

~ACTS~

Lesson 37- Persecution and Famine in Jerusalem

Acts 11:27-12:25

We are continuing our study in the book of Acts and last week we were introduced to the church of Antioch, the first Christian church consisting of uncircumcised Gentiles and Jews together in one body, by one Spirit in Christ Jesus. And we left off last week in **Acts 11:26**. As we said last week, Luke is starting to transition away from Peter and Jerusalem, and he begins to focus the attention on Paul and Antioch. And he does so in this next section by giving us details of Paul and Barnabas' journey to Jerusalem to bring the church famine relief from Antioch. And a quick reading of the remaining verses of chapter 11, Acts 11:27-30, into the events of chapter 12, leads people to believe that this journey to Jerusalem ends when they bring the gift to the church. And then in chapter 12, Luke seemingly switches the narrative back to Peter. But I believe Luke is using the events in chapter 12 as a transition between Peter and Paul, with the main focus still leaning toward Paul's trip to Jerusalem. Not only are they bringing famine relief, but they are also bringing exhortation and encouragement to the disciples in the midst of intense persecution. And I say this because Luke encompasses this entire narrative by two bracketing statements. Notice **11:30** and then he summarizes everything in chapter 12 by ending with Paul and Barnabas as well, **Acts 12:25**. Our study today will include these remaining verses in chapter 11, and chapter 12 in its entirety focusing on the journey to Jerusalem in the midst of great famine and persecution.

27-28) ²⁷ And in these days, prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.

Luke begins by saying, “**And in these days...**” These are the days in which Paul and Barnabas spent a whole year shepherding the flock of Antioch, v.26. And sometime during this year, between 43-44AD, God sends prophets from Jerusalem to Antioch, Agabus being one of these prophets, and he **showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world**. Agabus is being led of the Spirit to warn the church of a famine coming for the purpose to send famine relief by the hand of Barnabas and Saul to take care of the disciples in Jerusalem. This is God taking care of His Church. But we will find that not only does the church in Jerusalem need famine assistance, but they are also battling another round of persecution and they need edification and comfort. So God sends Barnabas, the son of encouragement, and the Great Apostle Paul to them. Luke confirms that this prophecy from Agabus was led of the Spirit because he says, **which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar**. Antiquity tells us that there were four major famines in the world during the reign of Claudius Caesar, from 41-54AD, with Jerusalem being the worst. These are recorded by Josephus, Eusebius and three other Roman historians by the name of Suetonius, Dio Cassius, and Tacitus.

29-30) ²⁹ Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. ³⁰ This they also did and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

This is showing one body by one Spirit with no schisms. This Christian church of Antioch, filled with Jews and Gentiles are coming together in one accord to send relief to their brethren in Jerusalem. And notice its not mandatory. Luke says, **each according to his ability**. Later during Paul's third missionary journey, he takes up another collection for the Jerusalem church and he urges the Corinthians to give out of a cheerful heart, 2 Cor 9:7. That's what they are doing here in the church of Antioch. This collection probably continued over the course of the next few months, and then they sent this gift **to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul**. Notice the complete change of heart that the Jerusalem church is about to see in Saul who once was a man bringing havoc and destruction to the church, but now he is bringing relief and exhortation. This leads directly into chapter 12...

12:1) Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church.

Luke says, **about that time**, Κατ' ἐκεῖνον δὲ τὸν καιρὸν, literally “And according to this time...” At this same time that Barnabas and Saul are coming down to Jerusalem to deliver this famine relief, Herod begins persecuting the church. This is Herod Agrippa I, one of six Herods mentioned in the Bible. This is the grandson of Herod the Great. His father Aristobulus was murdered by Herod the Great and he was raised in Rome ^{Josephus Antiquities of the Jews 18.143}. While in Rome, he became friends with Emperor Tiberius' son Caligula. When Tiberius died in 37AD, Caligula became emperor of Rome and because Agrippa and Caligula were friends, Caligula exalted him to power in the Roman Empire. By the end of 37AD, shortly after Caligula came into power, Caligula first gave Agrippa rule over the northern territories of what used to be Philip's region. Then in 40AD he was given control over Galilee, which was Antipas' region. Caligula died in 41AD, and Claudius became emperor, but Agrippa remained favorable with Rome and around 41-42AD he was given rule over Samaria and Judea. This was the first time since Herod the Great that a Herod had control over all of Palestine. Therefore, in an effort to remain in good standing with the Jews, Agrippa decides to... **stretch out his hand to harass some from the church**. The Greek literally says, “to throw his hands (of authority) upon certain ones of the church to do much harm.” He did this to remain favorable to the Jews who hated this new sect of so called “Christians.” So, in 44AD, Agrippa begins targeting certain leaders of the church. These weren't random incidences. They are pointed attacks and he begins with the Apostle James, the brother of John, one of the sons of Zebedee.

2) Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

This death, “**with the sword**,” was probably death by beheading. This was a legal execution performed by the authority of Rome given to Herod. And this was the first martyrdom of any of the Twelve Apostles. Herod, being a power hungry tyrant who wants to gain the favor of the Jews, begins conspiring with the Sanhedrin to take out the leaders of the church, starting with James. But he doesn't stop there. He continues to arrest Peter as well...

3) And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread.

It's no coincidence that persecution is coming against the church again at this time, because the Church has just experienced a major breakthrough with the acceptance of the Gentiles, and now the enemy is doing everything it can to thwart the plan of God. So after Herod saw that the death of James pleased the Jews, he went on to arrest and kill another leader of the Church, the Apostle Peter. Notice the timing that Herod is doing this... **during the Days of Unleavened Bread**. This was Passover week. One of the three mandatory feasts for the Jews to return to Jerusalem, so there were thousands of people gathered in the city for the Feast. What better time for Herod to gain favor with the Jews than when thousands have come from around the world and he can use this as an opportunity to exalt himself. You can just see the pride and arrogance that Herod has, which as we will see, becomes his downfall.

4) So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

We don't know if any of the other Twelve Apostles besides James and Peter were there in Jerusalem at this time but notice that Herod is selectively choosing the Apostles to kill. Little did he know that the greatest of the Apostles was also there with Barnabas offering encouragement and support to the Jerusalem church. Herod arrests Peter and places four squads of four soldiers, τέσσαρα τετραδίοις στρατιωτῶν, to guard him. The Greek makes it clear that there were sixteen soldiers assigned to guard Peter and these sixteen guards were split up into 4- six hour shifts to watch him 24 hours a day, alternating continuously. Why so much protection? The Sanhedrin probably told Herod about the last time they arrested Peter and the Apostles, and they escaped, Acts 5:19. Notice Herod's plan. He has arrested Peter but doesn't want to kill him until after the Passover. He is waiting for the feast to pass to make sure all the attention goes to

him. So he waits for the perfect time **to bring him before the people after Passover**. Bring him before, ἀνάγω- to lead up. He wants to parade Peter to the Jews and have all the glory on himself as the one who killed the leader of the Christians. But notice what is happening at the same time...

5) Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.

Luke uses that same emphatic conjunction we saw in Acts 11:19, μὲν οὖν- therefore indeed. Therefore indeed, while Peter was kept in prison awaiting his death, the church is praying to God for him. The Greek says, “A great earnestness of prayer had come about toward God on behalf of Peter by the church.” The church was uniting in prayer to seek His face. Prayer is powerful. It connects us to God and His will. Remember what God said about the prayers of Cornelius? The angel said, “*Your prayers have come into God’s hearing,*” Acts 10:31. James says, “*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much,*” James 5:16. Prayer is our opportunity to get involved with God’s plans. Prayer unites us together in perfect oneness with Him as He works in and out through us. Prayer isn’t demanding God to do something, but rather an opportunity to be a part of His will. And it was the will of God to set Peter free.

6-7) ⁶ And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. ⁷ Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, “Arise quickly!” And his chains fell off his hands.

