

Acts 12 - John Karmelich

When I study the scripture, often I'll ponder, "Why did God want this to be in the bible? Yes, I'll come back to that question, but first let me summarize this chapter. Essentially it's three stories: It opens with one of the 12 disciples (James) being killed by King Herod. The second's is about Peter and how he got miraculously rescued from prison. The third's about King Herod dying a painful death after he failed to acknowledge God. I could focus this lesson on martyrdom, the power of prayer or even accountability to God. However, What I believe God wants me to focus on here is 1) God's in charge of how long we live, 2) Failure to use our lives as a witness for God is well, costly, and 3) As long as we live, we'll get opportunities to use our lives for His glory. OK then let me present my case why these three stories are part of the bible:

I jokingly say God doesn't say to us, "Congrats you're saved, now go have a nice life and I'll see you in heaven". We're saved for a purpose. That purpose is to glorify God with our lives. What do you say to a child dying of cancer? First, they will live forever if they trust in Jesus. Second I would emphasize to use what time they got to be a witness for Him as they deal with their struggles. Yes they don't have to be serious all the time and can play with others. It's not about being perfect. I'm just saying we have to realize we're accountable to God and we should try to be the type of witness He desires us to be. There are eternal consequences (lack of eternal rewards) for failing to be a good witness for Him.

Romans Chapter 1 makes it clear we can ponder the world and figure out something greater than us did create everything. That's why it's logical to believe in a God. Even those who believe in multiple gods must admit there has to be a single entity that "got the ball rolling". Those who argue that God created everything and said, "I don't care about you anymore" can't explain miracles, such as Israel's existence, or the fact that hundreds of bible scriptures tell everything about what Jesus did way before He came to this world in human form. I realize I'm preaching to the choir here, but I want us to grasp that everyone is accountable to God and it is based on how much we did know or could have known about him.

With that said, let me describe the three stories in this chapter and then I'll return to the topic of why it is in the bible and of course, why we should care. First thing you to remember is there's more than one Herod in the bible. The Herod who killed the babies in Bethlehem was a Roman appointed leader. He had lots of sons from lots of wives. In this chapter we're dealing with one of his grandsons. We're now in Acts 12, about 10 years after Jesus resurrection. Anyway the Herod in this chapter was trying to win favor with the Jewish religious leaders so they'd like him when "Rome checked in". He decided here to arrest some of the disciples to have them killed to please the Jewish religious leadership.

I should say a few words about name "James" in the New Testament. We get three men named James in the New Testament. There were two named James in the 12-disciple group. One of them was in the "inner circle" that saw Jesus transformed and talk to both Elijah and Moses. That's the one who's killed in this chapter. His brother was John, author of the Gospel of John, John's letters and Revelation. This Herod had James beheaded for the crime of being a Christian. Then we read Peter was arrested, and it appeared he was going to be killed except God did a miracle to spare Peter. I pondered why God allow James to be killed and not Peter? I'll get to that. First I want to explain the other two James: The other of the 12 doesn't have much said about him. The 3rd James is Jesus half-brother. Joseph and Mary had more children after Jesus, and that James became a church leader, and wrote the book of James.

That leads me back to the question of why did God "take" James and spare Peter? First remember God decides how long each of us live. He also is reminding us that being a Christian is not a guarantee of a

long life. Some Christians become martyrs but most of us live out a full life. I think God allowed it as a reminder just as Jesus said, "We're to be on our toes" (Recall that He said, "we're to be wise as serpents and harmless as sheep". Matthew 10:16.) The killing of James is the only disciple's death stated in the bible. God wanted this recorded for a reason, not to know how all the disciples died. I would argue it's to remind us that none of us know how long we'll be alive to be a witness for Him.

OK enough of the bad news. Onto Peter: He was arrested, put in jail and was going to be executed the next day. When Peter was asleep in jail, an angel woke him and said in effect, "Get ready to leave you are being sprung!" (How could he sleep knowing this death awaits?) Sometimes when we're exhausted from worry, it just wears us out and we fall asleep! Peter was chained to guards. I'm sure God put them in a deep sleep and made the gates open for Peter to get out and go preach the Gospel again!

That leads to one of my favorite stories in Acts. Picture a bunch of people having a big prayer meeting for Peter. I picture them in a circle praying as Peter knocks on the door. A girl answers the knock, sees Peter and is so excited she runs back to tell the others who didn't believe it was Peter! It makes a great scene! Lots of zeal in the prayer, but little faith. Yes they went back saw Peter and let him in. Besides a brief mention of Peter in Chapter 15, this is the last we read of him in Acts. The rest of Acts shifts its focus to Paul. So why is Peter's story dropped? I believe God wanted us to focus on the Gospel being spread around the world which is what Paul was doing. Peter was concentrating on Christians in Israel. Peter continued doing what God called him to do, but God wants us to focus on the Gospel spreading. It is why the book changes focus.

Finally we have the story of the death of Herod. Back to my original question, why would God want to include this story in the first place? Obviously tragic deaths happen all the time. What I suspect is the reason is for us to realize that people "Don't get away with anything". Those who harm Christians will suffer far more. For example the bible doesn't record how the first of the Herod's did die (the one who killed the babies), just this Herod. I'm positive the first Herod is in hell, so that's that!

The hopefully obvious point is God wants us to understand that we're accountable for our actions. We don't know how long we'll live, we just know we're accountable for the gifts God gives us. He expects us our gifts and our time as a witness for Him! For the non-Jewish people around the Israelites, that is a way to show them how He expects people to live (not the ritual laws, but say the 10 Commandments as an obvious example), God held the Romans responsible for that who ruled in that area. By the way, the text mentions the fact that Herod had the guards killed who were watching Peter in jail. Obviously it wasn't their fault and I have no idea if they were saved. It's another reminder that we don't know how long we each get to live.

To finish the story, this Herod had a big ego. There was a famous Pro-Roman Jewish author, Josephus who also records of this Herod's death as does Luke here. They both say that Herod died shortly after a big party Herod threw for himself. Herod refused to give God glory and that's why he painfully died a short time after that party.

OK you all get the point about accountability. That's the underlying message of this chapter. With that said, if you'd like more details on this chapter I also wrote a detailed lesson on Chapter 12. That is on a verse-by-verse basis. To read that, click on one of the other two links on this chapter. You're always welcome to e-mail me and I hope you like this. Thanks, John