



**ACTS 12-13 DEATH OF HEROD AGRIPPA; PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY**

In the last study, we read about Peter's angelic rescue from a Jerusalem prison, thus avoiding the death sentence. He arrived at Mary's house, the "mother of John Mark," a church meeting place. John Mark would later write the Gospel of Mark and travel with Barnabas and Paul (see vs. 25). But Peter didn't want to stay and jeopardize the church members, since he was being sought by the authorities, so he told them, "Declare to *James* and to the brethren these things;" and having gone forth, he went on to another place" (Acts 12:17).

Who was this "James"? It is the first mention of a new Church leader Peter now recognized as leading the brethren in Jerusalem (but not the rest of the congregations). In fact, Paul lists the "pillars," or leading men in Jerusalem, in this order: "James, Peter and John," implying James as first (Gal. 2:9).

*Expositor's Commentary* says, "From the mid-thirties through the mid-forties James seems also to have exercised some form of administrative leadership along with Peter and the apostles, and he presided at the Jerusalem Council of A.D. 49. Later still Luke refers to him as head of the Jerusalem church (cf. 21:18). In 62 he was martyred by the younger Ananus [who was high priest] (cf. Jos. Antiq. XX, 200 [ix.1])...the fact that the apostles carried on missionary activities away from Jerusalem and outside Palestine cannot be doubted. For these reasons administrative leadership within the Jerusalem church seems to have gradually shifted to James, the Lord's brother" (notes on Acts 12:27).

The Roman soldiers in charge of guarding Peter did not escape punishment. Luke relates, "Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death" (Acts 12:18-19).

This might sound very harsh, but that was the norm in that day. The Code of Justinian, based on Roman law, confirmed that a guard who allowed his prisoner to escape was subject to the same penalty as that given to the escaped prisoner. Peter had been sentenced to death, so when Herod heard of his escape, he ordered a search and cross-examined the guards and then sentenced them to be executed.

Yet, little did Herod Agrippa know by persecuting Peter and the Jerusalem church he was touching God's elect and "the apples of His eyes."

Luke records Herod Agrippa's punishment by God: "And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there. 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. So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, 'The voice of a god and not of a man!' 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. But the word of God grew and multiplied" (Acts 12:20-23).

This is a reminder of how God can act, similar to the striking of Nebuchadnezzar with insanity for 7 years, when a ruler crosses the line and his pride and vanity greatly offend God. It can also happen to lesser mortals like us, so we should take note.

Josephus backs this historical account, mentioning the same place and the same kind of death (terrible intestinal pain) suffered by Herod Agrippa (see Antiq. XVIII, 195, 200 (vi.7)).

*Expositor's* mentions, "Agrippa I's death occurred in A.D. 44, 'after the completion of the third year of his reign over the whole of Judea' and in the fourth year of the emperor Claudius. Luke's reference to worms suggests an infection by intestinal roundworms (*Ascaris lumbricoides*), which grow as long as ten to sixteen inches and feed on the nutrient fluids in the intestines. Bunches of roundworms can obstruct the intestines, causing severe pain, copious vomiting of worms, and death. But whatever its physical details, both Luke and Josephus attribute Agrippa's death to the king's impiety and God's judgment. Moreover, Luke sees it as part of God's activity on behalf of the Jerusalem church... In its context, v. 24 contrasts the progress of the gospel to the awful end of the church's persecutor Herod Agrippa I" (notes on Acts 12:23).

From now on in Acts, Luke focuses on the mission of the Church as it greatly grows in the Gentile world, mainly through the travels of the

apostle Paul. He shows how the precedent of Cornelius and his household's church membership (who under the law of Moses had been banned as uncircumcised and ritually unclean) forms the basis for the conversion of Gentiles through "justification by faith," a controversy leading to the Jerusalem Conference to resolve the matter of what was required for a Gentile to become a church member.

Luke focuses on the start of this new initiative at Antioch, which would be Paul's base of operations, "Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away" (Acts 13:1-3).

Note that in Acts, Luke uses interchangeably the terms, "God," "the Lord," or "the Holy Spirit" to explain Jesus' intervention in their lives. Sometimes it was through a voice, at other times, a vision, or a prophecy, but was never about a Third Person, a concept unknown to them, since they only knew of God the Father and God the Son, not another "Son."

Antioch was a cosmopolitan center, reflected by the variety of backgrounds of the church leaders. Barnabas was a Jew from Cyprus. Simeon was also a Jew, but his Latin nickname Niger indicates he was of dark complexion and perhaps a black African. Lucius was from Cyrene in North Africa. Manaen was an influential man, having been reared with Herod Antipas, who later beheaded John the Baptist and also denigrated Jesus at His trial. At the end of the list, was Saul, a Jew trained in the Rabbinical schools of Jerusalem. These men acted as one.

