

## 40. The Church Saw James Killed and Peter Imprisoned

In our last topic, we saw how the Lord caused the church to spread to the Greek-speaking people in the city of Antioch. We saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children understand the desire of the Lord to spread the message of the death and resurrection of Christ to the people of all nations. It was in the city of Antioch that the followers of Christ were first called Christians. In our topic today, we are going to see that new persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem began to develop.

The persecution of the church in Jerusalem in the earlier chapters came from the Jewish religious leaders. In our topic today, we will see that persecution started to come from the Roman government. After the time of the birth of Christ, Herod the Great tried to kill Christ when he was a young child. Matthew 2:16 says, “Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.” Then, one of the sons of Herod the Great named Herod Antipas ruled Galilee at the time of the death of Christ. Luke 23:8 says, “Now when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad; for he had desired for a long *time* to see Him, because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him.” The Herod mentioned here was Herod Agrippa 1, a grandson of Herod the Great. Herod Agrippa 1 ruled Jerusalem from 37-44 A.D and like the other members of the family was very fearful.

Here, we see that Herod Agrippa 1 began to persecute the church. Acts 12:1-3 says, “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 it was *during* the Days of Unleavened Bread.” The word translated “harass” means *to harm, do evil or mistreat*. Stephen used this word twice in his sermon in Acts 7 to talk about the way that Pharaoh mistreated the Jews when they were in Egypt. Then, in Acts 14:2, the word is translated “poisoned”. That verses says, “But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren.” Here, we see that the first thing that Herod did to harass the church was to kill James, the brother of John, with the sword.

Herod was trying to get the Jewish religious leaders to speak well of him and speak for him to the Roman Emperor. He saw when he killed James that these religious leaders were very pleased. As a result, Herod arrested Peter as well. Just like his grandfather before him, Herod Agrippa 1 was willing to kill innocent people in order to hold on to political power and try to gain additional power. Jeremiah described the heart of man very well in Jeremiah 17:9 where we read, “The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” This Herod did not even recognize the sinfulness of his own heart. He was willing to kill innocent people in order to increase his own power. Through the years, the world has seen many similar rulers who will do whatever it takes to try to control other people. Unless an individual repents of the wickedness of his or her heart, such individuals will one day experience the judgment of God on their lives and that judgment will last for eternity.

Since Herod Agrippa 1 was doing what he did to try and gain favor with the Jewish religious leaders, he realized that he should wait until the Days of Unleavened Bread came to an end before he killed Peter. The Days of Unleavened Bread began each year with the Passover. Exodus 12:13-15 says, ““Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you *are*. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy *you* when I strike the land of Egypt. So this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.”” Herod knew that this was an important feast for the Jewish religious leaders and so he thought that it would be best to wait until after this week to kill Peter.

As a result, Acts 12:4 says, “So when he had arrested 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.” Herod wanted to make sure that Peter did not escape during this time so he ordered four squads of soldiers to guard him. A normal Roman squad used to guard a prisoner had four soldiers in the squad. Two of these soldiers would be chained to the prisoner, one on each side. The other two soldiers would stand outside the door of the cell to make certain that the prisoner could not escape. Since the Romans had four-night watches, one squad would guard a prisoner in this way during each watch of the night. Herod really wanted to make certain that Peter could not escape.

The plan of Herod was to bring Peter out to the people as soon as the Feast of the Passover was over. Here, we see that Herod was a ruler that was controlled by fear. He had seen that the Jewish religious leaders were pleased when James was killed and he was sure that they would be even more pleased if Peter was killed. As a result, Herod wanted to make this a public event and execution in order to gain favor with these Jewish leaders. However, Herod did not know either the peace of God or the plan of God.

In Acts 12:5-6, we read, “Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. 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.” Herod was very confident that Peter would not escape. Acts 12:10 says, “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.” In addition to the regular security and guard posts inside the prison, we see that there was also an iron gate that would stop anyone who got past all of the guards.

Herod had strong Roman soldiers and a very secure prison. However, he did not know that there was one weapon that he could not fight. We see that constant prayer was being offered to God for Peter by the people of the church. Ephesians 6:12-13 says, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.” One of

the things to notice about the spiritual armor mentioned in Ephesians 6 is the fact that most of the armor is defensive and that spiritual defense is very different from that of the world.

The defensive armor includes truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation. Ephesians 6:17-18 say, “And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.” Here, we see that as Christians we have two weapons that the Lord has given us to fight spiritual battles. The first of these is the Word of God. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” This is important, because the Word of God has power that our words do not have.

However, the most important weapon for spiritual battle is the second weapon which is prayer. The early church realized that it had no power to stop Herod from killing Peter just as he had killed James. However, they knew that the Lord has all power and authority. As a result, we see that the early church realized that the one thing that they could do was pray for the Lord to work instead of trying to depend on their own wisdom or strength. We will see how the Lord answered their prayer in our next topic. Here, we see a key lesson that every Christian needs to learn for today. Mark 10:27 says, “But Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With men *it is* impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.’” Without Christ, we can do nothing – John 15:5. With Christ, we can do all things – Philippians 4:13. Until Christians learn this important fact, we will accomplish nothing. The world has absolutely no understanding of the power of prayer.

We also see that Peter could have complete peace even though Herod was planning to kill him. The night before Herod planned to kill Peter, he was sound asleep. He had no fear, because he was prepared for whatever the Lord chose to allow to happen in his life. Peter understood the meaning of Psalm 31:14-15 which says, “But as for me, I trust in You, O LORD; I say, ‘You *are* my God. My times *are* in Your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me.’” He knew that the Lord would deliver him in one of two ways. Peter knew that the Lord could choose to deliver him by taking him to heaven as He had done with James. He also knew that the Lord could deliver him out of the prison. Peter had complete peace and was sound asleep, because he knew that either way the Lord would deliver him. Peter had two chains that were attached to the two soldiers that were in the cell with him. There were also two guards out in front of the door of his cell to prevent anyone from trying to free him.

Here, we see a key lesson that we want to show our physical and spiritual children by our example. We can experience the peace of God in any situation when we are depending on the Lord instead of trying to depend on our own strength or wisdom. May the Lord richly bless you as you show your children how to experience the peace of God.