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THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD MISSIONARY MOVEMENT

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 46
ACTS 12:16-25

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In our last study we saw the threefold reaction the church had over the deliverance of Simon Peter from the prison. Their reaction was:

1. You are mad.
2. It is an angel.
3. They were astonished.

They had prayed for a week for Simon Peter to be delivered, then when he was delivered they didn't believe it. But let us remember, answers to prayer come on the basis of who and what God is and not on the basis of who and what we are. When God answers prayer it is always on the basis of grace.

ACTS 12:17 "But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place. When that prayer group opened the door and saw Simon Peter standing there in the flesh, they all broke out into conversation. They were astonished. Simon Peter told them that the Lord had delivered him and he asked that they go and report his deliverance to the Pastor of the Jerusalem Church, the half-brother of Jesus named James. You see, James was a legalist and he needed this lesson. Neither James nor the deacons of the Jerusalem Church had participated in the prayer meeting, and Simon Peter wanted a report to be taken to them. Simon Peter left Jerusalem and went to Antioch; as we would say, he went where the action was. He went to Antioch. This is the place where the new missionary movement would function. Jerusalem had lost her place and influence because Jerusalem was legalistic and not under the grace concept. Grace equals this--God does the work, man receives the benefit, and God gets the credit. The Jerusalem Church was under legalism and under legalism man does the doing, God is supposed to receive the result and man gets the credit. Antioch is the new grace center.

ACTS 12:18 "Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter." These are the sixteen Roman soldiers who had successfully guarded Simon Peter in the jail. King Herod and his court met and were waiting for these soldiers to bring him in to them.

ACTS 12:19 "And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea, and there abode." Herod had to judge someone so he turned on the soldiers and he had all of them put to death.

This man Herod Agrippa was quite a man. You remember his grandfather was called Herod the Great. Herod the Great was a genius, the greatest non-Roman alive in the world of his day. He was one of the most successful men of all time. He was a multi-millionaire and one of the most brilliant politicians of all the earth. He was the greatest construction genius of all times. He rebuilt Athens and beautified it. One of his sons was named Aristobulous, and he was the father of Herod Agrippa. Herod Agrippa got his training in Rome, and was a Roman citizen of the fourth generation. Julius Caesar had given his great-grandfather Roman citizenship. Mark Antony married Octavia and they had a child who came to be known as Lady Antony, and she is the one who took Herod Agrippa into her home and trained him in Rome. Caligula and Herod Agrippa became great friends, and one day when they were riding in a chariot in Rome, Herod Agrippa told Caligula that he would be glad when his drunken father was dead so he could take over the throne. The chauffeur overheard his remark and reported it to Tiberius Caesar and he had Herod Agrippa put in jail. But in six months Tiberius

ed and Caligula became Caesar and the first thing he did was to set Herod Agrippa free. While Herod Agrippa was in the Roman jail, a German prisoner prophesied something of real significance about Herod Agrippa. As they stood in the prison courtyard, an owl was in the tree above them and the German prisoner told him that the owl meant he was soon to be set free. But he said, "The next time you get up to speak and see an owl sitting in a tree above you, in five days you will be dead". Herod Agrippa never forgot that prophesy. Caligula set Herod Agrippa free and gave him a set of gold chains in exchange for the chains that had kept him bound. Herod took those chains back to Jerusalem with him and displayed them in the Holy Temple.

The events of this verse 19 happened ten years after Herod Agrippa had been set free in Rome and for ten years now he had been ruling Palestine.

When Simon Peter was set free by the angel from prison, it greatly frightened Herod Agrippa and he left Jerusalem and went down to live at Caesarea. Herod remembered the prophesy the German prisoner had made about the owl, and he would always look up before he began to speak to see if an owl was around.

You see, Herod Agrippa was ready to persecute the Christians in a terrible way, he had killed James and had planned to kill Simon Peter the same way. But when Simon Peter was delivered, it frightened him almost to death. Caligula went mad, and they had to put him to death. It so happened that Herod Agrippa was visiting him in Rome at the time he went mad. The Roman Senate didn't know who should be made Caesar and Herod Agrippa suggested that Claudius should become Caesar. It happened this way and when Claudius became Caesar, he turned all of Palestine over to Herod Agrippa.

Herod Agrippa went back to Caesarea, and after Claudius had conquered Britain, Herod Agrippa decided that he would stage some great celebration in Caesarea commemorating Claudius Caesar's great victory.

This brings us to verse 20 in our story, and this secular history we have just studied helps us understand what is going on here.

ACTS 12:20 "And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king's country." This verse tells us that while Herod Agrippa was getting ready for this big celebration in Caesarea, the Phoenicians came offering to surrender to him because they needed food. This verse also tells us that they bribed Blastus so they could get to see Herod Agrippa.

ACTS 12:21 "And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them." The big celebration was on, and Herod Agrippa stood up to make a big speech. Just as he did, he looked up and saw an owl sitting on a bar above his head. (I am filling in here from secular history.) Immediately he remembered the prophesy of the German prisoner more than fifteen years before. But Herod Agrippa recovered his composure and made one of the most brilliant orations ever made in the history of the world. Much of his oration was to blaspheme the name and work of Jesus Christ.

ACTS 12:22 "And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man." In this verse we have the response of the crowd. For more than an hour, they gave him an ovation and they kept on saying, "It is the voice of God--It is the voice of God--It is the voice of God!" While they kept shouting he collapsed.

ACTS 12:23 "And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost."

