

## The Dilemma of Inconsistency (4 of them) Acts 12:1-19

**Last week** we saw a church emerge out of the persecution that followed Stephen's martyrdom.

God took what was meant for evil and brought about good. His hand was upon the church at Antioch as they shared their faith **Inclusively** and without bias, they committed themselves to an **Intentional** plan of discipleship, and then **Influenced** their community and world with a lifestyle that caused others to say those people are *Christ-like*. The 3 I's of CCOD.

At the end of that story Paul and Barnabus are sent to Jerusalem with the Antioch Church's relief for a famine that would soon hit the Judean region.

Today we will be looking at Acts 12:1-19. Here Luke resumes his story about Peter which he interrupted with the story of the church that sprang up in Antioch.

We'll be looking at another of Peter's imprisonments and release. As we do this, we'll look at three inconsistencies that are not uncommon to us today.

In looking at these inconsistencies, there are a number of valuable lessons for us to learn. But before we go there let's just read verse one and then let me explain the historical context.

**Acts 12:1**, "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."

What does "**about that time**," refer to?

It is referring back to the time mentioned at the end of chapter 11; the time that Barnabus and Saul were sent to Jerusalem with financial relief that the Church of Antioch sent to help the brethren living in Judea.

These two events are linked together. *Why? What does the hand extended to help have to do with the hand stretched out to hurt?*

In answer to these questions, let's first look back at the last few verses we ended with last week.

**Acts 11:28-30**, "Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be **a great famine** throughout all the world, which **also** happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. 29 Then the disciples, each according to his ability,

*determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. 30 This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the **hands of Barnabas and Saul.**"*

It says that this famine also happened during the reign of Claudius Caesar, who was presently reigning.

We know he was because history tells us that in the first year of His reign, 41 A.D., Herod's reign was extended to include Judea and Samaria.

This wasn't by accident; these guys were buddies.

They had been childhood friends and were part of close knit trio: Agrippa, Claudius, and Caligula. Now, years later, as men, they watched each other's backs.

These were not good guys Herod Agrippa was hanging with; and neither was he. Matter of fact, like others in his family, he was known for his cruelty.

You'll remember that his grandfather, Herod the Great ordered the murder of male babies in Bethlehem and his uncle, Herod Antipas, had John the Baptist beheaded for his preaching.

And then here, we see Agrippa harassing the church and killing James the brother of John. Then he had Peter arrested with the intent to kill him.

**So how did this Agrippa rise to power?** Years before Claudius had taken the throne. Herod was overheard saying that he hoped Tiberius Caesar would die so that Caligula could take the throne.

This landed him in prison until Tiberius's death in 37 AD. *How did he die?* Accounts say that Caligula helped smother him to death. **Birds of a feather!**

So when Caligula took the throne he released Herod from prison and gave him some territories to rule over with the title of king and then gave him a chain of gold equal to the weight of the chain he was bound with in prison as a sign of his kingship.

In 39 AD Caligula banished Antipas from Palestine and gave Agrippa his reign over Galilee and Peraea.

In 41 AD Caligula is assassinated, and it was Herod's advice that secured Claudius' ascension to the throne. In gratitude, Claudius extended Herod's reign to include Judea and Samaria. *He was on his way up.*

But Herod's life would be cut short. Only 3 years later in 44 A.D he died a painful death (*more next week*).

So, getting back to the question: *Why are these two events linked together? (The churches hand extended and Herod's hand stretched out to hurt)*

Combine an ego-centric king with food already in short supply in the regions north of Galilee and voilà!

**Acts 12:20** says, *“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.”*

Food for Tyre and Sidon came from Rome which came through Herod. With Herod dead and more extensive famine on its way in 45 AD, according to Josephus, the prognosis for the poor Christian brothers of Judea was not good.

God cares for His people and made all this known ahead of time to Agabus who told the church in Antioch and they determined to send relief to be saved up against that day.

The countries of Tyre and Sidon thought the best way to secure their current food supply issues was to appease the bordering country's king by calling him a god at a peace accord banquet (next week's sermon).

Suffice it to say, Herod probably felt like His influence and power was being weakened by the church.

He preferred that his subjects trust in him for their sustenance.

So when it says **“about that time”** – the time when aid arrived from the church in Antioch from brethren in Judea, that Herod decided to harass church leaders.

It may have been the self-sufficiency of the church that caused Herod to become hateful and cruel toward the church.

Though his cruelty was consistent with that of his family and the rulers of that day, there was one glaring inconsistency to Agrippa's brutality. That is the first inconsistency we will look at today.

