

When Persecution Strikes – Acts 12 (Part 1)

Acts 12. We're continuing our journey through the book of Acts, finding people compelled by the Spirit to spread the Gospel and build the church.

The very things *we* ought to be about.

But it wasn't always a cakewalk. As we've already seen, they ran into obstacles; including persecution. And this chapter is no different.

So let's dig in and see what God has for us. Individually *and* as a church. Act 12:1.

(When persecution strikes – _____ earnestly (v1-5))

➤ [1] *About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.*

Alright, there's a lot of background to these verses and a lot of names. So let's work our way through it and see if we can sort it out.

About that time refers to the events of chapter 11; when Barnabas first went to Antioch.

And if Luke were writing chronologically, we would have read *this* chapter right *after* that. Right after v24 of chapter 11.

But he *didn't* write chronologically here.

He covered the events in Antioch with Barnabas and Saul, and then covered the events in Jerusalem with Peter and Herod.

But they're all within a couple of years of each other. Hence, *about that time*.

And *Herod the king* is Herod Agrippa I – the grandson of Herod the Great, who killed all the babies in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. Remember that?

What's more, he was the *nephew* of Herod Antipas; who killed John the Baptist, and *toyed* with Jesus; during his trial and execution.

So violence was no stranger to this Herod. In fact, as a young boy, he was separated from his mother and sent to Rome because his *father* was murdered.

No wonder he laid violent hands on the church. Generational sin is only broken by faith and repentance.

➤ [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.*

James the brother of John is the same James who was a disciple of Jesus. One of the sons of Zebedee. Part of his inner circle – Peter, James, and John.

And for some reason, Herod killed him; beheaded him. That's what the phrase "killed with the sword" meant in those days.

And Jesus had prophesied it. Speaking of his death and suffering, Jesus said . . .

"The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized." (Mark 10:39) Referring to a baptism of suffering.

"You're going to suffer just like me," Jesus said. And Herod fulfilled it.

And *when he saw that it pleased the Jews* [v3; those in *opposition* to the early church; those who didn't *believe* in Jesus], *he proceeded to arrest Peter also*.

Implying that he would do the same with him. And score *more* brownie points.

Win more favor. Wield more power.

➤ The only problem, is that he seized Peter during *the days of Unleavened Bread* – the week following Passover. A sacred *time* in the Jewish calendar . . .
Not to be desecrated by an execution.
So Herod put him in prison. V4.

[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 [including the following week] to bring him out to the people.*

No doubt having heard the stories of *earlier* escapes in earlier years, like in chapter 5, Herod wasn't taking any chances.

So he delivered him to 4 squads of 4 men each as we'll see in a minute.

Presumably, one squad for every 3 hour watch of the night; 6pm to 6am.

[5] *So Peter was kept in prison* [v5].

➤ *But earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.* (5b) There's the point. They prayed for him. Despite the fact that the *sky* was falling. Think about it.

One of the most prominent apostles had just been *killed*. One of their main leaders, snuffed out. A man who walked and talked with *Jesus*; for several years.

A man who could have gone on to preach the Gospel for *decades*; doing who knows *how* much good. Persecution struck.

And they *had* to have been disillusioned. Despair *must* have lurked in their midst.

Discouragement *must* have plagued them.

But instead of succumbing, they prayed. And prayed earnestly.

Which is exactly what we should do . . .

When persecution strikes – pray earnestly (v1-5)

Pray, as in get with God. Draw near to him. Commune with him. Abide in him.

So often we think of prayer only as communication. Only talking and listening. It's not.

It's also communion. Being in his presence. Cultivating a closeness that's nearly felt.

Get with God and *pray* to God. *Earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.*(5)

Not the air. Not the "powers that be." Not a god made in *your* image; or some *other* image. Not a saint or a someone. But God. Yahweh. Pray to him.

And not only ask him to *stop* the persecution, like the believers in Sri Lanka are praying these days, but ask him to give you *strength*.

