



SERMON NOTES

US N^o. 110

Date: August 4th, 2013

Title: Persecution & Prayer

#18 in the Series on the Acts of the Apostles

1. The martyrdom of "James the Greater"

a. Herod Agrippa I harasses the church

- i. The grandson of Herod the Great, who ruled in the days of Jesus' birth (cf. Mt. 2:1-16) and the nephew of Herod Antipas, who had a role in the trial of Jesus (cf. Luke 23:7-12)
- ii. No doubt, this was done because it was politically popular for Herod as it pleased many of his citizens who didn't like Christians. There are many political figures that are ready to persecute Christians if it will make them politically popular.

b. James

- i. One of the three most intimate friends of Jesus during His time on the earth:
 1. His calling – Mk. 1:19-20, "When He had gone a little farther from there, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat mending their nets. And immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him."
 2. The healing of Jairus' daughter – Mk. 5:37, "And He permitted no one to follow Him except Peter, James, and John the brother of James."
 3. The transfiguration – Mk. 9:2, "Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them."
 4. The garden of Gethsemane – Mk. 14:33, "And He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed."
- ii. Mk. 10:35-41, "Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask." And He said to them, "**What do you want Me to do for you?**" They said to Him, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory." But Jesus said to them, "**You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?**" They said to Him, "We are able." So Jesus said to them, "**You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared.**" And when the ten heard it, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John."

c. James' martyrdom

- i. Certainly the disciples were praying for James as they did for Peter, but perhaps they were caught unprepared and did not realize the danger lying at the door. Maybe they prayed more fervently for Peter having seen what happened with James.

- ii. Eusebius relates a story from Clement of Alexandria, who said the soldier guarding James before the judge was so affected by his witness that he declared himself a Christian also; James embraced him and pronounced, "*peace be to you*" before he was also willingly executed for Jesus along side of James. (Clement & Eusebius, *Church History* 2.9.2-3)
 - d. There was no attempt to replace James, as there was to replace Judas (*cf. Acts 1*). This was because James died as a faithful martyr, but Judas revealed his apostasy in betraying Jesus; there was no need for another man to take the office of James.
2. Imprisonment and Rescue of Peter
- a. There was a major difference between the persecution from Saul of Tarsus (*cf. Acts 8:1-3*) and from Herod. Saul, wrong as he was, persecuted out of sincere (though misguided) religious conviction while Herod persecuted out of purely political motives.
 - b. The persecution came as a means for Herod to ingratiate himself with the Jewish leadership (popular support) at the same time that the famine was coming; God does allow trials to multiply for His people when they appear least able to bear it.
 - c. Horton suggests three reasons for Herod's delay in executing Peter:
 - i. He wanted to show the Jews how scrupulously he observed the Passover;
 - ii. He wanted to wait until the pilgrim crowds went home, fearing a riot;
 - iii. He wanted to wait until he had the full attention of the Jewish population.
 - d. Peter arrested and guarded by 16 soldiers. "*Normally it was considered enough for a prisoner to be handcuffed to one soldier, but as a special precaution Peter had a soldier each side of him and both his wrists were manacled.*" (J. Stott)
 - i. 16 guards aptly demonstrate the public opinion of Jesus' disciples.
 - ii. It also demonstrates that Jesus had disappeared during the Passover and this wasn't going to happen with Peter.
 - e. The Church prays.
 - i. The word constant also has the idea of "*earnest*;" literally, the word pictures someone "*stretching out all they can for something.*" "*The verb ektenos is related to ektenes, a medical term describing the stretching of a muscle to its limits.*" Luke uses this same word *ektenos* for the agonizing prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (*cf. Luke 22:44*). Much of our prayer is powerless because it lacks earnestness. Too often we almost pray with the attitude of wanting God to care about things we really don't care too much about. Earnest prayer has power not because it in itself persuades a reluctant God. Instead, it demonstrates that our heart cares passionately about the things God cares about. The disciples were "*besieging*" heaven with their prayers.
 - ii. The prayer meeting at Mary's house was well attended and was actually about prayer.
 - iii. The early church was a praying church: upper room, after the 1st arrest, Peter's arrest. They prayed unceasingly, promptly and to the point.
 - f. Peter and the angel.

