

CHAPTER 12

In this chapter we have the story,

I. Of the martyrdom of James the apostle, and the imprisonment of Peter by Herod Agrippa, who now reigned as king in Judea (v. 14).

II. The miraculous deliverance of Peter out of prison by the ministry of an angel, in answer to the prayers of the church for him (v. 619).

III. The cutting off of Herod in the height of his pride by the stroke of an angel, the minister of God's justice (v. 20-23); and this was done while Barnabas and Saul were at Jerusalem, upon the errand that the church of Antioch sent them on, to carry their charity; and therefore in the close we have an account of their return to Antioch (v. 24, 25).

ACTS 12:14

THE MARTYRDOM OF JAMES

Ever since the conversion of Paul, we have heard no more of the agency of the priests in persecuting the saints at Jerusalem; perhaps that wonderful change wrought upon him, and the disappointment it gave to their design upon the Christians at Damascus, had somewhat mollified them, and brought them under the check of Gamaliel's advice to *let those men alone*, and see what would be the issue; but here the storm arises from another point. The civil power, not now, as usual (for aught that appears) stirred up by the ecclesiastics, acts by itself in the persecution. But Herod, though originally of an Edomite family, yet seems to have been a proselyte to the Jewish religion; for Josephus says he was zealous for the Mosaic rites, a bigot for the ceremonies. He was not only (as Herod Antipas was) tetrarch of Galilee, but had also the government of Judea committed to him by Claudius the emperor, and resided most at Jerusalem, where he was at this time. Three things we are here told he did:

I. He *stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church*, v. 1. His stretching forth his hands to it intimates that his hands had been tied up by the restraints which perhaps his own conscience held him under in this matter; but now he broke through them, and stretched forth his hands deliberately, and of malice prepense. *Herod laid hands upon some of the church to afflict them*, so some read it; he employed his officers to seize them, and take them into custody, in order to their being prosecuted. See how he advances gradually.

1. He began with some of the members of the church, certain of them that were of less note and figure; played first at small game, but afterwards flew at the apostles themselves. His spite was at the church, and, with regard to those he gave trouble to, it was not upon any other account, but because they belonged to the church, and so belonged to Christ.

2. He began with vexing them only, or afflicting them, imprisoning them, fining them, spoiling their houses and goods, and other ways molesting them; but afterwards he proceeded to greater instances of cruelty. Christ's suffering servants are thus trained up by less troubles for greater, *that tribulation may work patience, and patience experience*.

II. *He killed James the brother of John with the sword*, v. 2. We are here to consider,

1. Who the martyr was: it was *James the brother of John*; so called to distinguish him from the other James the brother of Joses. This was called *Jacobus major* *James the greater*; that, *minor-the less*. This who was here crowned with martyrdom was one of the first three of Christ's disciples, one of those that were *the witnesses of his transfiguration and agony*, whereby he was prepared for martyrdom; he was one of those whom Christ called *Boanerges* *Sons of thunder*; and perhaps by his powerful awakening preaching he had provoked Herod, or those about him, as John Baptist did the other Herod, and that was the occasion of his coming into this trouble. He was one of those sons of Zebedee whom Christ told *that they should drink of the cup that he was to drink of, and be baptized with the baptism that he was to be baptized with*, ^{<48B>}Matthew 20:23. And now those words of Christ were made good in him; but it was in order to his sitting at Christ's right hand; for *if we suffer with him, we shall reign with him*. He was one of the twelve who were commissioned *to disciple all nations*; and to take him off now, before he had removed from Jerusalem,

was like Cain's killing Abel when the world was to be peopled, and one man was then more than many at another time. To kill an apostle now was killing he knew not how many. But why would God permit it? If *the blood of his saints*, much more the blood of apostles, *is precious in his eyes*, and therefore, we may be sure, is not shed but upon a valuable consideration. Perhaps God intended hereby to awaken the rest of the apostles to disperse themselves among the nations, and not to nestle any longer at Jerusalem. Or it was to show that though the apostles were appointed *to plant the gospel in the world*, yet if they were taken off God could do his work without them, and would do it. The apostle died a martyr, to show the rest of them what they must expect, that they might prepare accordingly. The tradition that they have in the Romish church, that this James had been before this in Spain, and had planted the gospel there, is altogether groundless; nor is there any certainty of it, or good authority for it.

2. What kind of death he suffered: He was slain *with the sword*, that is, his head was *cut off with a sword*, which was looked upon by the Romans to be a more disgraceful way of being beheaded than with an axe; so Lorinus. Beheading was not ordinarily used among the Jews; but, when kings gave verbal orders for private and sudden executions, this manner of death was used, as most expeditious; and it is probable that this Herod killed James, as the other Herod killed John Baptist, privately *in the prison*. It is strange that we have not a more full and particular account of the martyrdom of this great apostle, as we had of Stephen. But even this short mention of the thing is sufficient to let us know that the first preachers of the gospel were so well assured of the truth of it that they sealed it with their blood, and thereby have encouraged us, if at any time we are called to it, *to resist unto blood too*. The Old-Testament martyrs were *slain with the sword* (⁸¹⁵Hebrews 11:37), and Christ *came not to send peace, but a sword* (⁴⁰⁸Matthew 10:34), in preparation for which we must arm ourselves *with the sword of the Spirit*, which is the word of God, and then we need not fear *what the sword of men can do unto us*.

III. He imprisoned Peter, of whom he had heard most, as making the greatest figure among the apostles and whom therefore he would be proud of the honour of taking off. Observe here,

1. When he had beheaded James, *he proceeded further*, he added, *to take Peter also*. Note, Blood to the blood-thirsty does but make them more so, and the way of persecution, as of other sins, is downhill; when men are in

it, they cannot easily stop themselves; when they are in they find they must on. *Male facta male factis tegere ne perpluant* One evil deed is covered with another, so that there is no passage through them. Those that take one bold step in a sinful way give Satan advantage against them to tempt them to take another, and provoke God to leave them to them-selves, to go from bad to worse. It is therefore our wisdom to take heed of the beginnings of sin.