Notice God’s timing. He waits until the final hour... **when Herod was about to bring him out, that night**. Many times, our timing is not God’s timing. And I believe He does this so that the glory always goes to Him. When there is no other explanation other than “This was God’s doing.” Peter is locked up tight. He is not getting out by any natural means. He has chains binding him, he is between two soldiers, and there are soldiers guarding the door of the prison. And notice that while Peter is kept in prison, the church is praying earnestly for him, but what is Peter doing? He’s sleeping! This isn’t the first time Peter has been sleeping when he should be praying, remember Gethsemane? I’m not sure if that’s what’s going on here or if Peter is just so content and at peace that he just resting in Jesus. I like to think it is this latter. He has surrendered everything to Jesus. He has seen God get him out of bad places in the past, and he knows if it be His will, He can do the same here. But he also knows that Jesus promised that he would die a martyr’s death, John 21:18, so I think Peter is just giving everything to God and trusting in Him to the point that he is sound asleep before the day of his execution. So much that the angel has to hit him to get him to wake up... **and he struck Peter on the side...**

8-9) ⁸ Then the angel said to him, “Gird yourself and tie on your sandals”; and so he did. And he said to him, “Put on your garment and follow me.” ⁹ So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.

The angel is so practical. Telling Peter to get dressed and follow him. But notice Peter isn’t even aware that this is really happening. He thinks he is having a vision. This tells me something... Peter was a man who spent a lot of time in prayer with the Lord. This wasn’t the first vision he had. We know he had another vision on the rooftop in Joppa and now this one, but how many other visions had he seen to make him think this was a vision as well? My guess is probably a lot.

10-11) ¹⁰ When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord (αὐτόματος); and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. ¹¹ And when Peter had come to himself, he said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.”

Once the angel got him out, he left. Peter finally comes to himself and realizes this really happening.

12) So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.

After understanding that God had just miraculously saved his life, he visits the brethren. And notice what they are doing. They were gathered together praying. It's the middle of the night and the church is praying. And they are gathered together in the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, This is John Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark. Which scholars say is really Peter's gospel and that Mark penned it for him. In 1 Peter 5:13 Peter calls Mark his son, as in "son in the faith." And Mark was also the ἀνεψιός, cousin or nephew of Barnabas, Col 4:10. This is what the church is... it's family. The family of believers gathered together.

13-15) ¹³ And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. ¹⁵ But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel."

It's obvious that this little girl knows Peter. She can tell its him just by the sound of his voice. But the adults in the house don't believe her. Even though they're praying, they are in hiding from Herod and the threat of persecution, so they don't want to open the door to a soldier and expose themselves. So they say, Μάϊνη, "You're out of your mind!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel." Whether they truly thought it was his angel or they just said this to the little girl to keep her quiet, it's hard to say. I believe the Holy Spirit puts all these details in the text just to show the humanity of the situation. But in the meantime, notice Peter is still outside knocking...

16-17) ¹⁶ Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.

You can imagine how surprised they were to see Peter. But you can tell that they are in hiding because Peter doesn't want to draw too much attention, so he motions to them with his hands to keep silent. And he doesn't even go in the house, but says, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." This is James the Lord's brother, who was the overseer of the Jerusalem church, Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12, and the brethren could possibly be the other Apostles in Jerusalem, along with Barnabas and Paul. Peter doesn't stick around, and Luke says he departed and went to another place, ἕτερος, another place of a different kind away from the other disciples, in hiding from Herod and the soldiers. Probably not to jeopardize the other brethren. This is the last time we see anything of Peter until the Jerusalem Council meeting 6 years later in Acts 15.

18-19) ¹⁸ Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there.

You can image the shock from the soldiers and the embarrassment of Herod. But after trying to find Peter, they can't find him, so Herod has the soldiers put to death, (jailor's penalty of an escaped prisoner, Acts 16:27). After being humiliated, Herod leaves Jerusalem and goes to Caesarea. This is probably where his main residence was, as he likely was just visiting Jerusalem for the Passover. Herod was such a prideful man who was using this as an opportunity to gain favor with the Jews, but God prevailed. In these last few verses of chapter 12, Luke gives us another example of Herod's pride which quickly results in his gruesome death.

20) Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country.

