



LESSON 34

God frees Peter from prison

ACTS 12:1-24



God defeats those who fight against Him.



“When Peter came to himself, he said, ‘Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting’” (Acts 12:11).

Supporting Truths

1. Christians will be persecuted.
2. God punishes those who hurt His people.
3. God can but does not always rescue Christians from persecution.
4. God wins the victory over all opposition.
5. God answers prayer to rescue His people.

Objectives

1. Explain why Herod kept persecuting the church.
2. List two reasons why the angel killed Herod.
3. Contrast what happened to James and Peter.
4. Contrast the success of the gospel with Herod’s failure.
5. Evaluate the effect of the believers’ prayers.

STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

God frees Peter from prison • Acts 12:1–24



Lesson Summary

After Peter's visit to Cornelius, King Herod Agrippa realized the Jews wanted him to attack the apostles. As a result, he executed James, then he imprisoned Peter in order to kill him too. The Christians could do nothing—except pray. But prayer is not a small thing! God answered by setting Peter free. Then God dealt with Herod's pride and persecution by striking him dead. In the end, Herod was totally defeated, but God's word spread with even greater success.

Spotlight on the Gospel

The gospel is not a promise that life will be easy. In fact, Jesus promised the opposite. But it is a promise of victory. Those who put their trust in Jesus may not be rescued from suffering and death in this world, but they can be confident that they will be on the winning side in the end. They can endure persecution because their God will win and His kingdom will come. But those who arrogantly exalt themselves will be defeated.

LAST WEEK



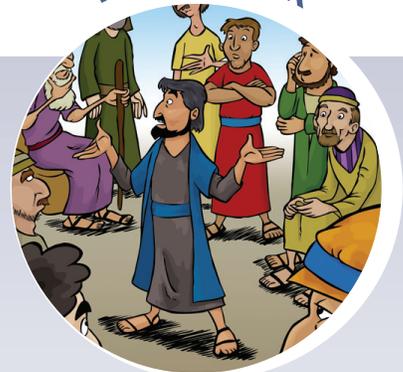
The Gentiles receive the
gospel
Acts 10:1–11:18

THIS WEEK



God frees Peter from
prison
Acts 12:1–24

NEXT WEEK



The Gentiles are saved
by faith alone
Acts 15:1–35

THE GOSPEL SPREADS INTO JUDEA AND SAMARIA

THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO THE
REMOTEST PART OF THE EARTH

Lesson Commentary

God defeats those who fight against Him.

When Peter went to Cornelius' house, it was a major step in the spread of the gospel (Acts 10). But it also made a lot of enemies. If even believing Jews had a hard time accepting it (11:1–3), just imagine what unbelieving Jews thought. While there had been persecution before, it was different this time. Before, it was mostly by Hellenistic Jews against Hellenistic Jewish believers (6:8–13), leaving the apostles untouched (8:1). But now persecution comes from the ruler of Judea directly against the leaders of the church. Would Herod succeed in crushing the church by killing its leaders? It turns out God had other plans.

Herod attacked the church (12:1–4)

This particular Herod was Herod Agrippa I. He was the grandson of Herod the Great who tried to kill Jesus (Matt 2) and father of Herod Agrippa II who would later hear Paul's defense (Acts 25–26). He grew up in Rome, the close friend of the future emperors Gaius Caligula and Claudius. These connections paid off. Gaius made Herod king over the northern part of Israel in 37 AD, then in 41 AD Claudius added Judea to Herod's rule. Herod had a good understanding of the Jews and was skilled in winning their approval (26:3). Against such a well-connected and cunning enemy, the church appeared to be doomed.

When Herod executed James (12:2), the church surely grieved. James, along with Peter and John, was in the inner group of apostles closest to Jesus. They had seen things that not even the other apostles had seen (Mark 5:37; 9:2–10; 14:33). It only grew worse when Herod arrested Peter in order to kill him too (Acts 12:3–4). Herod did not care about justice, only about his own popularity. He planned to kill the Gentile-loving Peter right after Passover while the holiday crowds were still in Jerusalem. Probably remembering Peter's escape the last time he had been imprisoned (5:19), Herod made sure he was vigilantly guarded. Again, the situation seemed hopeless.