2. He did this *because he saw it pleased the Jews*. Observe, The Jews made themselves guilty of the blood of James by showing themselves well pleased with it afterwards, though they had not excited Herod to it. There are accessaries *ex post facto* after the fact; and those will be reckoned with as persecutors who take pleasure in others' persecuting, who delight to see good men ill used, and cry, *Aha, so would we have it*, or at least secretly approve of it. For bloody persecutors, when they perceive themselves applauded for that which every one ought to cry shame upon them for, are encouraged to go on, and have their hands strengthened and their hearts hardened, and the checks of their own consciences smothered; nay, it is as strong a temptation to them to do the like as it was here to Herod, *because he saw it pleased the Jews*. Though he had no reason to fear displeasing them if he did not, as Pilate condemned Christ, yet he hoped to please them by doing it, and so to make an interest among them, and make amends for displeasing them in something else. Note, Those make themselves an easy prey to Satan who make it their business to please men.

3. Notice is taken of the time when Herod laid hold on Peter: *Then were the days of unleavened bread*. It was at the feast of the passover, when their celebrating the memorial of their typical deliverance should have led them to the acceptance of their spiritual deliverance; instead of this, they, under pretence of zeal for the law, were most violently fighting against it, and, in *the days of unleavened bread*, were most soured and embittered with the old leaven of malice and wickedness. At the passover, when *the Jews came from all parts to Jerusalem to keep the feast*, they irritated one another against the Christians and Christianity, and were then more violent than at other times.

4. Here is an account of Peter's imprisonment (v. 4): *When he had laid hands on him, and, it is likely, examined him, he put him in prison*, into the inner prison; some say, into the same prison into which he and the

other apostles were cast some years before, and were rescued out of it by an angel, ~~4158~~ Acts 5:18. He was *delivered to four quaternions of soldiers*, that is, to sixteen, who were to be a guard upon him, four at a time, that he should not make his escape, nor be rescued by his friends. Thus they thought they had him fast.

5. Herod's design was, *after Easter, to bring him forth unto the people.*

(1.) He would make a spectacle of him. Probably he had put James to death privately, which the people had complained of, not because it was an unjust thing to put a man to death without giving him a public hearing, but because it deprived them of the satisfaction of seeing him executed; and therefore Herod, now he knows their minds, will gratify them with the sight of Peter in bonds, of Peter upon the block, that they may feed their eyes with such a pleasing spectacle. And very ambitious surely he was to please the people who was willing thus to please them!

(2.) He would do this *after Easter, meta to pascha after the passover*, certainly so it ought to be read, for it is the same word that is always so rendered; and to insinuate the introducing of a gospel-feast, instead of the passover, when we have nothing in the New Testament of such a thing, is to mingle Judaism with our Christianity. Herod would not condemn him till the passover was over, some think, for fear lest he should have such an interest among the people that they should demand the release of him, according to the custom of the feast: or, after the hurry of the feast was over, and the town was empty, he would entertain them with Peter's public trial and execution. Thus was the plot laid, and both Herod and the people long to have the feast over, that they may gratify themselves with this barbarous entertainment.

~~4115~~ ACTS 12:519

PETER'S IMPRISONMENT AND DELIVERANCE

We have here an account of Peter's deliverance out of prison, by which the design of Herod against him was defeated, and his life preserved for further service, and a stop given to this bloody torrent. Now,

I. One thing that magnified his deliverance was that it was a signal answer to prayer (v. 5): *Peter was kept in prison with a great deal of care, so that it was altogether impossible, either by force or by stealth, to get him out. But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him, for prayers and tears are the church's arms; therewith she fights, not only against her enemies, but for her friends: and to these means they have recourse.*

1. The delay of Peter's trial gave them time for prayer. It is probable that James was hurried off so suddenly and so privately that they had not time to pray for him, God so ordering it that they should not have space to pray, when he designed they should not have the thing they prayed for. James must be offered upon the sacrifice and service of their faith, and therefore prayer for him is restrained and prevented; but Peter must be continued to them, and therefore prayer for him is stirred up, and time is given them for it, by Herod's putting off the prosecution. *Howbeit, he meant not so, neither did his heart think so.*

2. They were very particular in their prayers for him, that it would please God, some way or other, to defeat Herod's purpose, and to snatch the lamb out of the jaws of the lion. The death of James alarmed them to a greater fervency in their prayer for Peter; for, if they be broken thus with breach upon breach, they fear that the enemy will make a full end. Stephen is not, and James is not, and will they take Peter also? All these things are against them; this will be sorrow upon sorrow, ^{<3827>}Philippians 2:27. Note, Though the death and sufferings of Christ's ministers may be made greatly to serve the interests of Christ's kingdom, yet it is the duty and concern of the church earnestly to pray for their life, liberty, and tranquillity; and sometimes Providence orders it that they are brought into imminent danger, to stir up prayer for them.

3. *Prayer was made without ceasing*; it was, *proseuche ektenes* fervent prayer. It is the word that is used concerning Christ's praying in his agony more earnestly; it is *the fervent prayer of the righteous man, that is effectual, and availeth much*. Some think it denotes the constancy and continuance of their prayers; so we take it: *They prayed without ceasing*. It was an extended prayer; they prayed for his release in their public assemblies (private ones, perhaps, *for fear of the Jews*); then they went home, and prayed for it in their families; then retired into their closets, and prayed for it there; so *they prayed without ceasing*: or first one knot of

them, and then another, and then a third, kept a day of prayer, or rather a night of prayer, for him, v. 12. Note, Times of public distress and danger should be praying times with the church; we must pray always, but then especially.

