkness? To those outside the family of God... this is terminal weakness. Herod's definitely seemed to have the upper-hand. ... The axe had fallen once... and it would fall on the helpless neck of another of their leaders. ... Who were God's people to dare to believe anyone or anything could help them now?

It is time now for us to move on... to the second section of our passage – God's pattern of deliverance.

Acts 12:6-11

Peter was rescued in the nick of time. That very night of the rescue was the night Herod was scheduled to do more evil to Peter... God sometimes waits until the very last minute to bring our needed blessing. ... This helps us to trust in Him more. ... It also helps us to not give up though everything looks bleak and impossible.

Peter's escape looked impossible. He was utterly secured in prison—chained with not one but two chains. Also he was shackled to two soldiers, and there were guards at the doors. Humanly speaking escape was impossible. How God delights to rescue when things look impossible for rescue or deliverance.

Here are two observances about the pattern of God's rescues. #1 – He sometimes waits until the very last minute (so we can learn to trust Him.) #2 – He enjoys rescues that look hopeless.

We get the impression that Peter must have been groggy. The angel had to tell him how to get dressed: "*Now... Peter... Put on your clothes and sandals... OK... now... wrap your cloak around you and follow me.*"

Peter obeyed... but he was probably in disarray—sandals on the wrong feet... his tunic hanging loosely... his hair uncombed. ... He needed his morning coffee. ... One thing is for sure... though... Peter was dazed and bewildered... like a sleepwalker who is not quite sure where he is or why.

As Peter followed the angel... God opened the way. ... And when Peter was free... the angel vanished. ... His work was done and now it was up to Peter to trust the Lord... and use his common sense in taking the next step.

Now... here is a third observance about God's pattern of deliverance. #3 – Sometimes God's leading is only clear to a certain point... and then we are to trust Him to provide us with the next steps... when we need them... and to employ good ol' common sense until He does. Scripture doesn't tell us if Peter was told to go to the house where the church was praying. But somehow Peter knew to go there. ... And after Peter checks-in with the all-night prayer meeting... It says that Peter went somewhere else.

A fourth... and perhaps the most important observation about the pattern of God's deliverance... is wrapped up in a question. ... Why did God allow James to die and yet miraculously save Peter? ... Life is full of difficult questions like this. ... Why is one child physically disabled and another child athletically gifted? ... Why do some people die before realizing their potential? ... Questions like these we cannot possibly answer in this life because we do not see all that God sees. ... He has chosen to allow evil in

this world for a time. ... But we can trust God's leading because He has promised to destroy all evil eventually. ... In the meantime... we know that God will help us use our suffering to strengthen us and glorify Him.

God allowed Herod to kill James, but He kept him from harming Peter. And here is the 4th observation: It is the throne in heaven that is always in control... not any institution... government... or throne on earth.

The only real answer to the question... “Why did God allow James to die and yet miraculously save Peter?” ... is the sovereign will of God. ... It was time for James to join his Lord and receive the fruit of his labor for work done here on earth. ... Peter's work was not yet done. ... God's will may be for the believer to suffer and bear martyrdom for His name's sake. ... God's plan may be to use the persecuted believer's faithfulness as a testimony to reach others.

But here is one thing we must be completely settled on... and I think God wanted the church that day to learn. The legions of Rome barred the door, but it only took one of God's special agents to liberate the captive! ... No matter how grim life might appear... God and his angels are present and ministering... and He can deliver us anytime He sees fit!

God taught Jacob this same truth when... after the scheming patriarch-to-be had deceived Esau and stolen the blessing... and then fled for his life... he lay down on a stone pillow in utter despondency. ... Jacob was miserable... homesick... and overwhelmed with loneliness. ... But God loved him... (the conniving rascal that he was.) ... So God gave him a marvelous vision (Genesis 28:12) of a ladder reaching into Heaven and

angels ascending and descending. ... Although Jacob appeared to be abandoned by God and man... there was angelic traffic between Heaven and earth on his behalf. ... Jacob's response? "*Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it*"... ...That day he anointed his stone pillow with oil and called the place "Bethel"—"the house of God." ... There was a connection between Heaven and earth for Peter too. His jail cell was the very house of God. It is the same for us in the dilemmas that threaten us. We are not alone.

There is a fifth observation to the pattern of God's deliverance. ... It is that God often answers our prayers for deliverance in ways that exceed our expectation.

Acts 12:12-17

When you remember that (a) many people were praying... (b) they were praying earnestly... (c) they prayed night and day for perhaps as long as a week, and... (d) their prayers were centered specifically for Peter... then the scene that is described here is almost comical. ... The answer to their prayers is standing at the door... but they don't have faith enough to open the door and let him in! ... God could get Peter out of a prison... but Peter can't get himself into a prayer meeting!

Of course... the knock at the door might have been that of Herod's soldiers... coming to arrest more believers. ... So it must have taken courage for the maid (Rhoda) to go to the door. But imagine her surprise when she recognized Peter's voice! ... She was so overcome that she forgot to open the door! ... Poor Peter had to keep knocking and calling

while the "believers" in the prayer meeting decided what to do! ...And the longer he stood at the gate... the more dangerous his situation became. Would his guards be close behind...?

We must face the fact that even in the most fervent prayer meetings there is sometimes a spirit of doubt and unbelief. We are like the father who cried to Jesus, "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). ... God graciously honors even the weakest faith... but how much more He would do if only we would trust Him.