Herod is in Caesarea and somehow, Tyre and Sidon had made Herod mad. Luke doesn't give us any details of why. But it seems that Herod cut off the trade lines with Tyre and Sidon and being in a famine, this was devastating to them. Therefore, in order to gain Herod's favor again, and begin trading within his realm, they bribe the king's personal assistant to be their friend and they decide to throw a big party in honor of Caesar and Herod Agrippa. Herod being a prideful man, loved it when people were begging for his attention.

21-22) ²¹ So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. ²² And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!"

Josephus gives us more detail telling us that this party was in Caesarea, and it was in honor of Caesar and Herod. And Herod came out to greet the people wearing a garment made of silver. And the reflection of the sun on his silver garment was so resplendent, that it spread horror over all who saw it. And they begin crying out that he was a god and superior to mortal nature. ^{Josephus book 19, 8:2} Which is exactly what Luke describes in verse 22. And notice what God does in this instance...

23) Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.

God enacts Divine Judgement on Herod for his pride **because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.** Josephus says his pain was so violent that he was bedridden until he finally died 5 days later. This is another occasion in the New Testament of God enacting His sovereign judgement on prideful people. The first was Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5:1-10, hypocritical liars that have offered a profane offering to the Lord in an effort to gain glory and honor for themselves. They weren't Christians, but rather wolves in sheep's clothing doing the work of Satan to infiltrate the Church and destroy it. So God protected His young church and killed them. And now God enacts Judgement again on Herod, again to protect His church and to make known that all glory belongs to God. And notice that in both instances, these judgements came at crucial points in redemptive history. The first was just after Pentecost and the birth of the Church. And Herod came with his prideful persecutions against the church just when Gentiles were first coming into the body of Christ. It is no coincidence that the enemy ramped up its schemes at these critical points in history, but God intervened and put them away to protect His church. And notice the results through this turmoil...

24) But the Word of God grew and multiplied.

Even through the darkest of times, the Word of God will grow and multiply, and the will of God will always prevail. Persecution cannot stop the spread of the Gospel.

25) And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark.

Notice how Luke brings this all back to Barnabas and Saul. God sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, not only for famine relief, but to be a comfort to the body of Christ during these times of persecution. Notice Luke says, **when they had fulfilled their ministry.** They were in Jerusalem for a purpose. I believe it was the strength of Paul and Barnabas being in that city that increased the Word of God and allowed the saints to persevere through the famine and the persecution. So, having completed their mission, they head back to Antioch, and notice who goes with them, their new assistant, Barnabas' cousin... John Mark. This forms the trio who embark on the first missionary journey to the Gentiles in chapter 13.

List of Herods in the Bible

Herod the Great 37-1bc

- Gained control of the Palestinian region by sheer force and was granted authority over this kingdom from Roman Emperor Augustus from 37-1BC.
- Expanded the Second Jewish temple
- Met with the wise men, Matt 2:7
- Commanded the death of all male children under 2yrs of age, Matt 2:16

Herod Archelaus 1bc-6ad (Samaria, Judea, Idumea)

- Son of Herod the Great and full brother to Herod Antipas
- When Joseph, Mary and Jesus had come back from Egypt, they learned that Archelaus was reigning over Judea, so they went north to Galilee, Matt 2:22.

Herod Antipas 1bc-39ad (Galilee)

- Divorced King Aretas' daughter and married Herodias- his brother Philip's wife
- Killed John the Baptist at the request of Herodias and her daughter Salome, Matt 14:1-12
- Lost control over Galilee when Aretas retaliated with war for shaming and divorcing his daughter
- Jesus stood before Herod Antipas silent at His trial during His Passion week, Luke 23:6-12

Herod Philip the Tetrarch- north and east of Galilee

- The first husband of Herodias, but his brother Herod Antipas stole her from him, Matt 14:3

Herod Agrippa I 37-44AD (all of Palestine)

- Grandson of Herod the Great
- Killed James the brother of John and arrested Peter, Acts 12:1-2
- Only other Herod apart from Herod the Great to reign over all of Palestine
- Died by the Hand of God's Judgement, Acts 12:23

Herod Agrippa II 48-92ad

- Son of Agrippa I
- Paul stood before Herod Agrippa II and Festus in Acts 25:13-26:32