

**“Whose Glory?”**  
**Acts 12:1-24**  
**July 27, 2008**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

One of the questions about this story in Acts 12 is why Luke chose to include it in his account of the expansion of the early church. It is clearly something of an interlude between the ministry of Peter in the first eleven chapters of the book and the ministry of Paul that begins in chapter 12. And it is a very entertaining interlude. I can imagine Peter’s friends kidding him later about being such a sound sleeper. An angel comes in the middle of the night, accompanied by a bright light. But Peter just keeps on sleeping and needs to be struck by the angel to awaken him. He still seems to be groggy and, in his stupor, needs to be told every step to take. I can also imagine Rhoda getting her fair share of kidding after this. She’s a servant in the house where Peter flees and where the church is gathered for prayer on his behalf. The gate is locked so that Peter must knock. Rhoda comes and inquires about the identity of the visitor before unlocking the door. She is so excited when she hears Peter’s voice that she forgets to open the door, and runs back into the house to announce Peter’s arrival. But no one believes her, resulting in an argument between Rhoda and the others gathered there. Their argument is then interrupted by Peter’s resumed knocks on the door. I can imagine this story being repeated many times with a great many smiles and kidding.

So this is clearly an entertaining interlude. But is it more? Some commentators say that the purpose of this story is to introduce James as the new leader of the church in Jerusalem. James is mentioned in verse 17, where Peter directs this event to be retold to James and the rest of the Christians in Jerusalem. But I don’t consider it likely that Luke included this account just to explain James’ ascendancy, when he is only mentioned once in a somewhat parenthetical way. Others have claimed that Luke includes this account in order to explain why the church in Jerusalem loses its central place in the early church. That change, it is claimed, is due to the persecution that broke out here with Herod. But this explanation also seems unlikely to me, since only one man is reported to have died in this persecution, the apostle James. Furthermore, by the end of the chapter, the author of that persecution is dead.

So why did Luke include this chapter? A helpful clue is found in the fact that the chapter begins and ends with a story about King Herod. There is something about Herod that Luke wants us to know. And then the middle part of the chapter is all about Peter and his deliverance from a certain execution by the hand of Herod. Putting these clues all together, I think Luke’s point is to encourage God’s people to continue to live for God’s glory. Herod lived for his own glory, and look what happened to him. He may have seemed to have all

the power at one time, but he did not end well. God's people may seem to be powerless at times, but life flourishes when we learn to live for God's glory. This issue addresses the core of the heart. What gets you out of bed each morning? Everyone lives either for God or for themselves. Luke writes here to encourage us to live for God. So let's look at these two ways of living, for self-glory or for God's glory.

## I. Self-Glory – Herod

Herod did two things wrong in this passage. First, he killed an innocent man, James, and intended on killing a second one, Peter. Second, he did not give God the glory, but took it for himself. This second sin occurred when he was giving a speech and was praised as divine. There is a Jewish historian by the name of Josephus who describes the death of Herod. He reports that Herod was wearing a robe woven of silver thread. As he took his place to deliver this speech, the sun began shining on this silver robe, giving him a bright and glorious appearance. That's when the crowd began acclaiming him divine.

Which of these two sins was the greater, taking an innocent life or failing to quiet those who think you are divine? Most people in our day would answer confidently that it is far worse to take an innocent human life than to get a little off base about some small point of religion. After all, Herod didn't ask for their worship; he only failed to stop it once it started. Luke's view, reflecting that of the Bible as a whole, is just the opposite. Herod's sin of taking God's glory was far worse than his first sin because it was a foundational sin. The reason he took James' life and was planning to take Peter's is that he was seeking his own glory. Notice verse 3. **“When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.”** Herod wanted to please his subjects, and it was that desire that led him to want to kill Peter. He wanted to please them not because he valued them and loved them, but because he loved himself. His job would be easier and people would like him if he did things that pleased his subjects. Herod wanted to be popular and powerful. It was a desire for self-glory.

We see this same desire motivating him in the incident Luke describes at the end of the chapter. Tyre and Sidon were dependent upon Herod for their food, but he was angry at them. In light of their dependence on Herod for their food, it's not hard to imagine how they would want to please him and placate his anger. That's exactly what Herod liked, for others to act deferentially toward him. So he puts on his best outfit, assembles them together and gives a speech. The outcome was exactly as he had hoped. They loved him and worshipped him, at least until the angel of the Lord made his second appearance in this chapter. He had appeared first to thwart Herod's purpose to execute Peter. He appears now to bring judgment upon Herod.

Herod is not the only one guilty of the sin of self-glory. It is part of the way sin works in all of our lives that we become energized at the core of our hearts by the desire for self-exaltation and power. And when this desire fuels our lives and becomes part of our core motivation, we find ourselves doing things against God. Even without trying, we become God's enemy. That's what happened with Herod. He didn't grow up saying, "I think I want to kill innocent people when I grow up." But he ended up doing exactly that, not because it was his ambition to do so, but because it was his ambition to seek the praise of man. Proverbs 29:25 says, **"The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe."** The fear of man is another way of speaking about seeking the praise of men, because what is feared is displeasing men. To do so is to walk right into a trap. Jesus said the same thing when he asked a question of a group of Pharisees who loved the praise of men. **"How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?"** (John 5:44). If you seek the praise of man, you are setting yourself on a collision course with God.

