

AN INTERLUDE: ACTS 12



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A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Introduction to Acts 12

We have been observing the breakout of the Gospel and the Kingdom from its beginnings in Jerusalem, into the foreign soil of Samaria, and, most recently, among Gentiles from Caesarea to Antioch. The progress has been stunning, even exhilarating.

We need to catch our breath.

Acts 12 provides something of an interlude in the action of the ongoing work of Christ. It's not without its drama and sadness; nevertheless, Luke uses this chapter to remind us of the sovereignty of God in the Gospel. Nothing, not even the power of Rome, can stand in the way of Christ's ongoing work.

We're happy to offer a series of brief videos to introduce each portion of this study. You can view each one by *[clicking here](#)*.

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We hope you find this study of Acts instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Clamping Down, Crying Up

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24.27

Read and meditate on Acts 12.1-5.

The matter-of-fact tone of this paragraph is a bit startling. James was put to the sword because it pleased some jerk king to do so, and Peter, it seemed, would be next. No hand-wringing, despairing, or cries of outrage. Just the facts. But the *tone* is important.

For reflection

1. Acts 12 provides an interlude between the breakout of the Gospel and the Kingdom in Acts 8-11, and the rapid advance and expansion which will begin in Acts 13. It's as if Luke wants to remind us of some important matters by drawing us aside to these events in Jerusalem and beyond. In what ways does this chapter lead us to recall aspects of the ongoing work of Christ we've already seen in the book of Acts? Why is it good to recall these?

2. Luke does not want us to be surprised by the continuing persecution, by attempts to clamp down on the Gospel, as though it should be considered abnormal. Jesus promised it, and even His closest companions did not escape. Moreover, death in this life is not the end of things for the believer, so we don't regard martyrdom as a tragedy. In one way or to one degree or another, persecution simply comes with our Kingdom-and-glory calling to be witnesses for Christ (Acts 1.8). That *is* your attitude toward being a witness for Christ, right?

3. At the same time, believers should cry up to God as opponents try to clamp down on their liberties. Perhaps if we were as "earnest" in our prayers for our religious freedoms as these first believers were, and if we didn't think that political solutions were *real* solutions or the *best* solutions for such problems, we might see the kind of results the first Christians were able to realize. Why is prayer always, if not the *last* resort, the *least*, to which we turn in times of trial?

4. By the way, what does it suggest about Herod that he felt he needed four squads of soldiers to guard one fisherman-turned-preacher? Was this a matter of mere overkill? An attempt to impress? Or was Herod perhaps a little concerned that powers might be at work here which he did not understand – and it's always best to be prepared? Do you think today's opponents to the Gospel are as concerned about us as Herod was about Peter? Explain.

5. We'll just note here that Saul and Barnabas were probably in Jerusalem at this time (v. 25). If the execution of Peter had succeeded, could theirs have been far off? The purpose of Acts 12 is to remind us that the ongoing work of Christ has begun – the work of replacing one kingdom with another – and not even the greatest military and political power on earth can stand against it. What would it mean for Christians today to engage in "earnest prayer" for our persecuted brethren, our religious freedoms, and our witness for the Lord?

Summary

We should not think that persecution, harassment, scorn, mocking, and the like are not intended as

part of our experience as believers. It is given to us not only to believe, but to suffer for the Lord (Phil. 1.29, 30). How can we prepare ourselves to stand firm in our witness in the event of such clamping-down beginning to clamp down on us?

Closing Prayer

O my God, make them like the whirling dust,
Like the chaff before the wind!
As the fire burns the woods,
And as the flame sets the mountains on fire,
So pursue them with Your tempest,
And frighten them with Your storm.
Fill their faces with shame,
That they may seek Your name, O LORD.
Let them be confounded and dismayed forever;
Yes, let them be put to shame and perish,
That they may know that You, whose name alone *is* the LORD,
Are the Most High over all the earth.

Psalm 83.13-18

2 So Much for Rome's Power

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24.27

Read and meditate on Acts 12.6-9.

Faith and obedience are all about next steps. When God shows you the next steps, take them. He'll show you the next steps next.