"Lord, take this cup from me. But if not, give me the strength to endure it."

When persecution strikes, get with God and pray to God.

➤ And do so *earnestly*. Pray earnestly.

Like Daniel, who turned his *face* to the Lord God, *seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.* (Dan 9:3) Pray like that.

And pray earnestly like Moses, who fell on his face before the Lord. (Nu 16:22)

And Elijah, who prayed *fervently* the Bible says. Passionately.

And don't forget Jesus. Who being in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, *prayed more earnestly* it says. Instead of shrinking back in the face of persecution . . . He leaned into it. His agony *increased* his earnestness. (Lk 22:44) So that *his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*. When persecution strikes, pray like that. Pray like the church in Acts 12. Pray earnestly.

➤ But . . .

1. Don't be surprised.

3 "Don'ts" when persecution strikes. Starting with surprised.

Don't be shocked; caught off guard; dumbfounded.

You *will* have tribulation, Jesus said (Jn 16:33). We should expect it.

And *blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account*. (Mt 5:11). Not if, but when. It's going to happen.

And to extent we're surprised, we'll be demoralized. And *fail* to pray. Maybe even fail to keep the faith.

Look at how Peter himself says it (**1 Pet 4:12-13**); having gone *through* the persecution of Acts 12.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. [13] But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings [rejoice to the extent you're suffering for the things he suffered for, kingdom things], *that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed* [when he returns to make all things new].

When persecution strikes, don't be surprised. It's a part of *life* in Christ.

2. Don't despair.

Because God's grace is sufficient. Sufficient to hold you and deliver you. (**2 Cor 4:16**)

Which is why the Apostle Paul says . . .

[16] So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. [17] For this light momentary affliction [persecution] *is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, [18] as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.*

When persecution strikes, don't despair. It's not going to last forever, it increases your reward, and there's daily grace for your soul.*****

3. Don't wait.

Don't wait to *pray* when persecution strikes, and don't wait for *persecution* to pray.

Start now; anticipating it. Asking God to fortify you, and prepare you, and bolster you.

And start now for *others*. For whom it *has* struck. That's what the church in Acts did.

Everybody wasn't persecuted; *everybody* wasn't thrown in prison. *Herod laid violent hands on some* it says (1). But everybody *prayed*. And we should too.

It's one of the ways we can bear one another's burdens.

Like the burden of an abortion protester who was persecuted in Philadelphia last week.

By none other than a Pennsylvania State Representative.

Take a look. About 30 seconds. (**Video** – Brian Sims badgering a woman; 2:20-45)*****

That went on for 8½ minutes. Followed by another incident where he offered \$100 for the identities and addresses of 3 *teenage* girls who were praying.

We may not be the person on the video, but that doesn't mean we should wait to pray.

Pray now, pray for others, and pray earnestly. (**Summary**) That's the first takeaway.

➤ The second, comes from v12. (**When persecution strikes – _____ together (v12)**)

But to see it, we need the context; starting in v6.

[6] Now when Herod was about to bring him out [out of prison], *on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains* [most likely chains that connected him to the two soldiers], *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.

Just like the light around the shepherds when an angel appeared to them; announcing Jesus' *birth*. (Lk 2:9) It's a work of God.

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 [perhaps to conceal himself when he got to the street] *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* [like the vision he saw in chapter 10 during his nap on the rooftop].

[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.

There's our second point of application.

When persecution strikes – gather together (v12)

When Peter realized it wasn't a dream, *he went to the house of Mary* [v12], *the mother of John whose other name was Mark*.

Not Mary the mother of Jesus, but Mary the mother of John-Mark.

Who, like several others in the book of Acts, had both a Jewish name, *John*, and a

Roman name, *Mark*. Like Saul and Paul. The former Jewish, the latter, Roman.