II. Another thing that magnified his deliverance was that *when the king's commandment and decree drew near to be put in execution*, then his deliverance was wrought, as ^{<791>}Esther 9:1, 2. Let us observe when his deliverance came.

1. It was the very night before Herod designed to bring him forth, which made it to be so much the greater consolation to his friends and confusion to his enemies. It is probable some who had an interest in Herod, or those about him, had been improving it to get a discharge for Peter, but in vain; Herod resolves he shall die. And now they despair of prevailing in this way, for to-morrow is *the day set for the bringing of him forth*; and, it is likely, they will make as quick work with him as with his Master; and now God opened a door of escape for him. Note, God's time to help is when things are brought to the last extremity, when there is none shut up nor left (^{<4526>}Deuteronomy 32:36), and for this reason it has been said, "The worse the better." When Isaac is bound upon the altar, and the knife in the hand, and the hand stretched out to slay him, then *Jehovah-jireh, the Lord will provide*.

2. It was when he was *fast bound with two chains, between two soldiers*; so that if he offer to stir he wakes them; and, besides this, though the prison-doors, no doubt, were locked and bolted, yet, to make sure work, *the keepers before the door kept the prison*, that no one might so much as attempt to rescue him. Never could the art of man do more to secure a prisoner. Herod, no doubt, said, as Pilate (^{<4276>}Matthew 27:65), *make it as sure as you can*. When men will think to be too hard for God, God will make it appear that he is too hard for them.

3. It was when he was *sleeping between the soldiers*, fast asleep;

(1.) Not terrified with his danger, though it was very imminent, and there was no visible way for his escape. There was but a step between him and death, and yet he could lay himself down in peace, and sleepsleep in the midst of his enemies sleep when, it may be, they were awake, having a good cause that he suffered for, and a good conscience that he suffered with, and being assured that God would issue his trial that way that should

be most for his glory. Having *committed his cause to him that judgeth righteously, his soul dwells at ease*; and even in prison, between two soldiers, God gives him sleep, as he doth to his beloved.

(2.) Not expecting his deliverance. He did not keep awake, looking to the right hand, or to the left, for relief, but lay asleep, and was perfectly surprised with his deliverance. Thus the church (~~1401~~ Psalm 126:1): *We were like those that dream.*

III. It also magnified his deliverance very much that an *angel was sent from heaven* on purpose to rescue him, which made his escape both practicable and warrantable. This angel brought him a legal discharge, and enabled him to make use of it.

1. *The angel of the Lord came upon him; epeste stood over him.* He seemed as one abandoned by men, yet not forgotten of his God; *The Lord thinketh upon him.* Gates and guards kept all his friends from him, but could not keep the angels of God from him: and *they invisibly encamp round about those that fear God, to deliver them* (~~1402~~ Psalm 34:7), and therefore they need not fear, though a host of enemies encamp against them, ~~1403~~ Psalm 27:3. Wherever the people of God are, and however surrounded, they have a way open heavenward, nor can any thing intercept their intercourse with God.

2. *A light shone in the prison.* Though it is a dark place, and in the night, Peter shall see his way clear. Some observe that we do not find in the Old Testament that where angels appeared *the light shone round about them*; for that was a dark dispensation, and the glory of angels was then veiled. But in the New Testament, when mention is made of the appearing of the angels, notice is taken of the light that they appeared in; for it is by the gospel that the upper world is brought to light. The soldiers to whom Peter was chained were either struck into a deep sleep for the present (as Saul and his soldiers were when David carried off his spear and cruise of water), or, if they were awake, the appearance of the angel made them to *shake, and to become as dead men*, as it was with the guard set on Christ's sepulchre.

3. The angel awoke Peter, by giving him *a blow on his side*, a gentle touch, enough to rouse him out of his sleep, though so fast asleep that the light that shone upon him did not awaken him. When good people slumber in a time of danger, and are not awakened by the light of the word, and the

discoveries it gives them, let them expect to be smitten on the side by some sharp affliction; better be raised up so than left asleep. The language of this stroke was, *Arise up quickly*; not as if the angel feared coming short by his delay, but Peter must not be indulged in it. When David hears *the sound of the going on the tops of the mulberry trees, then he must rise up quickly, and bestir himself*.

4. *His chains fell off from his hands*. It seems they had handcuffed him, to make him sure, but *God loosed his bands*; and, if they fall off from his hands, it is as well as if he had the strength of Samson to break them like threads of tow. Tradition makes a mighty rout about these chains, and tells a formal story that one of the soldiers kept them for a sacred relic, and they were long after presented to Eudoxia the empress, and I know not what miracles are said to have been wrought by them; and the Romish church keeps a feast on the first of August yearly in remembrance of Peter's chains, *festum vinculorum Petri The feast of Peter's chains*; whereas this was at the passover. Surely they are thus fond of Peter's chains in hope with them to enslave the world!

5. He was ordered to dress himself immediately, and follow the angel; and he did so, v. 8, 9. When Peter was awake he knew not what to do but as the angel directed him.

(1.) He must *gird himself*; for those that slept in their clothes ungirded themselves, so that they had nothing to do, when they got up, but to fasten their girdles.

(2.) He *must bind on his sandals*, that he might be fit to walk. Those whose bonds are loosed by the power of divine grace must have *their feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace*.