- i. Peter obeyed without really knowing what was happening. He knew enough to sense that God was doing something and the explanation could come later.
 - ii. “*Gird yourself...*” What Peter could not do was done for Him (chains & doors), but what he could do it was expected that he do himself (gird himself & find his way once outside). In the Divine economy there is no provision for idle blood. God gives us abilities and He expects us to employ them to their fullest; “we are workers together with God.”
 - iii. Many of us worry about the iron gate before we ever get to it. A month beforehand, and we are anxious about the iron gate, but God will take care of it when we come to it. For Peter, it opened of its own accord, (the Greek word is “*automate*”); one could say that the gates opened automatically for Peter.
 - g. Christ's church will certainly suffer persecution; better to have angels on your side than soldiers.
 - h. There is no obstacle too great for God;
 - i. James was martyred (Acts 12:1-2) and Peter was rescued. The reasons why He does such are often known only to Him. We do know that James, having graduated to glory, did not consider himself a loser in any way. Simply, it wasn't time for Peter to go to his heavenly home yet. Until it was time, he was invulnerable. He couldn't be harmed. It was time for James; it was not time for Peter.
 - j. Peter naturally went to where he knew Christians would be gathered and praying. They would want to know that their prayers had been answered.
 - k. Rhoda was so excited to hear from Peter that she left him out at the gate; such a natural, true-to-life feel of account shows the reliable historical character of the Book of Acts. We are comforted (and amused) by the little faith of these Christians. Even while they prayed for Peter, they found it hard to believe God actually answered their prayer. Their prayer was earnest (*cf. Acts 12:5*), but their faith was not overwhelming. Little faith can accomplish great things if it is placed in the great God.
3. The death of Herod Agrippa (44 AD)
- a. God allowed Herod's sin to be filled up; an angel carried out the punishment, but it had a natural explanation.
 - b. The manner of Herod's death was appropriate to his spiritual state; he corrupted from the inside out. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus – writing to the Roman world – also described the death of Herod in gory detail (*Antiquities*, XIX.8.2). “*He put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment, being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon 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...A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner...when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life.*”

- c. *"But when it was known that Agrippa was departed this life, the inhabitants of Caesarea and of Sebaste forgot the kindnesses he had bestowed on them, and acted the part of the bitterest enemies... They also laid themselves down in public places, and celebrated general feasting, with garlands on their heads, and with ointments and libations to Charon, and drinking to one another for joy that the king was expired."* Josephus
- d. Lessons from Herod:
 - i. Note that God will avenge the blood of His martyrs (*cf.* Dt. 32:43, Luke 18:7)
 - ii. It is a vain thing to wage war with God
 - iii. It is wicked to rob God of His glory
 - iv. The Gospel will ultimately out
- e. The word of God grew & multiplied; grew in weight and influence upon the hearts of listeners, grew in extent over which it travelled, grew in power. Multiplied the number of believers.
- f. The Gospel has been opposed by Jewish prejudices, Satanic influences, and human pride but it was succeeding through the power of the Spirit, the zeal of its preachers, the holy lives of the disciples, and the unity of the church.
- g. Acts 1-12 demonstrates how Jesus Christ is the Messiah of the Jews. The section ends with the present king of the Jews – Herod – taking up arms against the Church and then himself coming to a bad end.
- 4. Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch
 - a. Coming back from their relief effort to Jerusalem (*cf.* Acts 11:30), Barnabas and Saul brought John Mark with them back to the church at Antioch.
 - b. Mark resembles Timothy (pious mother), nephew of Barnabas. Peter considered him a son (*cf.* 1 Pet. 5:13).
 - i. He was timid; *"Grace does not all at once revolutionize a man's natural temperament."* Ultimately steadfast; youthful faults & indiscretions should not discredit or hinder future usefulness.
- 5. Take aways
 - a. There's a cosmic battle going on
 - i. Do not be caught unawares
 - ii. Pray with earnestness
 - iii. Do not be idle
 - b. God takes care of His own
 - c. The gates of Hell will not prevail