What are some of the ways in which we are like Herod, seeking the praise of men instead of God? Have you ever had the experience of not really noticing a particular type of car until you own that exact car, after which you start to see it everywhere? That's the case with this sin. Once you become aware of this category, you start to see it everywhere in your life. Why do we like to have a lot of money? Because money gives us control and it gives us the approval of people. If my car is nicer, my house bigger and my clothing more stylish, then others will look upon me with an attitude of respect. Why does it feel like death to know that there are important people who disapprove of me or what I have done? Because, like Herod, we want their approval and we would do almost anything to get it. How can we go an entire day and never pray to God? Because we are completely devoted to a self-pleasing agenda rather than a God-pleasing one.

The path of self-glory does not end well. A person filled with the desire for self-glory at this deep, motivational place of the heart is someone who is rotten to the core. Sometimes you may run across an apple that looks very good on the outside, but which has been eaten up by a worm on the inside. That's the way Herod was. At the high point of his political career, dressed in his finest robe and wielding his political power, he died a painful and humiliating death. He was eaten by worms. I understand that there is a type of intestinal worm that can proliferate and form a tight ball of worms which can obstruct the intestines. Perhaps that's what Herod had. He wasn't God-like at all. He was rotten to the core because he sought self-glory instead of God's glory.

## **II. God's Glory – Peter**

Peter stands in marked contrast to Herod. He has been living for God, and now he is ready to die for him too. Peter no doubt thought that he was about to die. He had already seen his good friend and colleague, James, succumb to the executioner's sword. Now, it seems, his time has come. But Peter has learned to live and to die for God's glory. So on the night before his trial and execution, notice what he's doing. He's sleeping, confident that God will handle things in the best way.

Those who live for God's glory experience the deliverance of God. Verse 5 sets the scene for a conflict between Herod and God. **“So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”** Notice how Herod is in the position of power, while Peter and the rest of the church are in the position of weakness. Herod reminds me here of the way a cat will catch a chipmunk and play with it for a time before killing it. The cat is so confident that the chipmunk is in its complete power, that it will let it lie at its feet still alive, pawing it to encourage the poor thing to try to run away. But the cat has wounded it seriously enough that it knows the chipmunk will never succeed in escaping. When the cat tires of the game, it's lights out for the chipmunk. Herod is keeping Peter alive until it's most convenient for him to bring him out for execution. He's not afraid of Peter, or of Peter's God at all. But Peter has learned not to live for his own glory. He has been proclaiming the good news found in Jesus and bringing glory to Jesus through this message.

It is delightful to read of the way God delivers Peter. He acts at the last moment, on the night before Peter's trial and execution. God so often waits until the last moment to deliver his people that we are right to conclude that this is part of his glory. He also plays with his enemies, making them think that they have won. But then, in one decisive act, God utterly defeats his enemies. In this case, he sends only one angel, because one would be more than enough, even though Peter is confined under a situation of maximum security. He is under 24 hour guard, being watched by four guards at a time. Two of the guards are chained to him, with one on each side. The other two guards were assigned to stand guard at the locked door of the cell. But the angel loosens the chains, unlocks the doors and somehow neutralizes all the guards. Peter just walks out a free man.

I am drawn to this image of Peter being fast asleep the night before his execution. In a matter of just a few hours, he thinks that he will likely be dead. But he's able to sleep the sleep of the faithful, trusting God with his life. Haven't we often been in similar situations? There is a major challenge we are facing in life, before which we are largely powerless. There is a surgery tomorrow morning. A job is ending, and there is no other prospect in sight. Your only friend at school has just moved away, and you're afraid of the prospect of being friendless at school, eating by yourself in the lunchroom. The message of this chapter is that for those who live for God's glory, there is always deliverance. There is either deliverance *from* suffering, as in the case of

Peter, or deliverance *through* suffering, as in the case of the martyred James. Peter could sleep because he knew he was in a no-lose situation.

God's deliverance of Peter here is the pattern of all his deliverances. Notice how active God is through his angel. Peter did not orchestrate this prison break. He is almost sleep-walking through the whole affair. The angel has to speak to him like we speak to children, telling him everything to do as he gets dressed. And then when Peter comes to the church gathered for prayer on his behalf, they are about as shocked by the whole thing as Herod was. Quite clearly, they were not expecting the kind of deliverance God brought to Peter, not believing it at all until they were presented with the clear evidence of Peter standing right in front of them. They all underestimated what God would do. When Peter knocked at the door, they didn't say, "Peter, we've been expecting you. Come on in." If we underestimate what God will do in delivering us *from* suffering, is it possible that we also underestimate what God will do in delivering us *through* suffering? Things did not end so well for Herod, being eaten by worms. But they did end well for Peter, as he was delivered from Herod's hand. They ended even better for James, whose martyrdom brought him immediately into the glorious presence of Jesus.

A little girl was working so diligently on her homework one night that her father became curious and asked her what she was doing. "I'm writing a report on the condition of the world and how to bring peace," she replied. The father responded, "Isn't that a pretty big order for a young girl?" "Oh no," she answered, "and don't worry. There are three of us in the class working on it!" We are about as ill-equipped to deliver ourselves as three 4<sup>th</sup> grade girls are to bring world peace. But don't worry. There is someone working on it. Jesus works on our deliverance in the case of everyone who seeks his glory.

## **CONCLUSION:**

If it is true that Jesus works on behalf of all those who seek his glory instead of their own, then the big question is, "How do you give yourself to God's glory instead of seeking your own glory?" The answer is that you have to believe in the right king. Herod was the king of the Jews, but Jesus is the true King. Note the big difference between these two kings. Herod took innocent lives. Jesus gave himself for the guilty. Herod sought his own glory. Jesus gave up his glory for others. Herod had all earthly power. Jesus had none. Herod was praised by the crowds just before his death. Jesus was mocked by the crowds just before his death. Herod was judged for his own sin. Jesus was judged for the sins of others. Since Jesus has lived and died for us, let us now live and die for his glory.