

## Part 32 – Vexing of the Church

A sermon series by Pastor Byron Chesney Wednesday, April 27, 2016

† Acts 12:1-25

We covered all of Chapter 11 last Wednesday night which dealt with the Gentile Church. We saw that Barnabas was sent to Antioch to verify and help out with the great revival that was taking place among the Gentiles. He went and got Paul to help him and at the end of our study we saw where a Prophet named Agabus came to Antioch and warned of a dearth or famine that was going to happen and the Church sent money and aid to Judea by the hands of Barnabas and Paul, who is still being referred to as Saul at that time.

Tonight, Lord willing, we are going to try and cover all of Chapter 12 which deals with the Vexing of the Church.

1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church.

“About that time,” most likely means about the time of the famine, or about the time that Barnabas and Saul brought aid to Jerusalem. This would have been around 44 AD, 44-years after the birth of Christ and about 10 years after his death, burial, and resurrection.

“Herod” There are a lot of Herods mentioned in the Bible, this one would be Herod Agrippa. His Grandfather, Herod the Great, was the King in charge during the days of Jesus, but now he is in charge, he is King Herod and he is a very bad and wicked King. He was not liked by the Jews but in this case he is trying to win their approval by helping them get rid of the Christians, so this is going to please them, as we will read in verse 3.

It says that he stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. That word “vex” means to “treat with evil, to cause harm.” He is taking up where his papaw left off trying to rid the world of Christianity.

Every time we see things going smooth, you better believe that the devil has to try and intervene. The Church had been experiencing peace for several years and growing but now Satan is going to go on full attack and he is going to use King Herod to do it.

2 And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

To make a bold and immediate statement, Herod chooses to first murder James, the brother of John, one of the Sons of Zebedee. James was living in Jerusalem so he was an easy target. Since he was one of the inner circle with Jesus during his earthly ministry, he would be at the top of the list of the “Most Wanted” men in Jerusalem. He was of course well known and looked up to by Christians and his death is going to send shock waves throughout the Christian world.

“with the sword” From what I understand, according to the Talmud, which is the basis for all codes of Jewish law, states that those that lead people to worship other gods or strange gods shall be executed by the sword. So, Herod is following the Jewish law by claiming that James is leading people to worship other gods.

3 And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)

Notice that Herod is not doing this out of some sense of duty or because he thinks it is the right thing to do, he is doing it because it is making him popular with the Jews. That was his only motivation.

“he proceeded further to take Peter also” Peter was the most famous of all of the Apostles. For Herod to arrest, imprison, or kill Peter would be the ultimate victory for him.

(Then were the days of unleavened bread.) These are the seven days immediately following the Passover, when the Jews are required to eat bread without leaven. It was some time during these 7 days that Herod chose to take Peter. Probably because it was a deeply religious time for the Jews and by him arresting the top Christian would make the Jews even happier.

4 And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.

four quaternions of soldiers Peter is arrested and then 4 quaternions of soldiers are appointed to watch him. Each quaternion was made up of 4 soldiers. They would have stationed one quaternion at a time for each of the four watches during the night. They were probably afraid that the Christians would try to break him out.

Intending after Easter There is a lot of debate of why the King James translators used the word Easter here instead of Passover. You will hear some so-called scholars that hate the King James say that this is a gross error that it should have been translated Passover. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that it should not have been rendered Passover because it said in verse 3 that the arrest of Peter took place in the days of unleavened bread. The days of unleavened bread are the 7-days AFTER the Passover. Herod is planning on bringing Peter in front of the people for a trial AFTER Easter. This is not the same Easter that you and I celebrate as Resurrection Sunday, but rather it was referring to the Pagan Holiday Easter which was for the fertility goddess Eostre. The Bible is in no way supporting Christians to celebrate the Pagan Holiday Easter but is just letting us know when Herod had planned on bringing Peter before the people.

5 Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.

Instead of killing Peter right away during the holy season of the Jews, he is kept in prison until afterwards. We see that the Church prayed for Peter without ceasing. What a blow this must have been to the early Church to have the Apostle Peter in prison facing a death sentence. But this is what the Church is supposed to do when one of our members is in trouble. That is why we take so many prayer requests and we have altar prayer and why some people accuse us of praying too much. You can never pray too much.

6 And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison. 7 And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands.

The Lord is not ready for Peter to lose his life yet. We don't know why God didn't intervene for James or John the Baptist, we aren't told these things. God only knows the purpose for everything that He does. But he is not finished with Peter so He sends an angel to free him.

8 And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. 9 And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision.

Peter is having a hard time discerning reality from a vision. He has had visions before that were very real. He isn't sure if this might be a vision he is experiencing now, nevertheless he is obedient to the angel and does what he says.

10 When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him. 11 And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.

They made it out of the prison safely without waking anyone up or causing a disturbance, and just like that, the angel departs. Then the Bible says that Peter "come to himself." He now realizes that he was not having a vision or a dream but it was reality.

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

Peter goes to a place of a friend, John-Mark. We will read more about John-Mark later on when he begins traveling with Paul and Barnabas. He is also the human penman of the Gospel of Mark.

Notice that it says "where many were gathered together praying." This was no doubt members of the Church congregated together in this house to pray for Peter. It's a shame we don't hear of Church members gathering together in homes to pray for one another. There should be more of that these days.

13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda. 14 And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate.

I have always found these verses a little humorous. Here's this girl named Rhoda (whose name means Rose by the way) and she has been in the house with the other people praying for Peter to be released and when he shows up at the door she is so excited that she doesn't let him in!

