

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ
Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 10

Day One: God's Omnipotence

One of the great lessons in the Christian life happens when the believer realizes experientially that God sees, knows, and acts on their behalf because He is in complete control! Though we may not fully understand His ways, we know His will is always best. And when we put our confidence in the truth of scripture, we can be assured we are safe: *For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open unto their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil*" (1 Peter 3:12).

Once again the enemy rears his ugly head, this time through another of the Herods. In an effort to win the Jewish popular vote, Herod Agrippa I begins to ruthlessly persecute the church by taking aim at two of its pillars: James and Peter. One would be allowed to die while the other would be set free. This earthly king would stretch forth his hand in an effort to destroy the church, but God would overrule from heaven to protect it and propel the gospel onward.

Peter's deliverance would take place at the Passover time when the Jews celebrated their Exodus from Egypt. The word "delivered" in Acts 12:11 is the same word used by Stephan when he spoke about the Exodus (Acts 7:34). In answer to the persistent prayers of God's people, Peter experienced a new kind of deliverance.

Read Acts 12:1–25.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord. Write down your first impressions.

Memory verse: Hebrews 11:6 Write out the verse; repeat it daily to commit it to memory.

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Up to Acts 12, the church was on a “winning streak,” experiencing one conversion after another. Saul’s dramatic conversion was soon followed by Cornelius and his entire household. Then there came the mixed crowd of Jews and Gentiles in Antioch. But here in chapter 12, there is a new development in church history—James is the first of the twelve to be martyred. He was not the first to die for his faith in Christ. Stephen (Acts 7) was martyred earlier, as were others. But the death of James somehow crushed the notion that the twelve enjoyed a unique divine protection.

1. Jesus did not promise His closest followers protection; rather what did He tell them they could expect? Matthew 10:16–26 How did He encourage them in these verses?

2. James was the brother of John, and often the two were linked with Peter for special intimate moments with the Savior. Recall what a few of those were that are recorded for us in scripture.

- a. Matthew 17:1–2 _____
- b. Mark 5:35–42 _____
- c. Matthew 26:36–38 _____

3. In Mark 10:35–40, James and his brother John came to Jesus and asked to be singled out for special favor. What did they specifically ask of Him? How did Jesus respond?

Jesus promised that they would indeed drink of His cup and be baptized with His baptism. This martyrdom of James is the fulfillment of that promise. And despite repeated attempts to also martyr John, he would fulfill the promise through a lifetime of service to God.

When Herod saw that killing James pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter and put him in prison. He delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

4. Challenge: Contrast the difference between the persecution brought by Saul of Tarsus (Acts 8:1–3) and that of King Herod here in chapter 12.

Day Two:

Prevailing Prayer

Read Acts 12:5–19 for review.

*Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church (Acts 12:5). The believers were helpless to open prison doors, but did they give up? No, they prayed! Fervent, earnest, constant prayer was offered to God by the believers. The key word *constant* conveys the idea of something earnest or firmly believed. Literally, it refers to the *stretching out of all they can do for something*. Much of our prayer is powerless because it lacks earnestness. We must remember that the key to *prayer that prevails* is found in: 1) knowing to whom it is we pray; 2) what specifically to pray for; and 3) joining the power of our prayers with that of other believers.*

1. Once Peter was delivered, he found his way to the prayer meeting at the house of Mary, John Mark's mother. A brave Rhoda answered as Peter knocked but then what did she do? Why?
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2. When she ran to tell the other believers inside, how did they respond? Who did they believe it was at the door?
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Why would an angel bother to knock? But the Jews did believe in guardian angels and felt that the man at the door had to be an angel that looked like Peter. Just outside the door stood the answer to their earnest prayers, but they did not believe it! Their faith did not match the earnestness of their request.

3. As Peter continued knocking and they opened the door, what was their response? v. 16
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4. What did Peter direct the believers to do? v. 17
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Except for a brief mention in Acts 15, this is the last that Luke speaks of Peter. He now fades from the scene and Paul becomes the primary figure in the remainder of the book.

