

Acts 12:1-25: Would You Like Heaven Now...and In Eternity?

Ricardo Campos, Pastor Grace Chapel, Orange, CA March 26, 2017

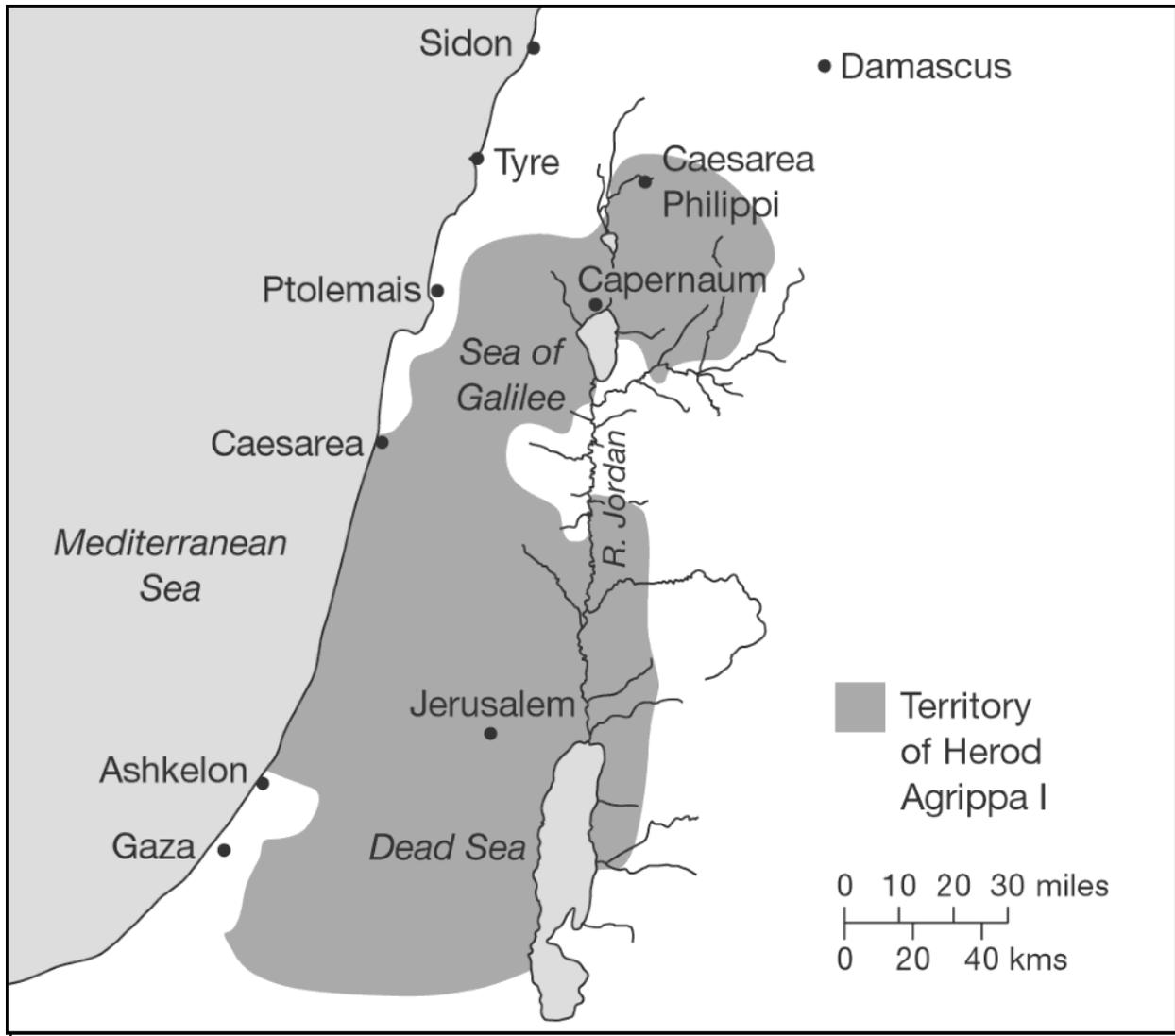
I. Introduction

As impossible as it may sound, God promises you heaven now? But He asks of you one thing: your life. That is, He wants you to let Him tell you how to think, how to speak, basically how to live. If you do this, not only does He promise you heaven later the instant you believe in His Son (Romans 5:1), if you keep believing in His Son, He promises you salvation right now (Romans 5:9-10), now in the midst of this miserable life. The question is, do you believe Him, do you trust Him when He says this? If you do, even your worst imaginable moments will be surrounded by peace and joy...but do you believe Him?