And *this* particular John-Mark, is the same man who wrote the second *Gospel* that bears his name; under the supervision of *Peter* according to the early church fathers.

Perhaps that's why Luke *names* the owner of the house and her son – to *establish* that connection; and validate the apostolic *influence* on Mark's gospel.

Which was necessary for the early church to accept it as legit. As from God.

In any case, they gathered. Because that's what they *always* did when persecution struck.

From the days following *Jesus*' death and persecution, to the earliest days of the church. Like in chapter 5. They gathered *in the temple* it says, as a *large* group, and *from house to house* in smaller groups. (Acts 5:42)

Temple courts and house to house. The very thing *we* do. And *every* church should do.

The point being, when persecution struck, they *gathered together*.

Peter went to the house of Mary . . . where many were gathered together. (12)

And we should too. That's where the support is, the encouragement, the perspective, everything. God has *wired* us for fellowship. He has *wired* us for together-ness. To rejoice in the *best* of times, and persevere in the worst. Gather together.

Or to say it in the negative . . .

1. Don't isolate yourself. 2 more "Don'ts" here.

Don't withdraw. Don't "go it alone."

For you have need of endurance Hebrews says. (Heb 10:36).

And isolation does nothing but *undermine* your endurance. *Undermine* your resolve.

By discouraging you more than you already *are* by the persecution at hand.

That's why solitary *confinement* is so hard. There's no support, no encouragement, no fellowship, and no love. So why would you put *yourself* through that?

Better to gather. Together. With *other* believers.

Better to go to church; attend Small Group; have coffee with someone. And repeat.

➤ I can't tell you how valuable our elder meetings are to me in this respect.

Especially when false accusations are made, or the winds of culture blow, or *laws* threaten to erode our religious freedoms.

Like *The Equality Act* that just passed the House.

Our elder meetings are a shot in the arm. Because we're *together* when talking about it.

Bearing the burden *together*. United *together*.

The same thing that happens on weekends. Gathering together refreshes my perspective, renews my soul, and fuels my resolve. I assume it does yours, as well. So whatever you do, don't isolate yourself.

2. Don't fear. Don't cower. Don't shrink back.

For he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 Jn 4:4)

And God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. (2 Tim 1:7)

When persecution strikes, draw on that – *that* power, that love, that self-control.

Draw on the strength of Christ *in* you, and stand strong.

Because in the end, we win. The victory is ours. In Christ. *I have overcome the world*, he said. (Jn 16:33)

So gather together, and don't fear.

➤ And don't forget the *ultimate* purpose, the *primary* purpose of gathering together: prayer. Gather together for *prayer*. Peter went to the house of Mary [v12] . . .

Where many were gathered together and were praying.

Chit-chat is good, and fellowship great, but *praying* is best.

And not just *individually*, but corporately. Often in Small Groups, but also as a large group. A church.

It's not only the catalyst for greater *perseverance* as a church, and greater *strength* . . .

But greater passion and greater ministry. Even in the *midst* of persecution.

In fact, it's persecution that seems to fuel the church all the more.

But not without prayer.

Corporate prayer is often the act of obedience and desire that God *waits* for, to do his greatest work. Like releasing Peter from prison.

They gathered, and he noticed. They prayed, and he responded.

➤ Does that mean we have to gather every *day* to pray corporately? Or every *week*? Not at all. And there's *already* a great deal of corporate prayer going on in our ministries. But if we don't come together as a *church* on occasion, we're failing to gather. We're missing it. And missing out. (**Night of Worship & Prayer**)

That's why we have nights of worship and prayer like the one tonight. 6:30-8, right here.

We're going to gather together, worship the Lord, and pray earnestly.

Because there's a power to the united voice of many, that's greater than the single voice of one. (Bruce, *Acts* NICNT, 335)

Pray – Lord, as much as we'd like to ignore or avoid persecution, we know it will strike. So keep us from discouragement and despair, isolation and fear. And spur us on to pray, earnestly and together.