(3.) He must *cast his garments about him*, and come away as he was, and follow the angel; and he might go with a great deal of courage and cheerfulness who had a messenger from heaven for his guide and guard. He *went out, and followed him*. Those who are delivered out of a spiritual imprisonment must follow their deliverer, as Israel when they went out of the house of bondage did; they *went out, not knowing whither they went*, but whom they followed. Now it is said, when Peter went out after the angel, *he knew not that it was true which was done by the angel*, that it was really a matter of fact, *but thought he saw a vision*; and, if he did, it was not the first he had seen: but by this it appears that a heavenly vision

was so plain, and carried so much of its own evidence along with it, that it was difficult to distinguish between what was done in fact and what was done in vision. *When the Lord brought back the captivity of his people we were like those that dream,* ^{<BGT>}Psalm 126:1. Peter was so; he thought the news was too good to be true.

6. He was led safely by the angel out of danger, v. 10. Guards were kept at one pass and at another, which they were to make their way through when they were out of the prison, and they did so without any opposition; nay, for aught that appears, without any discovery: either their eyes were closed; or their hands were tied, or their hearts failed them; so it was that the angel and Peter safely *passed the first and second ward*. Those watchmen represented the watchmen of the Jewish church, on whom God had *poured out a spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear,* ^{<SIB>}Romans 11:8. His *watchmen are blind, sleeping, lying down, and loving to slumber*. But still there is an iron gate, after all, that will stop them, and, if the guards can but recover themselves, there they may recover their prisoner, as Pharaoh hoped to retake Israel at the Red Sea. However, up to that gate they march, and, like the Red Sea before Israel, it *opened to them*. They did not so much as put a hand to it, but it opened *of its own accord*, by an invisible power; and thus was fulfilled in the letter what was figuratively promised to Cyrus (^{<SIB>}Isaiah 45:1, 2): *I will open before him the two-leaved gates, will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron*. And probably the iron gate shut again of itself, that none of the guards might pursue Peter. Note, When God will work salvation for his people, no difficulties in their way are insuperable; but even gates of iron are made to open of their own accord. This iron gate led him into the city out of the castle or tower; whether within the gates of the city or without is not certain, so that, when they were through this, they were got into the street. This deliverance of Peter represents to us our redemption by Christ, which is often spoken of as the setting of prisoners free, not only the proclaiming of liberty to the captives, but the *bringing of them out of the prison-house*. The application of the redemption in the conversion of souls is the *sending forth of the prisoners, by the blood of the covenant, out of the pit wherein is no water,* ^{<SIB>}Zechariah 9:11. The grace of God, like this angel of the Lord, brings light first into the prison, by the opening of the understanding, smites the sleeping sinner on the side by the awakening of the conscience, causes the chains to fall off from the hands by the renewing of the will, and then

gives the word of command, *Gird thyself, and follow me*. Difficulties are to be passed through, and the opposition of Satan and his instruments, a first and second ward, an untoward generation, from which we are concerned to save ourselves; and we shall be saved by the grace of God, if we put ourselves under the divine conduct. And at length the iron gate shall be opened to us, to enter into the New Jerusalem, where we shall be perfectly freed from all the marks of our captivity, and brought into the *glorious liberty of the children of God*.

7. When this was done, *the angel departed from him*, and left him to himself. He was out of danger from his enemies, and needed no guard. He knew where he was, and how to find out his friends, and needed no guide, and therefore his heavenly guard and guide bids him farewell. Note, Miracles are not to be expected when ordinary means are to be used. When Peter has now no more wards to pass, nor iron gates to get through, he needs only the ordinary invisible ministration of the angels, who encamp round about those that fear God, and deliver them.

IV. Having seen how his deliverance was magnified, we are next to see how it was manifested both to himself and others, and how, being made great, it was made known. We are here told,

1. How Peter came to himself, and so came himself to the knowledge of it, v. 11. So many strange and surprising things coming together upon a man just awoke out of sleep put him for the present into some confusion; so that he knew not where he was, nor what he did, nor whether it was fancy or fact; but at length Peter *came to himself*, was thoroughly awake, and found that it was not a dream, but a real thing: “*Now I know of a surety, now I know [alethos](#) truly*, now I know that it is truth, and not an illusion of the fancy. Now I am well satisfied concerning it *that the Lord Jesus hath sent his angel*, for angels are subject to him and go on his errands, and by him *hath delivered me out of the hands of Herod*, who thought he had me fast, and so hath disappointed *all the expectation of the people of the Jews*, who doubted not to see Peter cut off the next day, and hoped it was the one neck of Christianity, in which it would all be struck off at one blow.” For this reason it was a cause of great expectation, among not only the common people, but the great people of the Jews. Peter, when he recollected himself, *perceived of a truth* what great things God had done for him, which at first he could not believe for joy. Thus souls who are delivered out of a spiritual bondage are not at first aware what God has

wrought in them. Many have the truth of grace that want the evidence of it. They are questioning whether there be indeed this change wrought in them, or whether they have not been all this while in a dream. But *when the Comforter comes, whom the Father will send* sooner or later, he will let them know of a surety what a blessed change is wrought in them, and what a happy state they are brought into.

2. How Peter came to his friends, and brought the knowledge of it to them. Here is a particular account of this, and it is very interesting.

(1.) He *considered the thing* (v. 12), considered how imminent his danger was, how great his deliverance; and now what has he to do? What improvement must he make of this deliverance? What must he do next? God's providence leaves room for the use of our prudence; and, though he has undertaken to perform and perfect what he has begun, yet he expects we should consider the thing.

(2.) He went directly to a friend's house, which, it is likely, lay near to the place where he was; it was the house of Mary, a sister of Barnabas, and mother of John Mark, whose house, it should seem, was frequently made use of for the private meeting of the disciples, either because it lay obscure, or because she was more forward than others were to open her doors to them; and, no doubt, it was, like the house of Obededom, blessed for the ark's sake. A church in the house makes it a little sanctuary.