For reflection

1. This story is so rich in meaning! Again we note Herod's precautions: Two soldiers, one on either side to guard Peter; two chains to hold him in place; sentries at the door; four squads of soldiers positioned in various places around. Herod is going to make doggone sure that Peter doesn't *get out*. Perhaps he should have thought about how to keep God from *getting in*? What obstacles ("chains") are currently trying to keep you from being an effective witness for Christ? Does the Lord see your predicament?
2. Suddenly, here's an angel! Where'd he come from? Right there. In the unseen realm. All around us all the time. He just stepped through the veil at the Lord's command and filled the cell with light. He came to deliver Peter. Why? For the progress of the Kingdom, of course. Do you believe God is watching over you with angels? To what end?
3. But the angel is not going to do all the work. Peter has to take responsibility for his part in this little drama. Next steps, next steps: Get up, get dressed, get moving! At each step, as Peter obeys, weird, unlikely stuff begins to happen. Chains fall off. Guards apparently don't realize what's going on, even though the angel had "turned on the light" for them. Peter follows an *angel* toward the door of the prison? Does this make sense? Not to Peter. Not rationally. Not if we're only going to think in terms of time and matter and our own abilities. Does it make sense that you could be a consistent and effective witness for Christ, even in spite of the obstacles you face? Explain.
4. If we're responding to the commands of God, every next step, within the framework of the ongoing work of Christ, then we should *expect* strange, weird, wondrous things to happen, and just take care of whatever next step is required of us as the Lord commands. How do you try to discern the Lord's next steps for your work in the ongoing work of Christ?
5. OK, now don't miss this: Christ is seated in glory, continuing His work of overthrowing the kingdom of darkness and the Lie, replacing it with His own Kingdom. He commands us to make all the nations disciples. And He commands angels to bring Kingdom power to bear on our behalf (cf. Rev. 14.6, 7). "King" Herod gave it his best shot to do his "kingdom" thing to Peter. But the eternal King and His Kingdom are not subject to the whims and wiles of foolish men. Neither are His subjects: Get up! Get dressed! Get moving! What "next steps" is the Lord calling you to take for the progress of His Kingdom today?

Summary

We must always remember that the ongoing work of Christ is just that – *His!* He has resources and ways that are beyond knowing, and we don't need to know them. All we need to know is the next step He's directing us to at any moment. How can Christians help one another to live more consistently like this, walking by faith and not by sight, walking in the Spirit rather than the flesh?

Closing Prayer

Because you have made the LORD, *who is* my refuge,
Even the Most High, your dwelling place,
No evil shall befall you,
Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling;
For He shall give His angels charge over you,
To keep you in all your ways.
In *their* hands they shall bear you up,
Lest you dash your foot against a stone.
You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra,
The young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot.
“Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him;
I will set him on high, because he has known My name.
He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him;
I *will be* with him in trouble;
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him,
And show him My salvation.”

Psalm 91.9-16

3 Now I Get It!

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24.27

Read and meditate on Acts 12.10, 11.

Peter is bemused. He thinks this might be a vision (been there, done that, Acts 10). But he does what he's told. They walk right past the first and second guards. "Evenin', gents!" Next they arrive at the door of the prison and *voilà*, it swings open, seemingly by its own power (but not). Now, out in the street, the angel's work is done, and he steps back through the veil into the eternal realm. He's still there, and myriads of others, but Peter can't see him anymore.

For reflection

1. Peter reflects on the weirdness and wonder of all this and draws the right conclusion: "Now I know for certain..." How do you suppose this incident affected Peter's commitment to the ongoing work of Christ? Do we have to have an incident like this to get us moving toward the Lord's next steps for our lives? Explain.
2. This is really important. The "Now I know for certain..." came *after* the obedience, not *before* it. What about us: We want to be absolutely sure that, if we share the Gospel with someone, nothing terrible will happen. But God doesn't promise us that. He simply says, "make disciples" and "be My witnesses." Have we got the cart before the horse?
3. We won't see the *fruit* of obedience until we obey. We'll "get it" about the Spirit's power to make us witnesses for Christ – weird and unlikely as that may seem – when we have actually *drawn on* that power by obeying our mandate, taking the next steps to reach out to the lost, and opening our mouths with the Good News of Christ and His Kingdom. What can keep you from being a witness like this today?
4. Really, doesn't this story make you laugh with wonder and joy? It does me, every time I read it. Think of those poor guards. Think of that *iron* gate, creaking and swaying in the evening breeze. Think of Peter, hustling along to Mary's home, still scratching his head. Think of the angels in heaven, high-fiving and praising the power of King Jesus! But don't turn away from the action just yet; there's more to come! How do we get past the *fear* and *uncertainty* of present circumstances so that we can live in the *joy* and *security* of the unseen things of Christ?
5. What would it look like for Christ's power to flow through your life for the progress of His Kingdom today? Should you expect to see an angel? To become suddenly eloquent in sharing the Gospel? To be able to answer every objection someone might pose? Or simply to obey the Lord's next step? Explain.