Of course they probably had the gate locked and were in constant fear due to the persecution that was going on at that time so they were very cautious but the reason she didn't let Peter in was because she was so happy about it and obviously had kind of lost her senses.

15 And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.

If you remember, in verse 5 the Bible says that the Church was praying without ceasing for Peter. What were they praying? Were they praying, "Lord, Peter's had it now. Please don't let him suffer when Herod cuts his head off?" Or were they praying, "Lord please don't let them kill the preacher. Please make a way for him to escape or a way for him to be released from prison."

Because, if they were praying for him to be released, they sure didn't act like it when he suddenly appeared outside the front door. I mean, they gave poor little Rhoda a hard time. They told her she was mad. That's like telling someone they are looney or out of their mind. I mean, here these people had been praying for Peter. Were they just going through a routine? Were they just playing at Church? May God help us to never just be playing at Church. May we never just get in a routine or a rut and just going through the motions.

But she constantly affirmed that it was even so Then when she kept on insisting it was Peter they claim it was his angel. As we studied in our Angels 101 Bible study, you should remember that in those days the Jews had a belief that each person had a guardian angel that watched over them. They thought it was so impossible for Peter to have been released that his guardian angel had been sent to tell them something.

Church, too many times we go to the Lord in prayer and we don't believe He is going to answer us. 9 out of 10 times we pray with such disbelief in prayer that it is a wonder that the Lord answers us. Here the early church was gathered in a house praying without ceasing and then they didn't even believe it when the Lord answered their prayers. We need to have the faith that the Lord hears and answers our prayers.

16 But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.

There's the poor preacher still standing outside the locked door, knocking. Friends, sometimes that's what it takes. When you come before unbelief. When you come before half-heartedness. When you come before spiritually cold people. Sometimes you gotta knock, knock, knock, and keep knocking until they wake up.

The Bible says that all of those people that had been praying for him, when they saw him, were astonished! This means they were beside themselves, they were amazed, and shocked! Friends, it is clear they had absolutely no confidence that their prayers were going to be answered that night.

17 But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place.

And what did Peter do? He gave his testimony! He told everybody what the Lord had done for him. When is the last time you told somebody what the Lord had done for you? Has he ever got you out of a situation that you got yourself in that seemed hopeless? I bet you have. Go and tell somebody

[James, and to the brethren](#) This James that Peter mentions is not James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John. This James is the brother of the Lord Jesus who was considered to be Bishop of the Church of Jerusalem. We know he was the Lord's brother because that is what Paul called him in [Galatians 1:18-19](#): [Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. 19 But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.](#)

This James was also the head of the Jerusalem council that met together in [Acts 15](#) to decide whether or not circumcision was needed for the Gentiles to be part of the plan of salvation. We will be looking at that in a few weeks from now.

[18 Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter. 19 And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea, and there abode.](#)

It was a rule that if a Roman soldier lost a prisoner under his watch that it meant a death sentence for him. Herod has been embarrassed by what has happened and in his fury he orders all of the soldiers that were supposed to be watching Peter, to be put to death. Then he sulks off to Caesarea to stew for a while.

Instead of waking up and realizing that he is fighting against God, which is a war he cannot win, he runs off to fight another day.

[20 And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king's country.](#)

We do not know why Herod is "displeased" with the people of Tyre and Sidon because the Bible does not say. It could have been any number of reasons. I do not think it is related to the escape of Peter though. It was probably some ongoing dispute that he had with them. Nevertheless Tyre and Sidon sent people to the King to try and find peace with him. They had to maintain peace because without his aide to their country they could not survive. He was not their King but he was giving them some kind of help during the famine. So his anger could have been related to money or getting paid for the aid.

[21 And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them.](#)

Here we find Herod doing what Herod did best, make a spectacle of himself. He loved the accolades of men. History tells us that the reason he was down there in Caesarea at that time was because there was a celebration in honor of Claudius Caesar going on at that time.

The Jewish historian Josephus tells of this day in his "Antiquities of the Jews<sup>†</sup>," He says: "*Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea, which was formerly called Strato's Tower; and there he exhibited shows in honor of Caesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety. At which festival a great multitude was gotten together of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity throughout his province. On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver,*" etc.

[22 And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.](#)

The people are trying to butter ol' Herod up. They are giving all the attention and praise that he so much desires, but then they call him a god, and that's not good. Listen, there has been one man on this earth that you can refer to as a god and that is THE God, the God man, Jesus Christ, and if you think that's not an important fact, then just look at the next verse:

[23 And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.](#)

We need to understand that any abilities that we have, any talents, any fame, wealth, or glory that we have is only because God allowed us to have it. We are to glory in none of these things for ourselves. We must give God ALL the glory.

In the end of times, we read [Revelation 14:6-7](#): [And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, 7 Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.](#)

[and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost](#) – What a tragic way to die. What a swift and immediate judgment. History tells us that Herod immediately fell down with severe and violent pain in his stomach and was carried off to his palace where he laid in torment for 5-days being eaten by worms until he died.

[24 But the word of God grew and multiplied. 25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark.](#)

And, so, we end this chapter with good news. Despite the vexing of the Church, the persecution and trials that they went through, they continued sharing the Gospel and many people were saved. Then Barnabas and Saul leave Jerusalem and head back towards Antioch, their sending Church, and they take John Mark with them.

Things are just going to continue to get more and more exciting as we continue our study through the Book of Acts. I told you in the very first sermon back in August of last year, that it may take us 75-weeks to finish this series and right now we are about half way through and we are in our 32<sup>nd</sup> week, so we are right on schedule.

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<sup>†</sup> All Scripture from the Authorized King James Version

<sup>‡</sup> Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews," book 19, chapter 8, section 2