Still, none of this should surprise us. Jesus had predicted that just as He was hated and persecuted, so His followers would be too (John 15:20). He had even specifically predicted James' martyrdom (Mark 10:39). In fact, He said that to be a Christian is to count yourself dead already (8:34). God is able to rescue with great power, as we will see with Peter (Heb 11:34), but many believers are also mistreated and killed without being rescued (11:37). Why do some get rescued and not others? Because God uses both death and life to bring great honor to Himself (Phil 1:20). The only question is whether we think eternal life with Jesus forever is worth it (Mark 8:35–38).

THINK ABOUT IT

Through many troubles we enter into God's kingdom (Acts 14:22).



God rescued Peter (12:5–17)

While there was nothing the church could do in human terms, they had a powerful weapon that Herod had not taken into account: prayer. They prayed earnestly for Peter (Acts 12:5). This was no sleepy prayer meeting. They were exerting all their energy and stretching themselves to the limit in prayer. For a while, though, it did not seem to make a difference. The days passed, but Peter remained in prison. Soon the time came for Peter to be executed, but he was still locked up as tight as ever (12:6).

But while they were still praying, God was already answering their prayers. An angel woke Peter up and led him out of the prison without any difficulty (12:7–10). The chains fell off, and he walked right past the guards: the guards at his side, the guards outside his cell, the guards at the first guard post, the guards at the second guard post, the guards at the main gate—it was as if they did not even exist. And the main gate of the jail simply opened on its own. Against this kind of supernatural power, Herod's power seems pretty powerless.

THINK ABOUT IT

Prayer makes a powerful difference because God is powerful (Jas 5:16).



STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

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Even the praying believers did not think prayer could make such a difference! When Peter showed up at Mary's house, the believers there were so shocked that they argued about it as Peter waited outside the gate (12:11–17). Peter was more level-headed. He told them to tell James that he was free. This James (not the one just executed) was the brother of Jesus (Matt 13:55), who at this point was recognized as the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Because of his careful observation of the law and his skill at handling controversy (Acts 15), James continued to be respected even by unbelieving Jews for two more decades. With that message delivered, Peter wisely disappeared before Herod came looking for him (12:17).

God defeated Herod (12:18–25)

As for Herod, he was about to face the consequences for putting his own glory above God's. First, he was made to look like a fool. Instead of giving the crowds in Jerusalem a popular execution, he was unable to account for a single prisoner under the guard of four squads of soldiers. Frustrated, he blamed his guards and executed them in Peter's place (12:18–19). It did not occur to him that his problem was something more than careless guards.

But life went on for Herod, and if he could not get his way in Jerusalem, at least he could in his capital of Caesarea (12:19). Men had come south from Tyre and Sidon to try to earn back Herod's favor. Somehow they had offended him, and he had responded by restricting the food traded to their cities (12:20). There they were, gathered in the stadium, with the Mediterranean sparkling nearby and the sound of its waves lapping up on shore. It was a perfect day to be praised, Herod thought, and he made the most of it by dressing in royal robes, which, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, were woven with silver thread (12:21). As the sun sparkled off his robes, Herod soaked up their gushing praise (12:22).

Actually, he did not soak up much, for at that moment an angel struck him down (12:23a). It is clear that this was an act of God, a punishment for two things. First, God struck him because God hates pride (Jas 4:6). One way or another, God always humbles the proud (Isa 2:9–17). Second, God struck Herod because God fiercely loves His people (Zech 12:1–9). For all his cleverness, Herod made a serious mistake when he went after God's people.

In contrast to Herod's miserable end, the church flourished. As Herod's body collapsed, God's word spread rapidly (Acts 12:24). But God was only just getting started, for Saul, also known as Paul, was back on the scene along with Barnabas. As Herod's body was laid in its tomb, Paul's first missionary journey was about to begin (12:25–13:3). Truly it is much wiser to side with God than to fight against Him. If we're on God's side, then even if we die like James did, we know the victory is ours (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26).

THINK ABOUT IT

Considering what happened to Herod, no wonder Paul always felt unworthy after being forgiven for persecuting the church (1 Cor 15:9)!



Lesson Outline

God defeats those who fight against Him.

AGES 3–5 LESSON OUTLINE



1. God allows some Christians to die for Him (12:1–2).
2. God can rescue Christians from anything (12:3–19).
3. God defeats enemies who harm His people (12:20–25).