The lesson from this scene is simple but striking . . . God always responds to the faith of the individual seeking Him in prayer; but in all matters pertaining to the well-being of His Church, He desires that we *unite together* in our supplications: *Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.* Matthew 18:18–20

5. Looking at Matthew 18:18–20, consider the following . . .
 - a. What is the condition for answered prayer?
 - b. What does it mean to “agree”? How many are required to agree?
 - c. Why do you think there is more power when believers unite in agreement?

Day Three:

Prompt Obedience

Read Acts 12:6–11 for review.

Four squads guarded Peter, each squad had four soldiers at all times; two were chained to him while the other two stood watch outside the cell. Herod put him under heavy guard, well aware that the previous time Peter was arrested, he got out of jail. Herod was determined that would not be repeated.

1. What was Peter doing on what was supposed to be the last night of his life?

a. Imagine, in chains and believing he was about to die, Peter showed no signs of anxiety at all. What does the Bible say about God’s care for His own? Psalm 127:2

2. What were the angel’s instructions to Peter?

a. As Peter obeyed, he didn’t understand that what the angel had done was real. What did he think?

Once they passed the first and second guard gates, they came to the iron gate leading into the city which opened of its own accord. The angel immediately left and Peter understood that God was up to something.

b. When Peter “came to himself,” what did become clear to him? v.11

The angel had brought light and liberty into that dark prison cell. The guards were unaware that anything was happening. But if Peter was going to be delivered, he had to *promptly obey* what the angel commanded of him. What does that tell us? That sometimes even in miracles, God expects our willing participation—our faithful obedience whether or not we understand.

c. The angel that miraculously removed the shackles and chains also commanded Peter to humbly stoop down and put on his own shoes. Think about it: what might Peter have remembered about that act of obedience later on in life when he wrote his letters?

d. Personal: Are *you* perhaps right now being held against your will in a difficult situation? Does it seem like prison? Are you praying in faith and asking other believers to pray with you? Is there a step of obedience God has asked you to take? Please explain.

Prison cells, armed guards, holding chains, guard posts—all are nothing when God is with us and prayer is upholding us! And the iron gate . . . don’t worry about that until you come to it. When you do, God Himself will take care of it!

Day Four:

King Herod: Sin's Brutality

King Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great, who murdered the children when Jesus was born. He was also the nephew of Herod Antipas, who played a role in the trial of Jesus. He ruled from A.D. 37–44 and was quite the political figure of his day with an ability to please both Romans and Jews. Friend to kings and emperors alike, he wielded considerable power and influence, manipulating every situation to his own personal advantage. He was a perfect example of a successful man of the world; nothing was more important to him than the applause and admiration of people. But like his predecessors, Herod was an exceedingly wicked man.

Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church (Acts 12:1). Herod's attention to the rites, ceremonies and religious observances of Jewish law brought him respect from the priests and Pharisees. He didn't care whether the believers in the church were of God or even whether they were right or wrong. He gained in popularity by killing James and tried to do the same to Peter, but God had other plans. When at last Herod seemed to rise to the pinnacle of his own glory, receiving the acclamation that he was not a mere mortal but a god, he was stricken and died a victim of his own arrogance and pride.

"The proud man . . . enlarges his desire as hell, and he is like death, and cannot be satisfied (Habakkuk 2:5b). The significance of James' death to the church meant nothing to a man like Herod. Such ruthless shedding of blood is a lasting example of a spirit—a life—void of God. It is sin's indifference to sorrow and injustice and it continues to this day.

Deeper Discoveries ~

Take a closer look at the verses below. Look for the lesson in each verse. Ask yourself in the form of a question how each might apply to you.

- a. Proverbs 13:13 _____

- b. Proverbs 16:18 _____

- c. Proverbs 26:12 _____

- d. Read through Romans 1:18–32. What is the natural result when sin rules the life?

Herod's horrific death was symbolic of the kind of life he lived—one governed by sin's brutality and depravity. But God overruled, and verse 24 presents us with the positive results: "The Word of God grew and multiplied." Those who feared the commandment were indeed rewarded. What the enemy meant for evil God used for good.

- e. As you ponder what you've just studied, how might the truth of it keep you humble and thankful?

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Give God your praise for setting you free from sin's grasp and giving you life.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.
