Great Events of the New Testament

Lesson #83 – Herod Agrippa Attacks the Church

Study Notes

Read Acts 12:1-24

We read several times in the New Testament about Herod. This is not one man, but a family. The Herod family almost always seemed to be the Devil’s agent in opposing the cause of Christ, but God always protected His own:

- Herod the Great murdered the infant boys of Bethlehem, but with God’s intervention the baby Jesus was taken to Egypt just in time.
- The cruelty of Herod Antipas beheaded the John the baptist, but did not stop the ministry of Jesus.
- At Jesus' trial Herod Antipas mocked Jesus, but after the Lord’s death, He resurrected.
- As the church of Christ was planted and flourishing, another Herod came on the scene – Herod Agrippa I. Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great (through Aristobulus).

The first Herod had been an Edomite. The second Herod was half-Edomite, half-Samaritan. But Herod Agrippa descended from a Jewish grandmother and he was far more tactful in his dealing with the Jews. Agrippa was raised in Rome and was trusted by Rome. He knew and got along well with the emperors Caligula and Claudius. During
the reign of Emperor Claudius, he was awarded the rule over his grandfather’s full kingdom including the regions Judea, Samaria, Galilee and Perea.

The story of Herod Agrippa I in Scripture begins in Acts 12. It is apparent as Luke records these events, that once again God entered the scene providentially to protect His Son’s cause.

**Herod Agrippa Harasses the Church.** Herod Agrippa, like most of his relatives, was a treacherous, superficial and extravagant ruler. He kept Jerusalem as his capital and often sought the favor of the Jews. Act 12:1 states, "Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church." Herod Agrippa wanted to please the Jews and when Jewish leaders sought to stamp out the cause of Christ, Herod Agrippa quickly sided with them.

The wicked king’s reign of terror began with the abuse of some who belonged to the church. But what started as abuse soon led him to what the Herods did best -- murder the innocent. Verse two states that “he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” James became the first apostle to lose his life for the cause of Christ.

We think back to Mk. 10 when James and his brother John came to Jesus asking for a special place in the Lord’s kingdom. “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” “We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with” (vs. 38-39). Jesus was saying that they would face persecution and death just as Jesus had.

**Peter’s Arrest.** “And because Herod saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. So when he had apprehended 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” (Acts 12:3,4).

The fact that it was the week of the Feast of Unleavened Bread meant that they would have to wait to execute Peter. If Peter could not be put to death right away, Herod was would keep him in custody, and put him in what we might call “maximum security.” In this type of imprisonment you had four soldiers, two on the inside with the prisoner (chained to him) and two on the outside, with new soldiers taking over every six hours. They probably took such drastic measures against Peter because he had escaped the Sanhedrin prison (Acts 5). Herod did not want to be embarrassed by another such incident.

James had been executed and now seemed like it would only be a matter of days before Peter was also killed. As Peter was kept in prison, the church offered constant prayer to
God for him. (Acts 12:5) The Lord’s people knew that not only Peter, but the church itself was in danger and was facing its most serious threat.

**Peter’s Escape.** Once again God was about to intervene. Acts 12:6: “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.” Tomorrow Passover would be over and Herod could bring Peter out for trial and execution. *It is possible that Herod Agrippa intended to kill Peter on the day after Passover – the same day Jesus was put to death on.*

“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. 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." So he went out and followed him, and did not know that all this was really happening, but thought he was seeing a vision (Vs. 7-9). The escape was not anything Peter had planned. He was sound asleep when the angel appears and (like most of us who are suddenly awakened in the middle of the night) not fully over being groggy until after the escape was over. The angel had escorted Peter out as if there were no chains and no guards at all.

Vs. 10-11 state, “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; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. 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.”

Finally Peter made his way to the house of Mary, John Mark’s mother, where many Christians had been praying through the night. In interesting detail, Luke records Peter’s arrival at Mary’s home. He knocked on the door and the servant girl, Rhoda, answered. In her excitement she runs to tell the others, forgetting to let Peter in. “You are crazy” the group tells her, but she insists that it is Peter. “It must be his angel” they speculated. Since the word angel means “messenger” it may be that they thought Peter had sent word to them. Or it may be that they thought it was a heavenly angel come to announce a message about Peter. While they all discuss this, Peter is still outside knocking. When the door was finally opened, there he stood. He tells them what had happened that night and asked that they report the news to James (the Lord’s brother who was taking an increasing role in the church, Acts 15, Gal. 1:19) and to the rest of the brethren. Peter went on elsewhere to preach, probably somewhere beyond Jerusalem.

Acts 12:18-19 records, “Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. 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.”

**Herod Agrippa’s Blasphemy.** The prayers of the church had prevailed and Herod had stopped his persecution. Luke next records the downfall of Herod Agrippa. Acts 12:20-23 states, “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 chamberlain their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king’s country. 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!" Herod should have put a stop to this, but instead seemed to enjoy the attention.

Agrippa I stood in the stadium that his grandfather Herod the Great had built. The historian Joseph records this same incident. "Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea…. At a festival a great multitude was gotten together of the principle 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, and of wonderful contexture, and early in the morning came into the theatre, at which time the silver of his garment, being illuminated by the first reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone in a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently on him. And presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good,) that he was a god; and they added, 'Be thou merciful unto us, for although we have hitherto reverenced thee only as a king, yet shall we henceforth own thee as a superior to mortal nature.'

Acts 12:23 “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.” Again Josephus verifies this, saying that Herod "did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. A severe pain arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. And when he was quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and seventh of his reign." Herod died shortly after the Passover in 44 A.D.

“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.” [*Now watch Luke’s contrast.*] “But the word of God grew and multiplied” (Acts 12:23-24). Herod died, but the influence of God’s Word continued to be felt. One of their apostles had died, but the church was not dead. With Christ on the throne, His kingdom could survive no matter how powerful the people opposed it.
Bible Quiz

1. Who did Herod have killed? (Acts 12:1,2)  
   Who was pleased that Herod had done this? (Acts 12:3)

2. Who did Herod want to kill next? (Acts 12:3)

3. When Peter was arrested what did the church do? (Acts 12:5)


5. Whose house did Peter go to once he was safely out of prison? (Acts 12:12)

6. When Herod realized that Peter had escaped, what did he do to the guards? (Acts 12:18,19)

7. When Herod gave a speech, what did the people cry out? (Acts 12:21,22)