

Week 20

The Church Continues to Spread

The Church Enters a New Time of Persecution and Growth

Chapter 12 brings us a kind of summary of the church to date, and one of the key components of the church's life to this point was persecution. King Herod (Agrippa) begins a new wave of persecution of the Christians, seemingly to endear himself evermore to the Jewish people.

Herod Agrippa is one of the many sons of Herod the Great, who reigned at the time of Jesus' birth. He was also a descendant of the heroic Maccabean family that led the revolt and ruled in the inter-testament period. They were known as the Hasmonean Dynasty, and had no ancestral ties to King David, and therefore no claim to the Messianic throne of David.

The Romans conquered the Hasmoneans in 63 BC and Herod the Great became ruler under the Romans in 37 BC. Herod the Great was married 10 times and several of his sons from different mothers reigned over the Roman Province of Palestine in the first Christian century.

The Herod's liked to claim ancestry with the Hasmoneans, however, only Herod Agrippa, whom we read about in chapter 12, had true Hasmonean ancestry. Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great through his son Aristobulos, who was murdered by his father Herod. Aristobulos was married to a Mariamne, a true princess of Hasmonaeen descent.

Agrippa was educated in Rome and was known for keeping the Jewish Law and Observances quite meticulously, which earned him popularity with the Jewish people.

We see his quest for more power and more popularity with the people in Chapter 12 as he launches a new campaign to persecute and kill the Christians. He begins with the leaders. After beheading James, the brother of John the Beloved, he saw how much it pleased the people, that he arrested Peter with the same intentions.

However, Peter's arrest was on the eve of the Passover. As such, there could be no trials or executions during the high holy days of the Passover. So, Agrippa decided to put off Peter's execution until the end of the Passover.

Peter was undoubtedly the head of the Christian church and as such his death would have dealt a great blow to the growing movement, or so Agrippa thought. He held Peter under the greatest security conditions of their time. But that couldn't hold Peter, as an Angel of the Lord led him to freedom. Once free, Peter went the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark (the writer of the Gospel of Mark), which was likely serving as headquarters for the church. Round the clock prayer

vigils were held for Peter. It is worth noting that prayer was the greatest weapon of the church, and still should be.

Peter was adamant that the disciples tell James of his miraculous release in answer to prayer. This James was the brother of Jesus and was a great leader of the local church in Jerusalem. During Jesus' earthly ministry, James and the other siblings of Jesus didn't believe Him to be the divine Messiah. But here we see James serving the church not only as a believer but as the leader of the church.

The apocryphal book called the Gospel According to the Hebrews tells how after the crucifixion, James made a vow that he would not eat or drink until he saw Jesus again, and that Jesus did appear to him, and in 1 Corinthians 15:7, we read that Paul tells us of Jesus appearing to James after the resurrection. James serves as a great testimony to the power of the Cross to transform lives.

The chapter ends with the gruesome death of Herod Agrippa due to his prideful arrogance in receiving the worship of the people as a god. Then the chapter closes with the comment that the church continued to grow and spread. It seems the persecution only served to strengthen the church in the world.

E. GOD CONTINUES TO PROTECT JERUSALEM CHURCH EVEN THROUGH PERSECUTION

- 1. James Put to Death (12:1, 2)**
- 2. Peter Delivered (12:3-17)**
- 3. Herod Dies (12:18-21)**

F. A SUMMARY REPORT OF THE CHURCH (12:24, 25)