AGES 6–11 LESSON OUTLINE



1. Herod attacked the church (12:1–4).
 - Herod killed James the apostle (12:1–2).
 - Herod arrested Peter and planned to kill him (12:3–4).
2. God rescued Peter (12:5–17).
 - The church prayed earnestly for Peter (12:5).
 - An angel freed Peter from prison (12:6–10).
 - Believers were shocked to see Peter free (12:11–17).
3. God defeated Herod (12:18–25).
 - Herod executed the prison guards (12:18–19).
 - Herod accepted worship from the people of Tyre and Sidon (12:20–22).
 - An angel killed Herod with worms (12:23).
 - God's gospel spread (12:24–25).





Lesson Questions

Use these questions to teach or to review this week's lesson.



Ages 3-5 Lesson Questions

- 1. Who violently attacked the church?**
King Herod Agrippa I.
- 2. Did God rescue James?**
No. James was executed just as Jesus said he would be.
- 3. Did God rescue Peter?**
Yes. God is always able to rescue if He chooses.
- 4. What happened to Herod?**
An angel struck him and he died full of worms.



Ages 6-11 Lesson Questions

- 1. Why did Herod persecute the church?**
Because it made him popular with the Jews.
- 2. Why did Peter's situation seem hopeless from a human perspective?**
Herod was powerful and clever, and Peter was very well guarded.
- 3. What did the believers do?**
They prayed with all their might.
- 4. How did God answer their prayers?**
God sent an angel to rescue Peter from prison.
- 5. What did Herod do to his guards?**
He executed them.
- 6. What did Herod do in Caesarea?**
He appeared in a shining robe to receive praise from people from Tyre and Sidon.
- 7. Why did God send an angel to kill Herod?**
Because of Herod's pride, and because Herod had attacked God's people.
- 8. How did God win in the end?**
His word kept spreading, and it was about to spread even more.

Lesson Activities

Choose from the following ideas to introduce, illustrate, and apply this week's lesson.

AGES 3–5



PUPPET SKIT

Have a puppet brag about how well he can sing, then demonstrate with a few bars from “Jesus loves me.” Let him talk about how fast he can run as you move him back and forth quickly. Have him boast about what a good speaker he is with such a wonderful voice. Then take your hand out and confront the puppet with the fact that you make him sing and move and talk. Then explain that we’re a lot like this puppet. We boast about many things, but it is God who gives us the ability. In today’s lesson, we’re going to meet a man God punished for boasting.

BIG BAD SOLIDER

Introduce the lesson dressed as a soldier: helmet, shield, sword, spear, boots, body armor, gloves, chains, handcuffs, etc. Talk about how hard it would have been for Peter to escape from jail while being constantly guarded by a soldier. But Peter was not just guarded by one soldier—he was guarded by four at all times! How could he escape? It seemed impossible. Is there anyone strong enough to rescue Peter from the soldiers? We will find out in today’s lesson.



AND THE CHAINS FELL OFF

As you teach about Peter’s imprisonment, ask for a boy or a girl to come up front to represent Peter. Ask two more children to stand on each side, representing the two guards. Using paper chains, bind “Peter” to the guards on either side of him. Next, bind his hands with another paper chain. When describing Peter’s release, have the guards pretend to be asleep while Peter rips off the chains and escapes from prison.

EATEN BY WORMS

Bring some earthworms to class. While these are probably not the type of worms that ate Herod (Acts 12:23), they do illustrate the foolishness of boasting about ourselves. Herod was a king, yet he was eaten by one of the lowliest animals on earth: the worm. This is because he tried to steal the glory that belongs to God.



NEVER STOP PRAYING

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2.

Materials: Craft sheet, black construction paper, tape, scissors.

Directions: Color in black the three stripes. Make a chain with them. build two bigger rings with the construction paper (big enough for the hands to go in).

Never Stop Praying
See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2



TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

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AGES 6-8



INTRODUCE

CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

Ask the children if they have ever taken credit for something they didn't do. Have they ever let their parents praise them for cleaning up their bedroom, when really their brother or sister did it? Ask them if they have ever surprised their mom by doing the dishes, but failed to mention it was a brother or sister's idea. In today's lesson, king Herod tries to take credit for speaking like God. What do you think happened to him?

KING HEROD THE EGG, PART 1

Create a "King Herod" using a raw egg before class. Draw a face with markers, and create a shiny silver robe out of aluminum foil. Using two pretzel sticks and hot glue, attach two arms. Finally, create a crown out of a thimble. Introduce him to the class at the beginning of your lesson, making sure to mention how fragile he is. Tell the children King Herod the Egg will return later in the lesson.



