

**As God's people, we want to be guided by His Word and empowered by His Spirit to look more like Jesus. This Scripture Guide is based on this morning's passage to further equip you with what God's Word says.**

## **Week 5**

### **Acts 12:1-19**

This section of Acts contrasts Peter and Herod Agrippa in how they view power and authority. This section also shows Peter in the same light that Jesus was established in Luke. Prayer is also essential in this passage, bookending Peter's time in prison.

**12:1-4** Herod is introduced to begin the chapter. This Herod is not Herod the Great, but Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great and the King over Judea. Josephus characterizes Herod Agrippa (who will be referred to as Agrippa) as a generous ruler who regains the power of his grandfather through friendships with influential people in Rome.<sup>1</sup> Luke presents Agrippa's first actions as having James<sup>2</sup> executed and Peter arrested to appease the Jewish elite in Jerusalem (vv.1-3). Peter is thrown in prison during the Festival of Unleavened Bread,<sup>3</sup> also known as the Passover. He was left to wait as Agrippa likely did not want a public execution during a Holy Week to gain favor with the Jewish elite. Awaiting his execution, the Christians begin praying.<sup>4</sup> Peter is placed in a Christ-like role, awaiting execution around Passover, and Agrippa takes the role of Pilate.

**12:6-11** In prison, Peter is chained between two soldiers, and more soldiers guard the cell, similar to how Jesus was crucified between two thieves and sentries guarding his tomb (Luke 23:32-33, Matt 28:4).<sup>5</sup> Peter is woken up by an angel shining light into the cell. The angel "struck" (πατάξας) Peter on the side to wake him and commanded him to get dressed (vv.7-9). This word πατάξας can mean to tap gently or cut with the sword like in Luke 22:50. This creates Peter's "death" in this story, creating an allusion to Jesus's death and piercing with a spear (John 19:34). The angel brings light, the release of chains, and extends liberty to Peter, which is what Jesus claimed was being fulfilled through him in Luke 4:18-19 when he quoted Isaiah 61. The angel leads Peter out through the prison, while Peter thinks he is in a vision (v.9). They pass by the two guards, and the iron gate opens of its own accord (v.10). The angel leaves Peter after delivering him out of prison, and Peter fully wakes up to realize that "the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting (v.11)." Peter was delivered from the power of Herod and has been set free, just like Jesus did when he was resurrected.

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus. *Antiquities of the Jews*. Book IX, Chapter 5. The people in question include emperor Tiberius and the future emperor Claudius.

<sup>2</sup> James the brother of John, one of the "sons of thunder." His suffering and sacrifice were foretold in Mark 10:35-45 when Jesus implies to them that being at his right hand will involve sacrifice.

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 23:4-8

<sup>4</sup> The execution of James was a shock to the early church, as James was the first of the original apostles to be killed. It would create an anxious fever when Peter is also imprisoned and an uncertainty if God will actually save them from their enemies.

<sup>5</sup> This was also standard practice at the time, where four squads of four soldiers guard for the four three-hour watches of the night. *ESV: Study Bible: English Standard Version*. Crossway Bibles, 2016.

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**12:12-19** Peter then goes to the house of John Mark's mother, where the Christians are gathered to pray for him (v.12). He knocks on the door and is answered by a servant girl named Rhoda. She was so excited by the return of Peter that she ran back to the disciples leaving Peter at the door (vv.13-14). The disciples did not believe that Peter could have escaped. They thought Rhoda was "out of her mind" or that it was Peter's angel<sup>6</sup> (vv.15-16). This scenario happened before with Jesus' resurrection when women tell the men about his return and are dismissed as crazy (Luke 24:10-11). Jesus is also believed to be a spirit in Luke 24:37. They eventually answer the door and are amazed at his appearance. All begin to speak at once (v.16). Peter quiets them before explaining how he was freed by the angel and tells them to relay this to the other brothers, which is comparable to the women's message of Jesus in Luke 24 (v.17). Peter then departs and goes to "another place" with a new "life," which creates ambiguity about where he went, signifying a sort of "ascension." Agrippa kills the guards to suppress the story and then leaves for Caesarea (not Caeserea Phillippi). Lastly, Agrippa appears on his throne with his royal robes<sup>7</sup> during peace talks, and the people say he has the "voice of a God" (vv.20-22). Herod is struck down by an angel of God because he "did not give God the glory (v.23)." Luke then relays that he was eaten by worms. Herod's sudden death is corroborated by Josephus, who describes Agrippa dying in extreme pain, which began after a crowd at Caesarea praised him as a god or at least "superior to mortal nature."<sup>8</sup>

These stories, back to back, contrast the political opportunist Herod Agrippa with the patient and God-fearing Peter. Where Agrippa acted to increase his power and respect among the Jewish elite, Peter did what God demanded. Agrippa assumes the honor and authority of a god, whereas Peter thanks God for what He does for him. In addition, the undercurrent of Jesus' death and resurrection is placed beneath Peter's imprisonment. This comparison was not done to elevate Peter to the status of Jesus but to demonstrate that while Jesus is no longer physically on earth, his people will act on his behalf and suffer the same things that Jesus suffered. Peter will not appear for most of the rest of the book of Acts, and Paul will come to occupy the spot of the God-fearing believer carrying out Jesus' mission through the Spirit.

## **Conclusion**

This story of Peter and Herod Agrippa is blanketed with themes of prayer in the face of adversity and living like Jesus despite the political powers at work. While preaching the news of Jesus, Herod Agrippa chooses to put Peter to death to continue his good relationship with the Jews. Peter is delivered from death by God, who hears the prayer of the other disciples. For this, Peter gives God glory. Against evil and death, the followers of Jesus should rely on prayer and should also rely on God to deliver them. Against corruption and death, followers of Jesus are called to rely on God through prayer, all the while trusting that God will use whatever the circumstances to bring about our ultimate good and His ultimate glory.

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<sup>6</sup> The Greek word here is ἄγγελος, the same word used for angel elsewhere. They could believe that Peter was killed and then God raised up his spirit to be "like an angel." Or this could be an angel in the likeness of Peter as there are a few rabbinic stories that describe angels looking like men. See Ruth Rabbah 5:6 and Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 18:4.

<sup>7</sup> Josephus describes his royal robes as made of silver so that the light could reflect off it, making his flatters cry out that he was a god. Josephus. *Antiquities of the Jews*. Book IX, Chapter 8.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that Josephus views Agrippa in a much greater light than the portrait in Acts. This is emblematic of a greater divide between the Messianic Jews and the Jewish elite. Josephus. *Antiquities of the Jews*. Book IX, Chapter 8.