## **1. The Inconsistency in Herod's Thinking.**

**Acts 12:1-4**, *“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.”*

Agrippa has already killed James and when He sees that his brutality against the church pleased the Jewish leadership, he decides to ramp up his cruelty.

He seizes Peter, but because He is meticulous in regards to the law – he delays his execution because it was time for the festival of Unleavened Bread and Passover.

In some weird way he didn't want to disrupt or defile that holy week. Talk about inconsistent thinking!

Here is the major difference between organized religion and Christianity.

Organized religion is picky in regard to details—it observes outward aspects of religion as Herod did but no true interest in God or what is holy.

Last week we defined holiness: *to do what is right, to love mercy, to walk humbly before our God.*

As religiously sensitive as Agrippa was, he wasn't holy! He didn't do what was right, he didn't love mercy, and he didn't walk humbly before God because he didn't know God.

There are those who are outwardly religious and who may believe but who have never come to know Christ (*unbelievers – seekers – believers - knowers*).

The wicked will always be quick to harass the righteous in a way that complies with what is religiously acceptable, as inconsistent as that is with a true knowledge of God.

We need to understand that there will always be an inconsistency between belief and behavior when it comes to the world system.

When it comes to us as Christians those two must be consistent!

**In John 16:2-3 Jesus said,** *“They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. 3 “And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.”*

Yes, the persecution we see happening here in Acts was consistent with what Jesus said.

He had been quite clear about this; and He was especially clear to James about his coming death.

It was James and his brother John who once asked Jesus if they could sit on either side of His throne in glory and the Lord asked them, *“are you able to drink the cup that I drink and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”*

It was symbolic language for suffering and death. They said yes and Jesus assured them they would indeed drink from that cup.

So James was killed and Peter was imprisoned with the expectation of execution hanging over him, but God spared him. **Let's read that account.**

**Acts 12:5-11,** *“Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. 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.”*

What a miraculous supernatural rescue operation that was! And it is that reality **which brings me to a second inconsistency.**

## **2. The Inconsistency in Our Thinking.**

Like many of you, I have often been perplexed with the issue of James and Peter.

It has caused me grief to think about why one was saved from a cruel death and the other not.

This inconsistency continues to plague me. *Why are some miraculously rescued while others are not?*

It cannot be understood. **Why Peter and not James?**

**First,** we should never forget is - Jesus loved James.

In fact, James was part of the inner circle of three Jesus spent alone time with (Peter, James, John).

**Secondly,** John, Peter, and many others whose lives were spared at some point, eventually died. And in some of those cases, their sufferings and deaths were even more horrible than the ones they had been rescued from.

So why one rescued and not the other? I do not have the answer for you on this side of heaven.

It's like looking at a small portion of a mural and trying to understand that small piece without seeing the whole canvas.

I just have to remember that the artist who painted it did so with a complete knowledge and full understanding of what He was painting, and that this piece of art was a work of perfect love, right down to the smallest incomprehensible part – that is to us!

This inconsistency has tried my faith over the years, but I have learned that we cannot hold God and the truth of His existence hostage to the things we just do not fully understand.

Even if you removed God from the equation, and became an atheist, you would still not understand the answer to why some are born here in peace and others in another place into famine and starvation.

Well, you may be an atheist and saying to yourself, I am perfectly satisfied with the idea of bad luck.

Or you may have moved to a belief system that says you do lots of good and good comes back to you, you do lots of bad and it comes back on you – *Karma*.

Well, I'm sorry, that isn't good enough either. Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people.

It is comforting to know that David and other psalmists were perplexed with this contradiction too.

The clarity with which the Bible addresses this subject is seen in **Matthew 5:44-45**,

*"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, 45 "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."*

The persecution we are looking at under the hand of Herod is actually the 5th persecution we see in Acts of the Church in Jerusalem.

Antioch was far enough away from Jerusalem that it lived in comparative peace.

We don't have this type of persecution in our country either – but in other countries there martyrs dying every day for their faith in Christ.

We who are spared may be the only means of supplying the material (goods) and spiritual (prayer) relief others need to get through their difficulties.

I often wonder what it was like for those left behind when James died, the comfort that John and his family needed to deal with James' death.

And I wonder what it was that gave Peter the strength to get through his incarceration. *Which leads me to the third inconsistency in this text...*

### **3. The seeming Inconsistency in Peter's Thinking.**

OK, I know that James has just been killed and I am in prison. I know that the only reason I'm still in this cage is because Agrippa is waiting to kill me after the Holy days. Matter of fact, I am looking at an execution this evening.

