

Prayer and Persecution

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Acts 12:1-19, 20

The theological concepts of "no neutrality" and "spiritual warfare" are pivotal in understanding the Christian faith and the "assurance of persecution" (**2 Timothy 3:12**, *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*). Scripture teaches there is no neutral ground in the spiritual realm; one is either aligned with God or against Him. Jesus states, *"Whoever is not with me is against me"* (**Matthew 12:30**), emphasizing the absence of neutrality in spiritual matters. Additionally, believers are engaged in a constant spiritual battle against evil forces. Paul writes, *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers...the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"* (**Ephesians 6:12**), underscoring the reality of the spiritual battle.

In Acts 11 and 12, we come to the end of Luke's focus on Peter (**Acts 1-12**). In chapter 10, we studied Cornelius's conversion and God's opening the door of the gospel to Gentiles by divine appointment. Peter was on a mission trip that took him to Caesarea via Joppa, modern-day Tel-Aviv. We watched Peter risk his reputation to share the Gospel and the testimony of Paul and his burden for the lost (**Romans 9:1-5**).

Upon his return to Jerusalem, Peter was initially met with criticism (**Acts 11:2-3**, *So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 3 "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."*). However, Peter fearlessly explained to the Jewish church in Jerusalem how he came to be in the home of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and *"ate with them"* (Acts 11:4-18). At the end of the chapter, Luke introduces us to the church at Antioch. The elders of Jerusalem sent Barnabas to investigate, and once there, he left for Tarsus to find Saul. Then, both returned to Antioch to minister for a full year.

• The Herods of the Bible¹ (Acts 12:1)

- **Antipater I the Idumaean** (113 BC – 43 BC) - He ruled Idumea on behalf of the Maccabees. He set up a dynasty for his family and eventually established an alliance with Rome that continued with his successors. He was father to Phasael (the family's finest diplomat) and Herod the Great. (Descended from Esau – Josephus)
- **Herod the Great** – (72 BC – 4 BC) responsible for the slaughter of the innocents in **Matthew 2**. He had some 10 children. Expanded the Jerusalem wall and temple mount; built Masada, Caesarea Maritime, and Herodium.
- **Herod Antipas** (20 BC -39 AD)– son of Herod the Great, a.k.a. Herod the Tetrarch (**Matthew 14:1; Luke 3:1**). Tetrarchs governed a fourth part of the kingdom. His father (Herod the Great) divided his large kingdom into four parts and bequeathed them to his sons, as confirmed by the Roman Senate. He was the Tetrarch of Galilee. He is the Herod to whom Jesus was sent during His trials and eventual crucifixion (**Luke 23**).



Figure 1 - Masada (North of Jerusalem)



Figure 2-Herodium (south of Jerusalem)

- **Herod Agrippa** (11 BC 44 AD)– (**Acts 12**). Grandson of Herod the Great, son of Aristobulus. Persecuted the church in Jerusalem and had the apostle James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee, put to death by the sword. He had a son Agrippa II. His daughters were Mariamne, Bereniké (Acts 24:24), and Drusilla (Acts 25:13).



Figure 3 - Caesarea Maritima (West)

- **Herod Agrippa II** (27 AD – 92-100 AD) – Agrippa's son. Saved Paul from being tried and imprisoned in Jerusalem by the Jews. Allowed Paul to defend himself, enabling him to share the Gospel through his testimony (Acts 25 & 26). Last in the line of Herod's. After him, the family fell out of favor with Rome.

¹ Chilton, Bruce. The Herods: Murder, Politics, & the Art of Succession. Fortress Press. Minneapolis, MN (2021). (Introduction)

I. The Violent Persecution Acts 12:1-4)

- A. The Ringleader - Herod Agrippa I was the leader (**Acts 12:1-3a**).
- B. The Remembrance - During the Feast of Unleavened Bread. (**Acts 12:3b; Exodus 13:3-6**)
- C. The Reclaiming (**Acts 12:4**)

II. The Earnest Prayer (Acts 12:5)

- A. The church prayed “earnestly.”
 - 1. The Greek word *ektenōs* is a medical term describing the stretching of a muscle to its limits.² It means continuously and without ceasing; persevering in the face of overwhelming difficulty.
 - 2. Jesus prayed earnestly (*ektenōs*) on the night of His betrayal, facing His death (**Luke 22:44**). The word is associated with three Christian distinctives:
 - a) “Earnestly love” (**1 Peter 4:8**)
 - b) “Earnestly worship/serve” (priestly service) (**Acts 26:7**)
 - c) “Earnestly pray (**Acts 12:5**)
- B. The “prayer for Peter” in the face of the loss of James
 - 1. Prayer in the context of battle (**Ephesians 6:17-18**)
 - 2. God did not fail with James; it is about alignment with God’s will, not getting what we want.
- C. In this case, the prayer was " corporate " or church-wide prayer for 6-7 days during the feast.

III. The Miraculous Escape (Acts 12:6-11)

- A. The Secure Prisoner (12:6)
- B. The Angel and the Light (12:7a)
- C. The Prodding Awake (12:7b)
- D. The Broken Chains (12:7c)
- E. The Disciple’s Dress (12:8)
- F. The Supposed Vision (12:9)
- G. The Angelic Escort (12:10)
- H. The Thwarted Plan (12:11)

The narrative bears witness to the delivering grace of God and to the power of believing prayer. That James should die while Peter should escape is a mystery of divine providence which has been repeated countless times in the history of the people of God. By faith, says the writer to the Hebrews, some “escaped the edge of the sword”; by faith others “were killed with the sword” (**Heb. 11:32-34, 36-38**).

IV. The Church’s Reaction (Acts 12:12-17)

- A. Peter went to Mary’s home, mother of John Mark (Mary’s only mention) (**Acts 12:12-15**).
- B. The door was open (**Acts 12:16-17**)

V. The Escape Discovered (Acts 12:18-19)

- A. Caused, “no little disturbance.” (**Acts 12:18**)
- B. Herod searches, examines, and executes (**Acts 12:19**)
- C. Herod returned to Caesarea (**Acts 12:19b**)
- D. Soon after Herod is struck dead for his rebellion and blasphemy (**Acts 12:20-24**)

- “No Neutrality” applies to the overt enemies of God (The Herod’s) and the Self-Deceived (**2 Cor 4:1-4**)
 - **Matthew 6:24**, “*No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.*”
 - **Romans 6:16**, *Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?*
 - **James 4:4**, *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*
 - **Matthew 12:30**, *Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.*
 - Because of spiritual blindness caused by the spiritual parenting of Satan (2 Cor 4:4), no one is born “neutral.” John 8:30-47
 - True believers abide (John 8:31)
 - False believers are exposed by their bondage, deafness, and heritage (John 8:34, 43 & 47, 44)

² MacArthur, John F., Jr. Acts. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994. (Volume 1, 323)