Summary

Understanding leads to *obedience*. *Obedience* generates *faith* and *understanding*. Faith does not grow by knowing the *outcomes* of our next steps, but only by *understanding* and *obeying* the next steps. We learn the next steps from the Lord, in His Word and prayer. What next steps is God leading you to take

today?

Closing Prayer

I waited patiently for the LORD;
And He inclined to me,
And heard my cry.
He also brought me up out of a horrible pit,
Out of the miry clay,
And set my feet upon a rock,
And established my steps.
He has put a new song in my mouth—
Praise to our God;
Many will see *it* and fear,
And will trust in the LORD.

Psalm 40.1-3

4 Knock, Knock

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24.27

Read and meditate on Acts 12.12-17.

If Shakespeare had written this story and featured it as a scene in one of his plays, we would be in the aisles, holding our sides. Even *before* this little “knock, knock” game. Knock, knock. Who’s there? Peter. Yeah, right.

For reflection

1. At this point I am hilarious with joy, as the Lord proceeds to unfold the mysteries of the unseen Kingdom in the very midst of those who are its heirs, citizens, and ambassadors. Didn’t these folks believe in the prayers they were earnestly making to the Lord (v. 5)? Certainly they did. But they could not have imagined *how* the Lord would answer their prayers. Neither, by the way, can we; so it’s best to just keep praying and expect strange, unlikely, amazing, wondrous things to happen. Is this the way you typically pray?

2. I love that little touch where Peter shushes everybody: We can imagine them squealing and crying with joy! We note they are gathered in a home, and we are introduced to John Mark, whom we’ll meet again soon (Luke’s way of keeping his history moving forward). This was probably one of many “house churches” in the Jerusalem church of Acts. Why don’t we do house churches today?

3. We also note that James, the Lord’s brother, has already achieved a place of prominence among the Apostles. We’ll see just how prominent in Acts 15. A doubter throughout Jesus’ earthly life, James finally “got it” when the Lord showed Himself to His half-brother after the resurrection (1 Cor. 15.7) and enlisted him in the work of the Kingdom. Nothing can stand against the power of the risen, exalted Christ. Nothing, and no one on whom the Lord sets His sights. What are the implications of this for your work in your Personal Mission Field?

4. And let’s not overlook little Rhoda (“red”). She recognized Peter’s voice, but was so excited she forgot let him in! Those within, still laboring in prayer for Peter, didn’t believe her report. But their lack of *belief* did not change the *fact* of Peter’s being at the door, as they soon discovered. Does this little vignette suggest anything about your call to report the Gospel to the people in your Personal Mission Field?

5. How does this story about Peter help us to see that Jesus is sovereign in all the daily, mundane details of life? How should that encourage us as His followers? As His witnesses?

Summary

The ongoing work of Christ is a human story, a story of real people taking small steps of obedience and finding the grace of God running ahead of them in surprising ways. The Gospel changes us as the Spirit leads us through the Kingdom turn into the ongoing work of Christ. What are some of the most significant ways you have experienced this work in your own life?

Closing Prayer

Happy *is he* who *has* the God of Jacob for his help,
Whose hope *is* in the LORD his God,
Who made heaven and earth,
The sea, and all that *is* in them;
Who keeps truth forever,
Who executes justice for the oppressed,
Who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD gives freedom to the prisoners.
The LORD opens *the eyes of* the blind;
The LORD raises those who are bowed down;
The LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the strangers;
He relieves the fatherless and widow;
But the way of the wicked He turns upside down.
The LORD shall reign forever—
Your God, O Zion, to all generations.
Praise the LORD!

Psalm 146.5-10

5 Tragic Ends (1)

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24.27

Read and meditate on Acts 12.18, 19.

Our story turns suddenly terrifying and tragic, and that in two parts. We'll consider part 1 here.

