

The Acts and Torah of the Apostles Study Guide

Chapter 12

12:1-11

The king mentioned here is Herod Agrippa I. He was the grandson of Herod the Great who ruled as king over Judea until 4 B.C. After that, the Romans took away full kingship and appointed tetrarchs and procurators (governors) to administer the territory, such as Pontius Pilate in the days of Yeshua. But in 41 A.D. they changed course and the Roman emperor Claudius allowed Herod Agrippa I to rule over Judea and Samaria and the Galilee as king once again. His reign lasted only for three years until 44 A.D. This account in Acts 12 describes what took place during the middle of his reign, and then, later in the chapter, picks up the story again at the end of his life.

Agrippa was not like his grandfather, Herod the Great, who was greatly despised by the Jewish people. He consistently practiced appeasement for both the Romans and the Jews, which made him very popular among both groups. So, when you read the writings of Josephus and the Talmud, he is depicted in a very favorable way. And that makes sense because he gave the Jewish authorities whatever they wanted as long as it did not conflict with Rome.

The appeasement of Agrippa is reflected in this chapter where he has James, the brother of John and one of the first Apostles, executed (beheaded) in v. 2. And in the next verse we read that this act pleased the Jewish leaders. Then, thinking that he had a good thing going by eliminating the Messianic community that the nonbelievers despised, he went after Peter and had him put in jail.

- v. 4 – The timing of this incident is significant. It was during the week-long period of the combined holiday of Unleavened Bread and Passover. That meant he couldn't do a quick trial with a predetermined verdict of guilt, followed immediately by another execution. That's the way it had been done a decade earlier with the trial and execution of Yeshua that was rushed because Passover was about to begin. This time the feast was already underway, so he had to wait until after Passover.

This was not the first time Peter was put in prison (5:17-25). The similarity of these two imprisonments is his miraculous release by an angel. In contrast, however, here he was chained between two soldiers (no doubt as an extra security measure after his first release (v. 6). And this time the people were praying fervently for him, because they undoubtedly realized that their idyllic life had given way to the reality of persecution and death for followers of Yeshua (v. 5). So, they responded in a godly way—they didn't storm the prison and bust him out—they prayed.

- v. 7 – Those prayers were answered when, for the second time, God sent an angel to bring about Peter's release. If the angel could open the door to his cell like the first time, it would be no less difficult for him to open the locks on his chains this time. This story illustrates the importance of asking what chains appear to be impossible to be released in your life, yet trusting God.
- v. 9 – Peter wasn't sure if what he was seeing was real or a vision. He had previously encountered an angel. And, more recently, he had experienced the vision of the sheet with the unclean

animals representing Gentiles, and that must have appeared to be very real. And he was able to engage in actual conversations during the vision and his first encounter with an angel. So, based on those past experiences, he could not be sure what was happening at this time. But that also tells us that a vision will appear the same way that our senses work, so there should be no mystical aspect to them as some religions attest.

- v. 11 – Eventually Peter came to realize that it was indeed real, not a vision.

In this chapter a story of tragedy and rescue is evident. Both James and Peter were part of the twelve Apostles. They were both privileged, along with John, to witness the transfiguration of Yeshua in Matthew 17. Yet James was martyred and Peter was rescued. This outcome demonstrates God’s sovereignty, but it remains a mystery from our perspective.

12:12-17

Upon his release, Peter went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where prayers were being offered to God on behalf of Peter. When he showed up at the door, the believers were skeptical that it was him, even though they had been praying fervently for his release. Yet God actually answered their prayers, even while they were offering them. It is like the way the Lord answered the prayer of Daniel while he was praying in Daniel 9. This teaches us the importance of having faith without being demanding, while also not having doubt that He will answer. It calls for a boldness to ask God to meet our needs, a trust in the Lord to answer as He sees fit in His sovereignty, and then to wait for His answer. This is a mature kind of reliance on God.

- v. 17 – Once they were over the shock of their prayers being answered, Peter requested that his release be reported to James. The James mentioned here is obviously not the apostle James, who was the son of Zebedee and brother of John, and was killed earlier. The other apostle James, the son of Alphaeus (Mat 10:3; Acts 1:13) is also not the subject. The biblical evidence points to him being the half-brother of Yeshua. The other two men named James are consistently identified along with the name of their father. But that is not the case in Scripture for James, the brother of Yeshua, possibly because Joseph had died, and since Yeshua had a heavenly father, it may not have seemed right to use “the son of Joseph” for James (see also Gal 1:19; 2:9). In any event, by this time, James had become the head of the Messianic community in Jerusalem.

12:18-25

- v. 18-19 – The freeing of Peter got the guards in trouble and they ended up losing their lives instead of Peter. This is consistent with people who approve of killing, like Agrippa. They can easily turn on their own people, as you can see in other groups today. As long as someone died, that satisfied him.
- v. 20-23 – After resolving a dispute over commerce with the two port cities of Tyre and Sidon, Herod scheduled a speech, where the audience shouted praise like he was divine. Josephus records the same thing and adds that Agrippa did not dispute it and was flattered by their words. Since such praise is due only to Adonai, he was inflicted with some kind of intestinal disease that leads to his death. That is also consistent with the writings of Josephus, who wrote:

“After five days, exhausted by the stomach pain, he died at the age of 53 (*Antiquities of the Jews* 19:8:2).

This story reminds us, as Yeshua taught, “those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword” (Mat 26:52). Or to put it another way, people who practice or live in a culture of death run the risk of dying unnecessarily themselves.

- v. 24 – In contrast, this passage shows that people who esteem life will experience the fullness of life.
- v. 25 – Back in the last verse of chapter 11, Barnabas and Saul brought the offering that had been raised in Antioch. Now in the last verse of chapter 12, they went back to Antioch, this time taking along John Mark. The only thing that we know about him, according to verse 12, is that his mother opened up her home to other believers for prayer. So that tells us that John Mark was raised in a godly home.