(3.) There he found *many* that were *gathered together praying*, at the dead time of the night, praying for Peter, who was the next day to come upon his trial, that God would find out some way or other for his deliverance. Observe,

[1.] They continued in prayer, in token of their importunity; they did not think it enough once to have presented his case to God, but they did it again and again. Thus *men ought always to pray, and not to faint*. As long as we are kept waiting for a mercy we must continue praying for it.

[2.] It should seem that now when the affair came near to a crisis, and the very next day was fixed for the determining of it, they were more fervent in prayer than before; and it was a good sign that God intended to deliver Peter when he thus stirred up a spirit of prayer for his deliverance, for he never *said to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye my face in vain*.

[3.] They gathered together for prayer on this occasion; though this would made them obnoxious to the government if they were discovered, yet they know what an encouragement Christ gave to joint-prayer, ^{<183>}Matthew 18:19, 20. And it was always the practice of God's praying people to unite their forces in prayer, as ^{<104>}2 Chronicles 20:4; ^{<1746>}Esther 4:16.

[4.] They were many that were got together for this work, as many perhaps as the room would hold; and first one prayed, and then another, of those who gave themselves to the word and prayer, the rest joining with them; or, if they had not ministers among them, no doubt but there were many private Christians that knew how to pray, and to pray pertinently, and to continue long in prayer when the affections of those who joined were so stirred as to keep pace with them upon such an occasion. This was in the night, when others were asleep, which was an instance both of their prudence and of their zeal. Note, It is good for Christians to have private meetings for prayer, especially in times of distress, and not to let fall nor forsake such assemblies.

[5.] Peter came to them when they were thus employed, which was an immediate present answer to their prayer. It was as if God should say, "You are praying that Peter may be restored to you; now here he is." *While they are yet speaking, I will hear,* ^{<262>}Isaiah 65:24. Thus the angel was sent with an answer of peace to Daniel's prayer, *while he was praying,* ^{<200>}Daniel 9:20, 21. *Ask, and it shall be given.*

(4.) He knocked at the gate, and had much ado to get them to let him in (v. 13-16): *Peter knocked at the door of the gate,* designing by it to awaken them out of their sleep, and, for aught that appears, not knowing that he disturbed them in their devotions. Yet, if his friends were permitted to speak with him in private in the prison, it is possible he might know of this appointment, and it was this which he recollected and considered when he determined to go to that house, where he knew he should find many of his friends together. Now when he knocked there,

[1.] A *damsel came to hearken;* not to open the door till she knew who was there, a friend or a foe, and what their business was, fearing informers. Whether this damsel was one of the family or one of the church, whether a servant or a daughter, does not appear; it should seem, by her being named, that she was of note among the Christians, and more zealously affected to the better part than most of her age.


[2.] She knew Peter's voice, having often heard him pray, and preach, and discourse, with a great deal of pleasure. But, instead of letting him in immediately out of the cold, *she opened not the gate for gladness*. Thus sometimes, in a transport of affection to our friends, we do that which is unkind. In an ecstasy of joy she forgets herself, and *opened not the gate*.

[3.] She ran in, and probably went up to an upper room where they were together, and told them that Peter was certainly at the gate, though she had not courage enough to open the gate, for fear she should be deceived, and it should be the enemy. But, when she spoke of Peter's being there, they said, "*Thou art mad; it is impossible it should be he, for he is in prison.*" Sometimes that which we most earnestly wish for we are most backward to believe, because we are afraid of imposing upon ourselves, as the disciples, who, when Christ had risen, *believed not for joy*. However, she stood to it that it was he. Then said they, *It is his angel*, v. 15. *First*, "It is a messenger from him, that makes use of his name;" so some take it; *angelos* often signifies no more than a messenger. It is used of John's messengers (~~104~~Luke 7:24, 27), of Christ's, ~~105~~Luke 9:52. When the damsel was confident it was Peter, because she knew his voice, they thought it was because he that stood at the door had called himself Peter, and therefore offer this solution of the difficulty, "It is one that comes with an errand from him, and thou didst mistake as if it had been he himself." Dr. Hammond thinks this the easiest way of understanding it. *Secondly*, "It is his guardian angel, or some other angel that has assumed his shape and voice, and stands at the gate in his resemblance." Some think that they supposed his angel to appear as a presage of his death approaching; and this agrees with a notion which the vulgar have, that sometimes before persons have died *their ward has been seen*, that is, some spirit exactly in their likeness for countenance and dress, when they themselves have been at the same time in some other place; they call it their *ward*, that is, their angel, who is their guard. If so, they concluded this an ill omen, that their prayers were denied, and that the language of the apparition was, "Let it suffice you, Peter must die, say no more of that matter." And, if we understand it so, it only proves that they had then such an opinion of a man's *ward* being seen a little before his death, but does not prove that there is such a thing. Others think they took this to be an angel from heaven, sent to bring them a grant to their prayers. But why should they imagine that angel to assume the voice and shape of Peter, when we find not any thing like it in the appearance of angels? Perhaps they herein

spoke the language of the Jews, who had a fond conceit that every good man has a particular tutelar angel, that has the charge of him, and sometimes personates him. the heathen called it a *good genius*, that attended a man; but, since no other scripture speaks of such a thing, this alone is too weak to bear the weight of such a doctrine. We are sure that the angels are *ministering spirits* for the good of *the heirs of salvation*, that they have a *charge concerning them*, and *pitch their tents round about them*; and we need not be solicitous that every particular saint should have his guardian angel, when we are assured he has a guard of angels.