For reflection

1. Peter is gone, perhaps as far away as Antioch. It is neither cowardly nor unwise to steer clear of those who intend to do you harm. The Kingdom spreads wherever we are, but we must continue to *be* for that to be the case. Staying in Jerusalem was not an option for Peter at this time, although he will return when things have settled down a bit. How do we know when it's time to "back away" from talking to others about spiritual things? How can we continue to *be* a witness (Acts 1.8) at the same time?
2. We read that "there was no small stir among the soldiers" about Peter's being gone. They understood what this meant. And this time there weren't any Jewish religious leaders to keep them from Rome's "justice" (Matt. 28.11-15). Failure of duty was a death sentence in the Roman world, and Herod was only doing what the limits of the law required and allowed. Life can be suddenly cut short. Do you keep this in mind as you're with the unbelievers in your Personal Mission Field?
4. What a callous king! He orders the death of *four squads* of soldiers, then heads off on holiday to the seaside. It's interesting to see that the death of James and the attempted murder of Peter had just the opposite effects on the enemies of the Gospel. God knows how to protect His own, and to bring to the consequences of their sin all who seek to oppose Him. Should our presentation of the Gospel include a warning to this effect? What would that sound like?
5. Here is another example, as in Acts 4, of the blinding power of sin. We might have thought Herod would revisit that policy of laying "violent hands" on church leaders (v. 1). Instead, he does violence to his own forces. Occurring, as this incident does, during the days of Unleavened Bread, it bears some similarities to that first feast of Unleavened Bread, while the people of Israel were preparing their exodus from Egypt: A king's foolish stubbornness results in his own people's injury. Meanwhile, the object of his anger escapes by a miracle. What do you think are the primary obstacles keeping believers today from bearing more consistent witness to the Lord? How can we help one another overcome these?

Summary

The wages of sin is death, as we know (Rom. 6.23). Death is not just a fact of life or an inevitable consequence of being human and sinful. Death is the enemy of life, and Christ, in His death, dealt death a death blow. Now He is our Life, and death has no hold over us. How does this make the Gospel we are called to proclaim really *Good News*?

Closing Prayer

O God, do not be far from me;

O my God, make haste to help me!
Let them be confounded *and* consumed
Who are adversaries of my life;
Let them be covered *with* reproach and dishonor
Who seek my hurt.
But I will hope continually,
And will praise You yet more and more.
My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness
And Your salvation all the day,
For I do not know *their* limits.
I will go in the strength of the Lord GOD;
I will make mention of Your righteousness, of Yours only.

Psalm 71.12-16

6 Tragic Ends (2)

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24.27

Read and meditate on Acts 12.20-24.

Note the posture and tactics of those who believe political solutions are the ones that matter most. You look for someone to butter-up so you can suck-up to someone you utterly despise. Aren't we glad that politics isn't the *modus operandi* of the ongoing work of Christ?

For reflection

1. Herod was rather easily contented, don't you think? He's angry at people and (probably) threatening an embargo of food against them, but he beams in the light of what he has to know is a phony acclamation: "The voice of a god!" Don't we face a similar challenge today, when so many people think that *they* are God, and can do whatever *they* think is best? How should this lead us to pray for people who think this way?
2. Did Herod really think so highly of his oratory? If so, it goes with the profile of one who callously does violence against good and decent people, then callously commands the death penalty against those who had done no wrong, and callously threatens the wellbeing of people with whom he's in a snit. Only God can change the hearts of such people, if their hearts are to be changed. We might want to give up on any "Herods" in our life, but then, shouldn't we remember Saul of Tarsus? Explain.
3. Herod deliberately and unashamedly claimed to be a god in this situation. And so an angel – never very far away, as it turns out – struck him with an illness and infestation that ultimately (not right then) took his life. This is not about "getting Herod, the jerk" for what he did to James and Peter and others. It's about God, and Who is God and who isn't, and what's due God, even by those who think the world owes them deference, respect, and honor as some kind of deity. Meanwhile, the Word of God continues, unhindered (v. 24). Why should that not surprise us?
4. This episode dramatically punctuates the story line of Acts: Christ is replacing the kingdom of darkness and the Lie with His own Kingdom, the Kingdom of life and light. The power of the eternal, spiritual realm is overcoming with good all the wickedness and evil of the temporal, material domains of men (Rom. 12.21). Herod comes under the judgment of God for claiming to be a god, and in him is embodied the ultimate demise of the Roman Empire, as Luke will foreshadow in Acts 17.1-9 and Augustine will explain, 400 years later, in *City of God*. Should we believe that Christ's Kingdom is continuing to advance in our own day? Why?
5. The world is a sad, scary, and uncertain place. The tragic death of Herod should cause us to weep: there but for the grace of God go you and I. Yet the ongoing work of Christ, His Word and Spirit at work in and through His Church, met us and brought us the gift of life. Let us weep tears of joy. In what ways is the Word of the Lord continuing and increasing in your life? In your Personal Mission Field? Your community?

Summary

Only God is God. All others are pretenders. We can trust the Lord to assert His uniqueness, authority, and power, albeit not always as dramatically as in this chapter. Still, Luke is trying to shape the way we think about the times in which we live and the Kingdom-and-glory calling of God that is upon us (1 Thess. 2.12). What should we learn from Acts 12 to help us in fulfilling our calling as witnesses for Christ?