ILLUSTRATE

ALUMINUM FOIL ROBE

According to Josephus, Herod wore a garment made of silver. Recreate Herod's royal robe out of aluminum foil and put it on at the appropriate time during the lesson.

KING HEROD THE EGG, PART 2

To illustrate the foolishness of fighting against God, allow the children to watch what happens when King Herod the Egg is dropped on a brick inside a five-gallon bucket. Even though the real king Herod was a great king, he was, before God, very much like this egg: powerless and fragile. So are all who try to fight against God.



APPLY

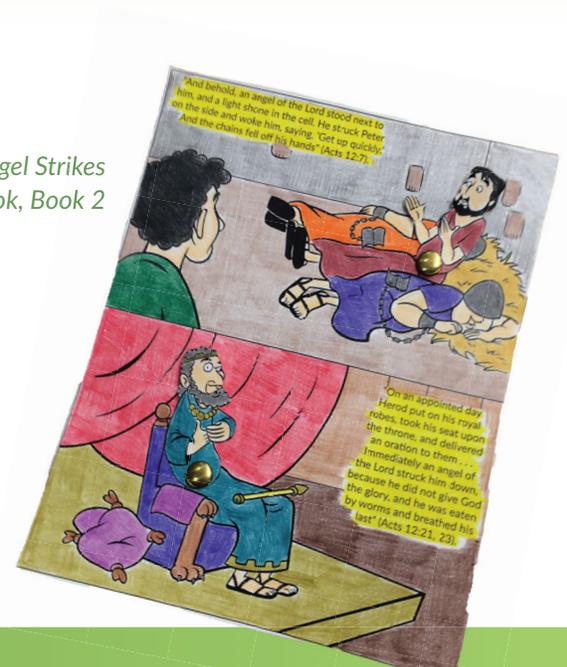
AN ANGEL STRIKES

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2.

Materials: Craft sheets, crayons, brads.

Directions: Color the images. Cut the upper part of Herod and Peter's body. Unite the lower and upper body with the brad.

An Angel Strikes
See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 2



AGES 9–11

**“I’M THE GREATEST”**

Muhammad Ali, an American boxer, was a three-time Heavyweight Champion. After defeating Sonny Liston for the first time on February 25, 1964 he famously said: “I’m the greatest thing that ever lived...I must be the greatest...I shook up the world, I’m the king of the world...I am the greatest! I can’t be beat!” (quoted in *Sound and Fury: Two Powerful Lives, One Fateful Friendship* by Dave Kindred). Do any of the children know what happened to this incredibly talented, athletic, vibrant, young man? He died a shell of his former self on June 3, 2016 after a long, painful, debilitating fight against Parkinson’s Disease.

LAST RESORT?

What is the first thing you do when you are in a difficult situation and need help? Do you call your parents? Maybe a friend? Do you search the internet for help? What about prayer? Does anyone pray? If they do, when do they pray? Is it the first thing they do, or the last? Today’s lesson is a great reminder of the power of prayer. The apostle Peter was in a seemingly impossible situation, but God heard the fervent prayer of the church and sent an angel to rescue him.

**ABLE TO DELIVER**

God can but does not always rescue Christians from persecution. This truth is beautifully illustrated by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. King Nebuchadnezzar warned them that if they did not worship the golden image they would be thrown into the fiery furnace. Their reply? “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan 3:17–18). They were ready to serve God in life and in death.

THE RIGHT SIDE OF HIS STORY (HISTORY)

“Do you want to be on the right side of history?” So say opponents of Christianity. They say this to pressure Christians to abandon their commitment to biblical truth. But is this really true? Who wins in the end? It isn’t the opponents of God! If you want to be on the right side of history, then you need to be on God’s side! We can endure persecution because we know God wins and His kingdom will come (Rev 19:11–21).

**MARTYRDOM**

James the apostle is the second martyr we have seen in the book of Acts. This concept of martyrdom can be hard to grasp for children who live in countries free of religious persecution. Yet even still, martyrdom continues to be a reality today. For this reason, this would be a good time to go over martyrdom that continues to take place in the world. Bring in a map and highlight those countries where believers still die for their faith in Christ. Talk about specific martyrs by name (“Voice of the Martyrs” is a good resource). Once the class has observed those areas of continued religious persecution, take the time to pray for those countries (including those believers who are suffering within).