

Heritage Christian Community Baptist Church

Acts 12:1-25 NKJV Martyrdom and Deliverance

Rev. Dr. Delores Cain - Founder

Rev. Eric Bostick – Pastor

March 10, 2026

Acts chapter 11 closes with a beautiful picture of unity in the early church. Jewish and Gentile believers in Antioch become one body in Christ, and their unity is demonstrated not merely in words but in action. When famine threatens Jerusalem, the believers respond together with generosity, sending relief through Barnabas and Saul. Chapter 11 shows us a church that stands as one in mission, compassion, and faith. As we enter Acts chapter 12, Luke shifts from unity in service to unity under suffering. The same church that stood together to give now must stand together to endure persecution. Herod stretches out his hand against the church, James is martyred, and Peter is imprisoned. Yet in the face of fear and opposition, the church does not scatter—it gathers. They unite in earnest prayer, lifting one voice to God on behalf of Peter. Acts 12 therefore teaches us that unity is not only forged in blessing but strengthened in crisis. This chapter reveals a powerful truth: when the people of God stand as one, God acts as One who reigns supreme. One apostle dies, another is delivered, a proud king is judged, and the Word of God continues to grow. Through persecution and prayer, through loss and victory, the message of Acts 12 proclaims the same theme introduced in Acts 11—the church stands as one, and nothing can stop the work of the Holy Spirit.

Persecution Begins Under Herod (Acts 12-1-5) NKJV

12 Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. ² Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.

Luke opens the chapter by introducing Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great. Unlike Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted Christians out of misguided religious zeal, Herod's motivation was political. Luke says that he "stretched out his hand to harass some from the church." The Greek word translated *harass* is *kakoō*, meaning *to mistreat, to afflict with evil intent*. This was not random opposition, but deliberate persecution designed to please the Jewish population. Herod discovered that attacking the church increased his popularity, and political ambition drove his cruelty. This reminds us that the church does not only face spiritual opposition but also political pressure. When faith becomes inconvenient to power, persecution often follows. Luke then records a shocking sentence: "*Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword.*" This James was one of Jesus' closest disciples—part of the inner circle with Peter and John. He had witnessed the Transfiguration and the agony in Gethsemane. Yet he becomes the first apostle to die for Christ. Years earlier, James and John had asked Jesus for positions of honor in His kingdom. Jesus replied, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink" (Mark 10:39). James' martyrdom fulfills that prophecy. John would drink that cup through a

lifetime of suffering and exile; James would drink it through death. The lesson is sobering: intimacy with Christ does not guarantee exemption from suffering. God's will sometimes brings deliverance through death and sometimes deliverance from death. James' death did not signal failure. It signaled faithfulness to glory.

Encouraged by public approval, Herod arrests Peter next. He places him under extraordinary guard—four squads of soldiers, chains on both wrists, and guards at the door. But Luke draws a powerful contrast: “*Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.*” the word constant from the Greek *ektenōs*. It was a medical term describing a muscle stretched to its limits. This was not casual prayer. It was intense, strained, passionate intercession. And power through prayer outweighed chains. The church's greatest weapon has never been political influence or physical power—it has always been earnest prayer.

Q1: What does Herod's persecution teach us about how political power can respond when faith threatens popularity or control? How should the church remain faithful when external pressure increases?

A:

Q2: What does James' death teach us about the relationship between faithfulness to Christ and suffering? How does this challenge the idea that closeness to God guarantees protection from hardship?

A:

Q3: What does the early church's response teach us about the role of prayer in times of crisis? In what ways can believers today practice the same kind of earnest and united prayer?

A: Open

God Sends an Angel to Free Peter (Acts 12:6–11) NKJV

⁶ 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. ⁷ Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, “Arise quickly!” And his chains fell off his hands. ⁸ Then the angel said to him, “Gird yourself and tie on your sandals”; and so he did. And he said to him, “Put on your garment and follow me.” ⁹ So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And when Peter had come to himself, he said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.”

On the very night before Peter's scheduled trial, God intervenes. Not worried about his scheduled execution the next morning, Peter showed no signs of anxiety as he slept in peace. Perhaps this was the result of His confidence in God to take care of him as He did in Acts 5:17-26. It was then that the Angel of the Lord freed Peter miraculously from prison by opening the prison doors and sending him to the temple to preach the Gospel. The incident occurred while guards stood outside the door of the prison and did not see Peter's release by the Angel.