In the Old Testament the Angel of the Lord is Jesus Christ, but here it is an angel from the Lord. Once Christ came in the flesh and lived, he never again appeared as an angel, as he did in Old Testament times. The angel from the Lord is the same death angel that passed over Egypt when the firstborn were slain. The angel smote him and he was eaten of worms. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that Herod Agrippa was stricken just as he finished his speech, and that he lingered five days and died and his flesh rotted from worms. If Herod Agrippa had lived, he would have tried to wipe out all believers.

ACTS 12:24-25 "But the word of God grew and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark." Here we have the results given of that famous prayer meeting. Here are the four results--

1. Simon Peter was delivered from prison.
2. God took the life of Herod Agrippa.
3. The Word of God spread to the Gentile world.
4. The foundation was formed for the great world missionary movement.

So here we have the names of the men whom God would use to launch the great missionary movement.

This chapter emphasizes the grace of God. James is slain, but Simon Peter is set free. Prison doors that men cannot open are opened without hands. Another door that should have been opened was left closed because the people who prayed were afraid. Their prayers were answered in an amazing way, but the people who prayed were afraid and had great doubts.

But the power of prayer is the power of the church and it is based on the grace of God. The chain of gold which Caligula gave to Herod Agrippa still was hanging in the temple at Jerusalem when the Romans came in 70 A.D. and burned the temple to the ground. The gold melted in those flames, and this is a picture of how Herod Agrippa in eternity would burn in the fire of destruction--because he failed to accept Jesus Christ as his Saviour.

Seven Lessons From This Chapter

This 12th chapter of Acts is the pivotal chapter in the book. From here on, we have a different book entirely. Here the great missionary movement saw its beginning and the Gospel is to be spread over the entire earth.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WILL OF GOD.

God had a plan in taking James, and God had a plan in sparing Simon Peter. This deliverance was linked up to prayer in order to show God's grace. They prayed, but the actual deliverance came from God. In the plan of God there is only room for the will of God.

2. CATASTROPHE AWAKENED THE SLEEPING CHURCH TO THE NEED FOR PREVAILING PRAYER.

The death of James was a shock and this shock aroused the sleeping church and sent the church to her knees. Often it takes some shock like this to awaken the church.

3. FAITH PRODUCES CALMNESS.

In a time of great pressure Simon Peter lived by faith. Faith produces calmness and a relaxed mental attitude. Simon Peter turned everything over to the Lord and fell asleep on the night he was under the sentence of death.

4. GOD ALWAYS DOES HIS PART AND GOD EXPECTS MAN TO DO HIS PART.

This is a dual operation. God did the supernatural and struck off the chains from Simon Peter, but Simon had to get up and dress himself and walk out. God never does that which we can do alone. We live in a natural realm and we must be willing to do our part, then in the Spiritual realm God always does his part.

5. GOD'S GRACE IS ALWAYS ADEQUATE.
These praying church members had great doubts and fears, and even when Simon Peter stood at the door knocking, they didn't believe he was there. They didn't deserve to have their prayers answered, but God answered on the basis of his grace.
6. GOD OFTEN CHANGES NATIONAL LEADERSHIP TO GET HIS WORK DONE.
Herod Agrippa was bent on destroying the Christians and God saw to it that he didn't accomplish his plan.
7. PRAYER OPENS THE DOOR FOR TRUE MISSIONARY ACTIVITY.
Prayer, though offered in doubt and fear, opened the door for the true missionary message to go forth in all the earth.

Psalm 116:1-8 has great instruction for us right at this point. Psalm 116 is not a Psalm of David but is a Psalm of King Hezekiah. Hezekiah had usurped the Priest's office and as punishment God was going to take his life. Isaiah had just visited King Hezekiah and had told him of the coming judgment of God. But before Isaiah could get out of the palace and across the court yard Hezekiah had repented and had asked the Lord to forgive him of his sin. As Isaiah was passing the sun dial in the court yard, the Lord spoke to him and said this to him--"Isaiah, King Hezekiah has repented of his sin. Go back into the palace and tell him that I have forgiven him, and as a sign of this I am moving the shadow back on the sun dial ten degrees".

Hezekiah rebounded and wrote this Psalm. Let us read the first eight verses.
PSALM 116:1-8 "I love the Lord, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications. Because he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live. The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow. Then called I upon the name of the Lord; O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul. Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful. The Lord preserveth the simple: I was brought low, and he helped me. Return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee. For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling."

Please give special notice to verse 5. "Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful". God is gracious, but please remember that it is based on his righteousness. God's righteousness comes first, and once his righteousness is satisfied, then his love and mercy become operative. People who always talk about the love of God as being for all and that no one can be punished in hell just don't know what they are talking about. They mention that you might go to purgatory for a few thousand years and there pay for your sins and then someone burns a candle and pays some money, and you wiggle out on the other side and finally get into heaven. This is directly contrary to the teaching of the Bible concerning the righteousness of God. God isn't inconsistent. He is fair with everybody. Once his righteousness is satisfied, he deals with us on the basis of grace.

Now let me ask you a question--what right do you or I have to come to God, after we have really gotten things all mixed up and we cry out, "Lord, help me"? And the Lord does help, but he does it on the basis of the fact that I am his child, and I have believed on Christ and the righteousness of God has been satisfied by Christ's death on the cross, and God deals with me on the basis of grace.

This is why we ought always to thoughtfully sing "Amazing Grace" for indeed it is the most amazing thing in all the world.