

Acts 12 Exegetical Meditation



Chapter 12 concludes the first half of the Book of Acts. The commonly held breakdown of the Book of Acts from the Church Fathers until the present day finds Acts 1-12 defined as the Petrine narrative and Acts 13-28 as the Pauline narrative. Of course, we have already been introduced to Saul, and not all of Acts 1-12 focused solely on St Peter. Nevertheless, this breakdown definitely makes sense on the evangelical level. St Peter's ministry was primarily centered on the Jewish Christians, and St Paul's ministry centered on the Gentiles. Therefore, the beginning and end of Chapter 12 are fitting and anything but superfluous if one believes Luke's intention to communicate Peter and Paul's perspective roles in this manner. The persecution of Peter is well suited for a conclusion to the narrative for it reveals Peter's role being that of a general who needs to suffer persecution for the administrative distresses placed on the Jews. These Christians were flipping the Jewish organizational structure on its head, and Peter needed to pay for that. Paul's mission is that of a sergeant. He is portrayed as an innovative maverick in spiritual combat. Both the administrative work and the front-line work were essential and remain essential to the spread of the gospel.

After having St James killed by the sword, King Herod targets St Peter. Given the popular response he received it makes sense that Herod would go after the head of the apostles. As so often the case with tyrannical leaders, Herod desired popularity not merely power.

Peter's release from prison by means of an angel reads like that of a Disney showtune. The celestial being imparts some hidden knowledge at the outset of the search for the main protagonists' destiny. "And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me" (Acts 12:7-8). Those silly step-by-step commands without giving Peter any explanation for what was going on seemed like a mystical mind

trip to me. No wonder Peter thought it was just a symbolic vision. Peter then goes to tell a house full of Christians the story (the “John who is called Mark” mentioned in Acts 12:12 is the future assistant of Peter and writer of the gospel of Mark). Notice the authoritative tone that he exhibits in his blunt description of the event. This happened and then he inexplicitly leaves without answering questions (see Acts 12:17).

Peter’s presence was felt by the Christians in that house, while simultaneously his absence was felt by Herod. The commotion of the Christians compelled Herod to execute the guards on duty at Peter’s cell. Herod eventually gets his comeuppance directly from God because his executions and his many offenses were evil actions aimed directly at God. In his every action he behaved as if he thought himself divine and he also expected to be received as a god. This is the ultimate sin in the eyes of God. God struck him down for his pride (see Acts 12:23).

As mentioned, the second half of Acts examines St Paul’s ministerial efforts to the Gentiles. Acts 12:25 is a quick transition statement to the back half of the book. Like Peter, he will find himself persecuted for disrupting the status quo. If you lack courage in proclaiming Jesus Christ, then Acts 13-28 is the place to start. St Paul shows the way to become unashamed of our Lord (see Rom 1:16-17).