*You might be thinking, well maybe he didn't know?*

I'm pretty sure the 16 guys who were guarding him and the chains didn't go unnoticed or unexplained.

In verse 4 – there were four squads of soldiers (each squad of 4 (16 total men) to watch him for six hours).

We do know the whole story here, and the church knew what was going too – that's why they are praying!

*So how do you get any sleep on a night like that?*

As I look at Peter's ability to go to sleep I am amazed. If I was facing the same outcome, I would have a hard time falling asleep – let alone into a deep sleep!

Let's face it -- when things are looking bad for us how do we respond – Roloids, medication?

What do we do when there isn't that kind of help, do we rest in the Lord like Peter did? That is the only explanation for the inconsistency of Peter's thinking as he faced execution.

**Psalm 37:7**, *"Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him; Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, Because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass."*

There is a discipline in resting in the Lord – trusting fully in Him realizing that He is truly in control and that circumstances can change if He wills it.

When we rest in the Lord we save ourselves a lot of nervous energy.

Though Peter's state of mind seems inconsistent with his immediate circumstances, they were consistent with the faith we embrace!

**Exodus 14:13**, *"Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever."*

**Psalm 46:10**, *"Be still and know that I am God"*

Now there was possibly another reason why Peter was sleeping.

The Lord said that Peter would live to be an old man

**John 21:18**, *“I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”*

We all need to think like Peter did.

**Matthew 11:28-30**, *“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 “For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”*

The last inconsistency I want to talk about today is found in **verses 12-19**.

*“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.”*

#### **4. The Inconsistency in the Church’s Thinking.**

Now, what was going on here in the house prior to Peter’s arrival?

**Acts 12:5**, *“Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.”*

This was consistent with what the church is called to do – pray!

Here’s the church caught by surprise, a story of real people told with feeling and humor.

In it, Peter, after coming out of his sleepy state of mind after being surprised at his rescue, he goes directly to the home of a believer he knew well, Mary, the mother of John Mark.

Unbeknownst to him prayer for his release is still going on inside while he stands at the outer gate knocking and calling for someone to come let him in.

A girl, perhaps a member of the household or another family attending the prayer vigil, named Rhoda (“rosebud” or “little rose,” hears the knocking and comes running.

She has heard Peter speak so often that she **Recognizes Peter’s familiar voice**, she realizes that their prayers have been answered. Peter is here!

So filled with joy, instead of opening the gate, she leaves this leading apostle standing there and runs to tell the others (as in the case of the Lord, the disciples “were disbelieving” “in their joy” at his appearance).

**This is the inconsistency I am referring to – A church committed to continual prayer but unbelieving of the results.**

The humor of the situation reaches its peak as these praying Christians tell her she is crazy!

When that doesn’t seem right in the face of her insistence that Peter really is there, they say it must be his angel. This could mean one of two things!

They are referring to his spirit and are insinuating that he’s dead or it was his guardian angel (Gen. 48:16; Dan. 3:28; 6:22; Heb. 1:14; Matt. 18:10).

Luke continues the ironic scene. Peter, the man for whom they have been praying, is left standing out in the street, knocking and calling. Finally members of the group come and open to him, amazed that their prayers have been so miraculously answered!

Even after he is inside, the apostle has difficulty getting them quieted down so he can tell them how God delivered him.

He finishes by telling them to report this to James and other members of the church.

Then out the door he goes to an undisclosed place knowing that a search would ensue and his absence would safeguard others!

#### **Conclusion**

There are inconsistencies we need to acknowledge and come to terms with.

**Evil people** will embrace religion and their actions will often be inconsistent with true faith.

Though **some people will be rescued** like Peter and others not like James – we only have a little bit of the bigger picture in view. God loves each one dearly.

When we **rest in the assurance of Christ's love** and perfect will being accomplished through us others will take notice of that inconsistency and envy our peace.

And lastly, here is the resource for all our problems – prayer with three aspects to it:

**Persistence** – *constant prayer* was made by the Church. They didn't give up.

**Precision** – they didn't pray in generalities but were precise in their targeted request (*prayer was made for him by the Church*).

**Power** – Peter's release a result of united prayer.

Like Peter, many people today are bound in prisons: of worries and fears, addictions and compulsions, hopelessness, grief, bad relationships or poor finances. But just as Peter found freedom through the passionate prayer of others, they can too.