Closing Prayer

O God, who *is* like You?

You, who have shown me great and severe troubles,

Shall revive me again,

And bring me up again from the depths of the earth.

You shall increase my greatness,

And comfort me on every side.

Also with the lute I will praise You—

And Your faithfulness, O my God!

To You I will sing with the harp,

O Holy One of Israel.

My lips shall greatly rejoice when I sing to You,

And my soul, which You have redeemed.

My tongue also shall talk of Your righteousness all the day long;

For they are confounded,

For they are brought to shame

Who seek my hurt.

Psalm 71.19-24

7 Preview

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24.27

Read and meditate on Acts 12.25.

Saul and Barnabas had watched the unfolding of the horrible and wonderful events in Jerusalem. James was dead. Peter was gone. New leadership was emerging in the church in Jerusalem. And the people were well-supplied by the gifts Saul and Barnabas had brought from Antioch. So they headed home, back to Antioch.

For reflection

1. But what must have been going on in their minds? Did they think about themselves being martyred for the Gospel? Were they encouraged to press on in the work? Should they just “lay low” for a while? If you had been in Jerusalem and witnessed the events of Acts 12, what might you have been feeling?
2. The fact that John Mark accompanied them suggests either that they required some assistance in their return to Antioch or they had plans in mind for a young man who showed promise. They don’t appear to have been in the least deterred or distracted from the work of the Kingdom by what happened in Jerusalem. Stuff happens; the work of the Kingdom goes on. How should this counsel us concerning our own ongoing witness for the Lord?
3. Barnabas and Saul are clearly a team at this point. They work together, and they will work together, as we shall see, until John Mark becomes a bone of contention and an issue between them. But even that, as we also shall see, works out for the progress of the Kingdom. Stay tuned. Meanwhile, what is it about Saul and Barnabas that makes them such a good team? Do we all need to be “cut” from the same chunk of wood in order to fulfill our callings in the Kingdom? Explain.
4. Luke uses Acts 12 as a kind of bridge into the story of the Kingdom’s wider expansion. Jewish opposition and Roman power will not stop the Word from increasing. Old leaders die, but new ones – James, Saul, John Mark – are ready to rise. The foolishness of unbelief continues on course, but heavenly hosts and an exalted King are pursuing a different agenda, turning the world rightside-up for the glory of God. How might you summarize the events and teachings of Acts 12 in a prayer of praise and thanks to the Lord?
5. In Acts we’re following the ongoing work of Jesus Christ. How would you describe that work to a new believer? What is it? What does it entail? How does it proceed? What is our role in it?

Summary

New leaders are emerging, and new horizons are opening up before the Lord’s faithful witnesses. What was true in Acts 12 remains true today. Is this the way you look at your church? Your Personal Mission Field? Explain.

Closing Prayer

The LORD reigns;
Let the peoples tremble!
He dwells *between* the cherubim;
Let the earth be moved!
The LORD *is* great in Zion,
And He *is* high above all the peoples.
Let them praise Your great and awesome name—
He *is* holy.
The King's strength also loves justice;
You have established equity;
You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.
Exalt the LORD our God,
And worship at His footstool—
He *is* holy.
Moses and Aaron were among His priests,
And Samuel was among those who called upon His name;
They called upon the LORD, and He answered them.
He spoke to them in the cloudy pillar;
They kept His testimonies and the ordinance He gave them.
You answered them, O LORD our God;
You were to them God-Who-Forgives,
Though You took vengeance on their deeds.
Exalt the LORD our God,
And worship at His holy hill;
For the LORD our God *is* holy.

Psalm 99.1-9

For reflection or discussion

1. What do we mean by saying that God is sovereign in the Gospel and the ongoing work of Christ?
2. What's involved in discerning the Lord's next steps for our lives?
3. How should we be encouraged by the fact that angels surround and help us in the work of the Gospel and the Kingdom?
4. Based on all that we have seen thus far in Acts, how would you summarize the main points of the Good News of the Kingdom?
5. What's the most important insight or lesson you've learned from Acts 12?

Glory to Glory

We are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ *from* the glory we encounter in God's Word to the way we *live for His glory* in the world (2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Cor. 10.31).

What have you encountered *of* God's glory in our reading and meditations in Acts 12? How has He shown Himself to you more clearly? How can this help you live more consistently *for* His glory in the daily details of your life?

What have you learned about yourself from Acts 12 to help you in knowing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom?

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Thank you.