(5.) At length they let him in (v. 16): *He continued knocking* though they delayed to open to him, and at last they admitted him. The iron gate which opposed his enlargement opened of itself, without so much as once knocking at it; but the door of his friend's house that was to welcome him does not open of its own accord, but must be knocked at, long knocked at; lest Peter should be puffed up by the honours which the angel did him, he meets with this mortification, by a seeming slight which his friends put upon him. But, *when they saw him, they were astonished*, were filled with wonder and joy in him, as much as they were but just now with sorrow and fear concerning him. It was both surprising and pleasing to them in the highest degree.

(6.) Peter gave them an account of his deliverance. When he came to the company that were gathered together with so much zeal to pray for him, they gathered about him with no less zeal to congratulate him on his deliverance; and herein they were so noisy that when Peter himself begged them to consider what peril he was yet in, if they should be overheard, he could not make them hear him, but was forced to *beckon to them with the hand to hold their peace*, and had much ado thereby to command silence, while *he declared unto them how the Lord Jesus had by an angel brought him out of prison*; and it is very likely, having found them praying for his deliverance, he did not part with them till he and they had together solemnly given thanks to God for his enlargement; or, if he could not stay to do it, it is probable they staid together to do it; for what is won by prayer must be worn with praise; and God must always have the glory of that which we have the comfort of. When David declares *what God had done for his soul*, he blesses God who had not turned away his prayer,

 Psalm 66:16, 20.

(7.) Peter sent the account to others of his friends: *Go, show these things to James, and to the brethren with him*, who perhaps were met together in another place at the same time, upon the same errand to the throne of grace, which is one way of keeping up the communion of saints and wrestling with God in prayeracting in concert, though at a distance, like Esther and Mordecai. He would have James and his company to know of his deliverance, not only that they might be eased of their pain and delivered from their fears concerning Peter, but that they might return thanks to God with him and for him. Observe, Though Herod had slain one James with the sword, yet here was another James, and that in Jerusalem too, that stood up in his room to preside among the brethren there; for, when God has work to do, he will never want instruments to do it with.

(8.) Peter had nothing more to do for the present than to shift for his own safety, which he did accordingly: *He departed, and went into another place more obscure*, and therefore more safe. He knew the town very well, and knew where to find a place that would be a shelter to him. Note, Even the Christian law of self-denial and suffering for Christ has not abrogated and repealed the natural law of self-preservation, and care for our own safety, as far as God gives an opportunity of providing for it by lawful means.

V. Having seen the triumph of Peter's friends in his deliverance, let us next observe the confusion of his enemies thereupon, which was so much the greater because people's expectation was so much raised of the putting of him to death.

1. The guards were in the utmost consternation upon it, for they knew how highly penal it was to them to let a prisoner escape that they had charge of (v. 18): *As soon as it was day*, and they found the prisoner gone, there was *no small stir or strife*, as some read it, *among the soldiers, what had become of Peter*; he is gone, and nobody knows how or which way. They thought themselves as sure as could be of him but last night; yet now the bird is flown, and they can hear no tale nor tidings of him. This set them together by the ears; one says, "It was your fault;" the other, "Nay, but it was yours;" having no other way to clear themselves, but by accusing one another. With us, if but a prisoner for debt escape, the sheriff must answer for the debt. Thus have the persecutors of the gospel of Christ been often

filled with vexation to see its cause conquering, notwithstanding the opposition they have given to it.

2. Houses were searched in vain for the rescued prisoner (v. 19): *Herod sought for him, and found him not.* Who can find whom God hath hidden? Baruch and Jeremiah are safe, though searched for, because *the Lord has hidden them,* ²⁸³Jeremiah 36:26. In times of public danger, all believers have God for *their hiding-place*, which is such a secret, that there the ignorant world cannot find them; such a strength, that the impotent world cannot reach them.

3. The keepers were reckoned with for a permissive escape: *Herod examined the keepers,* and finding that they could give no satisfactory account how Peter got away, *he commanded that they should be put to death,* according to the Roman law, and that ¹⁷⁸1 Kings 20:39, *If by any means he be missing, then shall thy life go for his life.* It is probable that these keepers had been more severe with Peter than they needed to be (as the jailor, ⁴¹²Acts 16:24), and had been abusive to him, and to others that had been their prisoners upon the like account; and now justly are they put to death for that which was not their fault, and by him too that had set them to work to *vex the church.* When the wicked are thus snared in the work of their own hands, the Lord is known by the judgments which he executes. Or, if they had not thus made themselves obnoxious to the justice of God, and it be thought hard that innocent men should suffer thus for that which was purely the act of God, we may easily admit the conjectures of some, that though they were *commanded to be put to death,* to please the Jews, who were sadly disappointed by Peter's escape, yet they were not executed; but Herod's death, immediately after, prevented it.

4. Herod himself retired upon it: *He went down from Judea to Cesarea, and there abode.* He was vexed to the heart, as a lion disappointed of his prey; and the more because he had so much raised the *expectation of the people of the Jews* concerning Peter, had told them how he would very shortly gratify them with the sight of Peter's head in a charger, which would oblige them as much as John Baptist's did Herodias; it made him ashamed to be robbed of this boasting, and to see himself, notwithstanding his confidence, disabled to make his words good. This is such a mortification to his proud spirit that he cannot bear to stay in Judea, but away he goes to Cesarea. Josephus mentions this coming of Herod to Cesarea, at the end of the third year of his reign over all Judea (*Antiq.*

19.343), and says, he came thither to solemnize the plays that were kept there, by a vast concourse of the nobility and gentry of the kingdom, for the health of Caesar, and in honour of him.