It was logical for them to first go to Cyprus, Barnabas' native home. This would begin what is now called Paul's First Missionary Journey.

Luke narrates, "And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant. Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas

the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, 'O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time.' And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord" (Acts 13:5-12).

Salamis was the largest city in the eastern half of Cyprus, where there were many Jews, for they visited several synagogues. Since Sabbath-keeping was a common denominator, Paul and Barnabas could give them the testimony about Christ. Also, the Gentiles in the synagogues, called God-fearers, would be a fruitful field for sowing the gospel because they were already acquainted with the Old Testament and its anticipation of the Messiah. John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10), was their ministerial assistant (Acts 12:25).

Paphos, 100 miles southwest of Salamis, was the seat of the provincial government. Word of their ministry aroused the curiosity of the Roman governor of the island, Sergius Paulus and he invited them to see him. It is interesting that we have two inscriptions in Cyprus and another in Rome mentioning a Sergius Paulus as a high-ranking Roman official around this time period. When they spoke to the governor, a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus opposed them.

*Barclay* explains, "The governor of Cyprus was Sergius Paulus. These were intensely superstitious times and most great men, even an intelligent man like Sergius Paulus, kept private wizards, fortune tellers who dealt in magic and spells. Bar-Jesus, or Elymas--an Arabic word which means the skilful one--saw that if the governor was won for Christianity, his day was done; Paul dealt effectively with him. From this point on Saul is called Paul. In those days nearly all Jews had two names. One was a Jewish name, by which they were known in their own circle; the other was a Greek name, by which they were known in the wider world. So Saul was also Paul [it means 'small']. It may well be that from

this time he so fully accepted his mission as the apostle to the Gentiles that he determined to use only his Gentile name” (notes Acts 13:9).

It is ironic that Bar-Jesus meant “Son of Jesus” in Aramaic, (Jesus means “Yahweh is salvation”), so Paul used a play of words to describe what he really was, a “son of the devil.” Sorcery is exercising certain power by the help and control of demons.

God’s spirit filled Paul and he punished Elymas with temporary blindness. Sergius Paulus then became a convert to Christianity. From now on, Paul would be the principal leader of the group.

Luke shows this as he records the following nation they visited. “Now when *Paul and his party* set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem. But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, ‘Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on’ (Acts 13:13-15).

Luke doesn’t tell us why Mark left the group, but Paul was displeased and did not want to take him on another trip (Acts 15:38). But Mark would later regain Paul’s confidence (see 2 Tim.4:11).

So they traveled northwest to what is now southern Turkey. Pamphylia was a Roman province and Perga was its capital, located seven miles inland on the River Cestrus. Paul spoke on the Sabbath at the synagogue there. Note nothing is said about Paul telling them of a new day of worship to meet--Sunday—nor is it said anywhere in the book of Acts.

He recounts the history of Israel, just as Stephen had done in Acts 7 and tells how Jesus had fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah. He then says, “And we declare to you glad tidings—that promise which was made to the fathers, God has fulfilled this for us their children...For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption; but He whom God raised up saw no corruption. Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the *forgiveness of sins*; and by Him everyone who believes is *justified* from all things from which you could *not* be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:32-39).

Paul was basing this on the precedent of Cornelius--a new way of being justified. The section of the law of Moses dealing with forgiveness and justification was circumcision and the ritual law—later called “works of the law.” So Paul uses this key term of justification [made right before God] by faith—or the faith in Jesus’ sacrifice that fulfilled the sacrificial system of the law of Moses--which could not really forgive sin, but only pointed it out and showed how through the shedding of blood, sin produced death (read Heb. 9:9-14). So the ritual law pointed to a future Redeemer—the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53—who would give His life for our sins (Gal. 3:24). This prophecy was fulfilled and it was *glad tidings* [the Gk. term means *gospel*].

Then Paul warned them not to harden their hearts before this truth. But the Jews in the synagogue didn’t receive the message well (they thought they were already justified), yet the Gentile God-fearers did. They now realized they didn’t have to be circumcised nor keep the ritual law to be forgiven of their sins and be justified before God, although they *still* had to keep God’s commandments (see Rom. 2:13, 25-29). This was breathtaking news! So they asked Paul to preach more about this on the following Sabbath.

Luke writes, “On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles...’ Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as *many as had been appointed* [called] to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region. But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region” (Acts 13:44-50).

This was their first persecution on this trip. The Jewish heart had been hardened and deceived under Judaism [Paul calls it being ‘blinded’ (2 Cor. 3:14)] and not many Jews would be called. So God would turn more to the Gentiles to fill His Church.