II. Acts 12:1-25: God Says, "If you lose your life for Me, you'll actually find it," Do You Trust Him?

12:1-4, as Saul and Barnabas get to Jerusalem with the relief money from Antioch due to the famine that was coming, Herod decides to persecute the church. There are several Herods mentioned in the New Testament. This is Herod Agrippa I. He was the grandson of Herod the Great, the one who tried to kill Jesus as a boy (Matthew 2). Agrippa governed Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Peraea, Iturea, Trachonitis and Abilene Provinces from 41-44 AD. The Roman Emperor allowed him to be called a king. Since his grandmother was Jewish, he got along well with the Jewish leaders and did much to appease them, which is why he's now persecuting Christians. Herod Antipas who beheaded John the Baptist in Matthew 14:3-12 and questioned Jesus in Luke 23:8-12 was his uncle. As we'll see Herod wants to be seen as the people's king, in fact, as their god. To achieve this, he beheads the apostle James—not James the son of Alphaeus or James the Lord's ½ brother, but James the brother of the apostle John (Matthew 4:21-22; 10:3). Seeing that this pleased the Jewish leadership, he goes after Peter, the chief apostle. He arrests him intending to put him on public trial and execution. But since it's Passover and Unleavened Bread season, he has to wait until Passover is over. Thus, he puts Peter in prison with a 24-hour guard, 16 soldiers, four at a time taking 3-hour shifts.

12:5-11, one of the apostles is now dead and the chief apostle is next. How does the church respond? They in a sense go on a 24-hour prayer watch. Meanwhile, something amazing was going on with Peter, he was peacefully asleep, not a care in the world. Why is this so amazing? Because he was chained to two Roman soldiers, one on his left wrist, the other on his right, there were two other guards watching the prison door, and more importantly Herod was about to behead him in a few hours! Why was Peter so calm the night before his execution? Would you be? Next, God sends an angel to free Peter from prison. A bright light shone in the prison and the angel, standing by Peter, struck him on the side and said, "Arise quickly!" Miraculously the chains fall off his hands. The angel tells him to put on his sandals and clothes and to follow him. He does so, but all the while Peter isn't sure if it's real or a vision. They go past the two guard posts and arrive at the gate to the city which miraculously opens on its own. They go down the street and then suddenly the angel disappears. Peter comes to his senses and realizes that it was all real. The Lord sent an angel to save him from Herod and the Jewish leadership who wanted him dead.



12:12-15, as Peter pondered all this, he headed to Mary's (Miriam) house, the mother of John Mark. This may've been the house where the apostles first met in Acts 1:13 and 4:31. She was likely wealthy since her house was big enough for a large group to meet and pray. It was obviously well-known to Peter, indicating that he'd been there many times before. Peter knocked on the door and a slave girl named Rhoda went to answer. She recognized Peter's voice and was so excited that she ran to tell the disciples without opening the door. When she tells them that Peter's at the door, they call her mad. But when she insists that it's Peter, they then think that it's Peter's guardian angel coming to tell them that Peter's dead. At that time Jews believed that a guardian angel was able to take on the appearance of the person he was protecting.

¹ Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (p. 189). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

12:16-17, Peter kept on knocking and when they opened the door, they were stunned. Peter motions with his hand to quiet them and proceeds to tell them everything. He then asks them to inform James and the rest of the brethren, after which he leaves for an unknown location, since Herod would give chase once he found out. With his departure, Peter is passing the baton of the Jerusalem church to James the ½ brother of the Lord, who had by this time become prominent in the church. Peter will appear briefly later at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), but with this Peter's story basically comes to an end. Recall that Acts is in two parts, the first half is focused on Peter, the second on the apostle Paul. It's been about 15 years since Acts 2 and the beginning of the church and Peter's role in spreading the Gospel to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria is now complete. And especially now that he's opened the door of the Kingdom to the Gentiles, it's time for Paul to fulfill his commission as apostle to the Gentiles. We don't know exactly where Peter went after this but it's clear from Scripture that he spent time in Corinth, traveled to Antioch, Asia Minor, and Babylon (1 Corinthians 1:12; 9:5; Galatians 2:11; 1 Peter 1:1; 5:13).

Why was the church shocked that God released Peter from prison? Hadn't He done it before (Acts 5:19)? Hadn't they seen Him do countless miracles (Acts 2:43; 5:12)? But when Rhoda said 'It's Peter!' They called her mad. What happens to our faith, why do we fail to trust God after seeing so many miracles? The reality of life is that powerful; it steals our faith and so our circumstances become more real to us. The church will sooner believe that Peter's dead and that his angel is there to announce the news than to believe the crazy idea that God freed him from prison. What does it mean to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7)? It means that what the Lord tells you is infinitely more real than your real-life circumstances.

