

## GOD PROTECTS THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM (James is martyred; Peter is rescued)

Acts 12:1-25

Key Verse: 12:5

God is the sovereign ruler of history. He himself orchestrated the world mission of his church. He prepared Saul (Paul), the man who would spearhead the mission to the gentile world. Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen (ch 7). He was a Grecian Jew, a well-educated Pharisee. He committed himself to the task of destroying the church and he did so systematically until he met the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, and received a commission from Jesus himself to be an evangelist to the Gentiles (Ch 9). God also prepared the church for the task of world evangelization. He used Peter, the spiritual leader of the church. And he used Cornelius, a Roman Centurion of Caesarea, to open the door to the Gentiles (10-11). In chapter 11, the Antioch church was pioneered. This is the first Gentile Church. Barnabas brought Saul from Tarsus. They taught the Bible and taught a giving spirit. Foundations for God's mission to the world were laid. In chapter 12, while Barnabas and Saul are visiting Jerusalem, the church encounters a different and more deadly kind of persecution. It was persecution by the evil King Herod. The apostles, especially the shepherd of the church, Peter, was in grave danger. Again, God protected his church.

### \* THE CHURCH PRAYS FOR PETER (1-5)

The church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit and grew in numbers. But this time of peace did not last long. As numbers of believers grew, enemies of God also increased in number. King Herod decided to interfere in the conflict between the unbelieving Jews and the believers in Jesus the Christ. He arrested some of the believers and then became bolder and had James, the brother of John put to death with the sword. When he saw that the Jewish leaders were pleased, he had Peter arrested, too. It was clear what he intended to do. What could the church do? What could Peter do? The church gathered together and prayed. Peter did not let the soldiers or the shackles make him afraid. The night before he was to be brought to trial, he slept soundly between the soldiers, while bound with two chains. The prison was very secure. There were sentries who stood guard at the entrance.

The angel who came to rescue Peter had to strike him on the side to wake him up. He was still groggy with sleep and didn't really believe what was happening. He thought it was a vision until he passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself and he went through. After they had walked the length of the street, the angel left him and he came to his senses. He realized that the Lord had sent his angel to rescue him. Still he did not think about trying

to escape the city. He went to the house where the church had gathered to pray for him.

He went to the house of Mary and John Mark and knocked on the door. Rhoda answered his knock and recognized Peter's voice, but she was too excited to open the door. They couldn't believe that God had heard their prayers and rescued Peter. Peter reported what had happened, asked them to tell James and the brothers. (Apparently they were in another place praying.) Then he left and went into hiding.

#### HEROD DIES; THE CHURCH GROWS (19-25)

The next morning Peter's absence was discovered. Herod was furious. He ordered a thorough search and then had the guards executed. Herod who had tried so diligently to destroy the church and who had determined to kill Peter did not live much longer. He went to Caesarea, the seat of Roman government in Palestine. He got involved in a quarrel with the people of Tyre and Sidon. They wanted a peaceful relationship with the country governed by Herod, because they were dependant for food on that country. They flattered Herod and deified him. He accepted their flattery and their exaltation and God was displeased. He struck Herod and worms ate him and he died. Herod's death ushered in a short-lived era of peace. The church continued to grow. Barnabas and Saul took young Mark with them and went back to Antioch. The stage was set for the first missionary journey. God would use Peter again to testify to God's great purpose to bring the Gentile world into his kingdom.