ACTS 12:20-25

THE DEATH OF HEROD

In these verses we have,

I. The death of Herod. God reckoned with him, not only for his putting James to death, but for his design and endeavour to put Peter to death; for sinners will be called to an account, not only for the wickedness of their deeds, but for the wickedness of their endeavours (³¹⁸Psalm 28:4), for the mischief they have done and the mischief they would have done. It was but a little while that Herod lived after this. Some sinners God makes quick work with. Observe,

1. How the measure of his iniquity was filled up: it was *pride* that did it; it is this that commonly goes more immediately *before destruction*, and a *haughty spirit before a fall*. Nebuchadnezzar had been a very bloody man, and a great persecutor; but the word that was in the king's mouth when the judgments of God fell upon him was a proud word: *Is not this great Babylon that I have built?* (²⁷⁸Daniel 4:30, 31. It is the glory of God to *look on every one that is proud, and bring him low*, (³⁴¹Job 40:12. The instance of it here is very remarkable, and shows how God *resists the proud*.

(1.) The men of Tyre and Sidon had, it seems, offended Herod. Those cities were now under the Roman yoke, and they had been guilty of some misdemeanours which Herod highly resented, and was resolved they should feel his resentment. Some very small matter would serve such a proud imperious man as Herod was for a provocation, where he was disposed to pick a quarrel. He was highly displeased with this people, and they must be made to know that his wrath was as the *roaring of a lion, as messengers of death*.

(2.) The offenders truckled, being convinced, if not that they had done amiss, yet that it was in vain to contend with such a potent adversary, who,

right or wrong, would be too hard for them; they submitted and were willing upon any terms to *make peace with him*. Observe,

[1.] The reason why they were desirous to have the matter accommodated: *Because their country was nourished by the king's country*. Tyre and Sidon were trading cities, and had little land belonging to them, but were always supplied with corn from the land of Canaan; *Judah and Israel traded in their market, with wheat, and honey, and oil,* ³⁵⁷⁷Ezekiel 27:17. Now if Herod should make a law to prohibit the exportation of corn to Tyre and Sidon (which they knew not but a man so revengeful as he might soon do, not caring how many were famished by it), their country would be undone; so that it was their interest to keep in with him. And is it not then our wisdom to make our peace with God, and humble ourselves before him, who have a much more constant and necessary dependence upon him than one country can have upon another? for *in him we live, and move, and have our being*.

[2.] The method they took to prevent a rupture: *They made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend*, probably with bribes and good presents; that is usually the way for men to make courtiers their friends. And it is the hard fate of princes that they must have not only their affairs, but their affections too, governed by such mercenary tools; yet such men as Herod, that will not be governed by reason, had better be so governed than by pride and passion. Blastus had Herod's ear, and has the art of mollifying his resentments; and a time is fixed for the ambassadors of Tyre and Sidon to come and make a public submission, to beg his majesty's pardon, throw themselves upon his clemency, and promise never again to offend in the like manner; and that which will thus feed his pride shall serve to cool his passion.

(3.) Herod appeared in all the pomp and grandeur he had: He was *arrayed in his royal apparel* (v. 21), *and sat upon his throne*. Josephus gives an account of this splendid appearance which Herod made upon this occasion. *Antiq.* 19.344. He says that Herod at this time wore a robe of cloth of silver, so richly woven, and framed with such art, that when the sun shone it reflected the light with such a lustre as dazzled the eyes of the spectators, and struck an awe upon them. Foolish people value men by their outward appearance; and no better are those who value themselves by the esteem of such, who court it, and recommend themselves to it as Herod did, who thought to make up the want of a royal heart with his

royal apparel; and sat upon his throne, as if that gave him a privilege to trample upon all about him as his footstool.

(4.) He made a speech to the men of Tyre and Sidon, a fine oration, in which, probably, after he had aggravated their fault, and commended their submission, he concluded with an assurance that he would pass by their offence and receive them into his favour againproud enough that he had it in his power *whom he would to keep alive, as well as whom he would to slay*; and probably he kept them in suspense as to what their doom should be, till he made this oration to them, that the act of grace might come to them with the more pleasing surprise.

(5.) The people applauded him, the people that had a dependence upon him, and had benefit by his favour, they *gave a shout*; and this was what they shouted, *It is the voice of a god, and not of a man*, v. 22. God is great and good, and they thought such was Herod's greatness in his apparel and throne, and such his goodness in forgiving them, that he was worthy to be called no less than a god; and perhaps his speech was delivered with such an air of majesty, and a mixture of clemency with it, as affected the auditors thus. Or, it may be, it was not from any real impression made upon their minds, or any high or good thoughts they had indeed conceived of him; but, how meanly soever they thought of him, they were resolved thus to curry favour with him, and strengthen the new-made peace between him and them. Thus great men are made an easy prey to flatterers if they lend an ear to them, and encourage them. Grotius here observes that, though magistrates are called *gods* (~~381~~ Psalm 82:1), yet *kings or monarchs, that is, single persons, are not, lest countenance should thereby be given to the Gentiles, who gave divine honours to their kings alive and dead, as here; but they are a college of senators, or a bench of judges, that are called gods. In collegio toto senatorum non idem erat periculi; itaque eos, non autem reges, invenimus dictos elohim*. Those that live by sense vilify God, as if he were *altogether such a one as themselves*, and deify men, as if they were gods; having *their persons in admiration, because of advantage*. This is not only a great affront to God, giving that glory to others which is due to him alone, but a great injury to those who are thus flattered, as it makes them forget themselves, and so puffs them up with pride that they are in the utmost danger possible of falling into the condemnation of the devil.

(6.) These undue praises he took to himself, pleased himself with them, and prided himself in them; and this was his sin. We do not find that he had given any private orders to his confidants to begin such a shout, or to put those words into the mouths of the people, nor that he returned them thanks for the compliment and undertook to answer their opinion of him. But his fault was that he said nothing, did not rebuke their flattery, nor disown the title they had given him, nor *give God the glory* (v. 23); but he took it to himself, was very willing it should terminate in himself, and that he should be thought a god and have divine honours paid him. *Si populus vult decipi, decipiatur* if the people will be deceived, let them. And it was worse in him who was a Jew, and professed to believe in one God only, than it was in the heathen emperors, who had gods many and lords many.

2. How his iniquity was punished: *Immediately* (v. 23) *the angel of the Lord smote him* (by the order of Christ, for to him all judgment is committed), *because he gave not God the glory* (for God is jealous for his own honour, and will be glorified upon those whom he is not glorified by); and *he was eaten of worms* above ground, and *gave up the ghost*. Now he was reckoned with for vexing the church of Christ, killing James, imprisoning Peter, and all the other mischiefs he had done. Observe in the destruction of Herod,

(1.) It was no less than an angel that was the agent *the angel of the Lord*, that angel that was ordered and commissioned to do it, or that angel that used to be employed in works of this nature, the destroying angel: or *the angel*, that is, that angel that delivered Peter in the former part of the chapter that angel smote Herod. For those ministering spirits are the ministers either of divine justice or of divine mercy, as God is pleased to employ them. The angel smote him with a sore disease just at that instant when he was strutting at the applauses of the people, and adoring his own shadow. Thus the king of Tyre said in his pride, *I am a god, I sit in the seat of God; and set his heart as the heart of God;* but he shall be a man, and no God, a weak mortal man, *in the hand of him that slayeth him* (³³⁰Ezekiel 28:29), so Herod here. Potent princes must know, not only that God is omnipotent, but that angels also are greater in power and might than they. The angel *smote him, because he gave not the glory to God;* angels are jealous for God's honour, and as soon as ever they have commission are ready to smite those that usurp his prerogatives, and rob God of his honour.

(2.) It was no more than a worm that was the instrument of Herod's destruction: He was *eaten of worms*, *genomenos skolekobrotos* he became worm-eaten, so it must be read; rotten he was, and he became like a piece of rotten wood. The body in the grave is destroyed by worms, but Herod's body putrefied while he was yet alive, and bred the worms which began to feed upon it betimes; so Antiochum, that great persecutor, died. See here,

[1.] What vile bodies those are which we carry about with us; they carry about with them the seeds of their own dissolution, by which they will soon be destroyed whenever God does but speak the word. Surprising discoveries have of late been made by microscopes of the multitude of worms that there are in human bodies, and how much they contribute to the diseases of them, which is a good reason why we should not be proud of our bodies, or of any of their accomplishments, and why we should not pamper our bodies, for this is but feeding the worms, and feeding them for the worms.

[2.] See what weak and contemptible creatures God can make the instruments of his justice, when he pleases. Pharaoh is plagued with lice and flies, Ephraim consumed as with a moth, and Herod eaten with worms.

[3.] See how God delights not only to bring down proud men, but to bring them down in such a way as is most mortifying, and pours most contempt upon them. Herod is not only destroyed, but destroyed by worms, that the pride of his glory may be effectually stained. This story of the death of Herod is particularly related by Josephus, a Jew, *Antiq.* 19.34-3350: "That Herod came down to Cesarea, to celebrate a festival in honour of Caesar; that the second day of the festival he went in the morning to the theatre, clothed with that splendid robe mentioned before; that his flatterers saluted him as a god, begged that he would be propitious to them; that hitherto they had revered him as a man, but now they would confess to be in him something more excellent than a mortal nature. That he did not refuse nor correct this impious flattery (so the historian expresses it); But, presently after, looking up, he saw an owl perched over his head, and was at the same instant seized with a most violent pain in his bowels, and gripes in his belly, which were exquisite from the very first; that he turned his eyes upon his friends, and said to this purpose: 'Now I, whom you called a god, and therefore immortal, must be proved a man, and mortal.' That his torture continued without intermission, or the least abatement,

and then he died in the fifty-fourth year of his age, when he had been king seven years.”

II. The progress of the gospel after this.

1. *The word of God grew and multiplied*, as seed sown, which comes up with a great increase, thirty, sixty, a hundred fold; wherever the gospel was preached, multitudes embraced it, and were added to the church by it, v. 24. After the death of James, the word of God grew; for the church, the more it was afflicted, the more it multiplied, like Israel in Egypt. The courage and comfort of the martyrs, and God's owning them, did more to invite people to Christianity, than their sufferings did to deter them from it. After the death of Herod the word of God gained ground. When such a persecutor was taken off by a dreadful judgment, many were thereby convinced that the cause of Christianity was doubtless the cause of Christ, and therefore embraced it.

2. Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch as soon as they had despatched the business they were sent upon: *When they had fulfilled their ministry*, had paid in their money to the proper persons, and taken care about the due distribution of it to those for whom it was collected, they *returned from Jerusalem*. Though they had a great many friends there, yet at present their work lay at Antioch; and where our business is there we should be, and no longer from it than is requisite. When a minister is called abroad upon any service, when he has fulfilled that ministry, he ought to remember that he has work to do at home, which wants him there and calls him thither. Barnabas and Saul, when they went to *Antioch*, took with them *John*, whose surname was *Mark*, at whose mother's house they had that meeting for prayer which we read of v. 12. She was sister to Barnabas. It is probable that Barnabas lodged there, and perhaps Paul with him, while they were at Jerusalem, and it was that that occasioned the meeting there at that time (for wherever Paul was he would have some good work doing), and their intimacy in that family while they were at Jerusalem occasioned their taking a son of that family with them when they returned, to be trained up under them, and employed by them, in the service of the gospel. Educating young men for the ministry, and entering them into it, is a very good work for elder ministers to take care of, and of good service to the rising generation.