12:18-19, once daybreak hit, the soldiers were terrified because they couldn't find Peter; they knew their lives were on the line (if a Roman soldier let a prisoner escape, it meant his death, Acts 16:27-30). Herod then searches the city for Peter but can't find him. He interrogates the soldiers and then commands their execution. Herod wanted to be seen as king and god, but goes back home to Caesarea, his headquarters, empty-handed.

12:20-24, next in the story appears a seemingly unrelated tale about Herod's displeasure with the people of Tyre and Sidon. The reason is not given but Herod was furious with them. They couldn't afford to have him angry since their food came from his territory. So they bribed his chamberlain to seek peace on their behalf. So it was that on a certain day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his judgment seat and gave an oration to those gathered, including representatives from Tyre and Sidon. The people responded with, "The voice of a god and not a man!" But immediately God struck him dead for pretending to be God. Jewish historian Josephus who lived during this time recounts that Herod was wearing a robe made of silver threads which made him look absolutely radiant against the sunlight. Those watching were in fear and awe as if they were seeing a god. He wanted desperately to be god, but God struck him and he was carried off. Five days later he died having been eaten by worms.

The final words say it all: "But the Word of God grew and multiplied." From the beginning, Christ and His people have been under attack; the governing authorities have sought to stop Him at every turn. And many times it looked like they would succeed, but then the real King stands up and dismisses the usurpers to His throne. Herod wanted to kill Peter, but God killed him instead. Herod was an arrogant king who wanted to be seen as god. But how does the real King behave? Instead of coming to seek glory, Jesus gave His life a ransom for many. Peter and James followed in His footsteps. They sought to serve God regardless of the cost, even if it meant their life.

12:25, there's a final comment which kicks off the second half of Acts: Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch from Jerusalem after they fulfilled their ministry regarding the financial aid. They were there for Herod's persecution and left after his death. Leaving for home they took John whose surname was Mark. Jews often had a Gentile name and a Jewish name. Mark's Hebrew name was Yochanan (John); his Roman name was Mark. He's the author of Mark's Gospel, Barnabas' cousin (Colossians 4:10), and some believe the young man who ran away naked the night Jesus was arrested (Mark 14:51-52). Peter was the one who led him to the Lord (1 Peter 5:13).

Do you believe God when He says, "If you give up your life for Me, you'll actually find it?"

Why was Peter sleeping so soundly even though his life was on the line? Jesus made him a promise that he wouldn't die until he was an old man (John 21:17-19). When you read this, do you say, "So that's why Peter's not afraid. Wish I had Jesus' promises today." You do!

Matthew 6:25-34—stop worrying about where the next paycheck is coming from; 28:20—you'll never be alone; I'll always be with you.

Romans 5:9-10—6:1-11; 7:24-25; 8:31-39—I will save you, in fact, I've set you free from the power of sin. And no matter what happens, nothing will ever separate you from My love, not even death!

1 Thessalonians 5:17—you'll always have Me to talk to.

You might say, "But what about James? Don't forget James preacher. He's dead; God didn't save him! How's that for your Christian world?" If this life is all there is; if the meaning of life is to die with the most toys, then James is a GIANT loser. Romans 8:37 says that if we give up our lives in service to God, we are more than conquerors. "What?! Conquerors, James is dead! Dead!" Oh, contraire mon frère: Matthew 16:24-27—if you die with the most toys, you've lost more than possessions. Life is not about you; it's about serving God, giving up your life for His cause which is to save this world of all its misery. Your goal is to follow Jesus, like Peter did. Notice the similarity:

Peter's jailed during Passover awaiting his public trial and execution; Jesus was arrested, tried and executed publically during Passover. Jesus dies; Peter's in prison asleep (metaphorical death) awaiting his death. Jesus is struck on the side (with a Roman spear) and resurrected escaping death; Peter is struck on the side and told to "arise," escaping his death. An angel rolls away the stone of Jesus' tomb; the gate of the prison opens on its own accord. The first person to encounter Jesus is a woman, likewise with Peter. The woman's testimony wasn't believed by the disciples; neither was Rhoda's. Jesus' guards are interrogated by the authorities, so are Peter's (Peter's are killed and so would have been those guarding Jesus, but Jewish authorities intervene).

Yes, James lost his life and if this life is all there is, then James is a fool who wasted his life. But if eternity is coming, then giving up your life for God who controls eternity will not just serve you well in eternity but right now. You will experience His peace and joy now, even in death (Acts 7:59-60).

III. Conclusion

Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also....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...So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" 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. But the word of God grew and multiplied.