It is a great comfort to me that the early church... with all of its tremendous spiritual power... did not believe that their prayers had been answered on this occasion. ... They didn't believe that Simon Peter had actually been delivered. ... Isn't that same thing true of us so many times? ... When we do have an answer to our prayer... we rejoice and talk about it as if we are really surprised. ... And we are surprised... to be honest... we really didn't expect an answer. ... Yet God heard and answered our prayer. How gracious He is!

But I must be honest. ... I am troubled by the way that the last part of verse 5 reads... and the response Peter is given. Here is what it says: "*But earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church...*"

They did not pray superficially... or half-hearted for him. That would explain their response... if they had prayed like that. ... How can you pray earnestly and have the disbelief that they showed?

Here is the best answer that I can give to that. There is nothing at all in this passage that says they were asking God to rescue Peter from his most

certain death. ... It simply says that they prayed earnestly for him. ... They very well may have been praying for Peter's testimony to hold firm to the very end. *"Lord... infuse Peter with the same kind of strength and dignity that Jesus took to His death... all the way to the end... Keep Peter's eyes on You, Lord. Let his testimony remain intact... Let him be bold as he faces his death... Give him opportunity to share the Gospel with his tormentors... Spare him from unnecessary pain in his death..."*

We know that they prayed earnestly for him... we don't know exactly what they were praying... but it did not have to be for his rescue from death. ... And if they were praying for these other things... and God chose to go beyond what they prayed for... then we don't have a problem with verse 5.

Before we leave this section... it would be profitable to consider how Christians can best pray for those in prison. American Pastor Saeed... right now sits in a prison cell over in Iran... Many of us have been praying for him... as well as his wife and two children who are in Idaho. Christian's all over the world are in prison... simply because they are Christian. ISIS continues to take and hold Christians. We ought to pray that God will give them grace to bear with suffering so that they might have a triumphant witness for the Lord. We should ask the Spirit to minister the Word to them and bring it to their remembrance. It is right to ask God to protect His own and to give them wisdom as they must day after day deal with a difficult enemy. We must ask God that, if it is His will, they be delivered from their bondage and suffering and reunited with their loved ones.

So far in our passage today... we have examined the first political attack against the church's leaders. Then we have observed God's pattern for deliverance... and we can find these in our own walk with the Lord, can't we...? Now it is time for us to look at God's vindication of the church... as we find it in our passage.

Acts 12:18-23

At times... God gets the devil's crowd to do His judgment for Him. ... Herod was not happy when he learned that they had lost his special prisoner. Under Roman law, a guard whose prisoner escaped would pay for it with the penalty due the prisoner—in this case, his own life

Herod is cold-blooded and he is hardhearted. He has no regard for human life. By executing the guards, he is saying to the world that he does not believe Peter's escape was an act of God. He is holding his men responsible. He executes all the soldiers who were guarding Peter. Then he goes down to Caesarea. Pilate enjoyed this little haven on the Mediterranean... and many of the Roman rulers stayed down there. Actually... it was the Roman headquarters. So now Herod beats it down to Caesarea.

Herod wanted to impress these folks of Tyre and Sidon of his glory. Roman historian (Josephus) has written that the "*royal apparel*" which Herod wore for this oration was a very gorgeous robe. It was threaded with silver and reflected dramatically in the sun when he wore it to speak in the outdoor arena at Caesarea.

And the people wanted the approval of Herod... so they said the most flattering thing that could be said... (totally ludicrous and no doubt they didn't mean it)... but they called Herod a god.

"The righteous is delivered out of trouble, and the wicked cometh in his stead" (Prov. 11:8). This truth is illustrated in the death of Herod. While God does not always bring retribution this quickly, we can be sure that the Judge of all the earth will do what is right.

Herod died a horrible death accompanied by intense pain; he was literally eaten alive, from the inside out, by worms. ... Pride is a serious sin, and in this case, God chose to punish it immediately. In short order, Herod went from glory to gore, from acclaim to shame, from splendor to stench, from life to death.

God has not always judged evil "officials" as He judged Herod, but He has always watched over His people and seen to it that they did not suffer and die in vain.

The early church had no "political clout" or friends in high places to "pull strings" for them. ... Instead, they went to the highest throne of all... the throne of grace. ... God's glorious throne was greater than the throne of Herod... They simply took their case to the highest court and left it with the Lord! ... And what was the result?

The church moved on triumphantly.

Acts 12:24-25

The attack on the church did not stop the advancing of the church.

Some of us need to be reacquainted with our position in Christ and the power we have in prayer. ... The truth is... we are God's children... and God's children will never be orphans! God is in control! He has promised to never abandon us or leave us to our resources (see John 14:18; Hebrews 13:5). His angels are sent to minister to us. ... And prayer brings amazing power into our lives.

The question is... do we believe God is in control? Do we believe in the ministry of angels to the elect? Do we believe that prayer brings untold power?

Just before World War II in Itasca, Texas, there was a school fire that took the lives of 263 children. It was a horrifying tragedy. After the war Itasca built a new school with the finest sprinkler system in the world. Never again would the citizens of Itasca be caught with such a tragedy on their hands. Honor students were selected to take citizens of the community on tours through the new school, to show them the finest sprinkler system ever assembled. The town continued to grow, and seven years after the new school was built an addition was needed. As the new construction began, it was discovered that the sprinkler system was never connected.

Some of us need to come into better connection with the Source, and this happens only through a growing faith and honest prayer.

(LISTEN) ... God always delivers His people... either *through* ... or *from* ... the trials of this life - including persecution and martyrdom... and cancer... and financial difficulty... and relationship problems with friends or family members... or whatever the current difficulty in *your* life happens to be.