This text depicts Peter bound by two guards in the cell and two guards watching outside the cell. In v7, an angel appears in the cell, a light fills the prison, and Peter's chains fall off his hands. The iron gate opened "of its own accord." The Greek word is *automē*, from which we get automatic. The gate did not need to be forced; God simply commanded it to open. Peter obeyed step by step, not fully understanding what was happening. He thought he was seeing a vision. Only after the angel left him did he realize that God had truly delivered him. We learn from this that obedience often precedes understanding. God does not always explain first; He acts, and clarity comes later.

Q4: What does Peter's peaceful sleep the night before his expected execution reveal about his trust in God's sovereignty?

A: Open

Q5: What does Peter's step-by-step obedience during the angelic deliverance teach us about following God when we do not fully understand His plan?

A: Open

Q6: How does God's miraculous intervention in Peter's imprisonment encourage believers to trust God's power even when circumstances appear impossible?

A:

The Praying Church Is Amazed (Acts 12:12–19) NKJV

¹² So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. ¹³ And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. ¹⁵ But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel." ¹⁶ Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place. ¹⁸ Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there.

Peter goes to the house of Mary, where believers are gathered in prayer. A servant girl named Rhoda hears his voice, becomes so excited that she forgets to open the door, and runs inside to announce the miracle. The believers respond with great disbelief, not considering the possibility of their answered prayer. They exclaim, “*You are beside yourself!*” Ironically, they had been praying for Peter’s release but could hardly believe it when it happened. Their prayer was earnest, but their faith was small. Peter instructs them to tell “James and the brethren.” This refers not to the martyred apostle but to James the brother of Jesus, who had become a central leader in Jerusalem. God answers prayer even when our faith wavers. Power is not in perfect faith but in a faithful God.

Luke uses the phrase “no small stir” to depict the reaction of the soldiers the next morning upon learning of Peter’s absence. In essence, he was stating there was a very great uproar or agitation. Luke uses intentional understatement frequently to convey intensity of actions (cf. Acts 15:2; 19:23; 27:20). The term *tarachos* denotes deep emotional confusion, disorder, and panic. The soldiers were thrown into chaos because Roman military law required that guards suffer the penalty assigned to the escaped prisoner. Thus, Luke subtly indicates that Peter’s escape was not merely embarrassing but legally catastrophic for the soldiers.

Q7: What does the believers’ reaction to Peter’s arrival reveal about the relationship between prayer and faith?

A:

Q8: What can we learn from Rhoda’s joyful response to hearing Peter’s voice?

A:

Q9: What does the reaction of the soldiers the next morning reveal about the seriousness of Peter’s escape and the power of God’s intervention?

A:

Herod’s Pride and God’s Judgment (Acts 12:20–23) NKJV

²⁰ Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king’s personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king’s country. ²¹ So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. ²² And the people kept shouting, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” ²³ Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.

Later, Herod appears before the people of Tyre and Sidon wearing royal apparel and delivering a public address. The crowd shouts, “*The voice of a god and not of a man!*” Herod accepts the praise instead of giving glory to God. Luke writes that immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, and he was eaten by worms and died.

The historian Josephus records that Herod wore a silver robe that reflected sunlight and dazzled the crowd, leading them to worship him. Shortly afterward, he was struck with severe

internal pain and died after five days of suffering. The lesson is unmistakable: God will not share His glory. Pride invites judgment. Herod persecuted the church, exalted himself, and perished.

Q10: What does Herod's acceptance of the crowd's praise teach us about the danger of pride and the importance of giving glory to God?

A:

Q11: How does Herod's judgment demonstrate God's sovereignty over rulers and earthly power?

A:

The Word of God Triumphs (Acts 12:24–25) NKJV

²⁴ But the word of God grew and multiplied. ²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark.

Luke ends the chapter with a victorious statement: "*But the word of God grew and multiplied.*" James is dead, Herod is dead, Peter has fled Jerusalem, and yet the gospel advances. Barnabas and Saul return to Antioch with John Mark, and the mission continues. The verb *grew* suggests organic, living expansion. God's Word is not hindered by prisons, executions, or political rulers.

Q12: What does the phrase "the word of God grew and multiplied" teach us about the nature of the gospel despite persecution and opposition?

A: Open

Q13: How does the return of Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark demonstrate the continuation of God's mission through faithful workers?

A: