**Who’s To Blame For This Famine?**

(Acts 12:1-4)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

 A man was interviewing for a new job one day, and the recruiter asked him, “Are you a *responsible* person? In this job, we need someone who is *very* responsible.” The man replied, “Then I’m your man. In my last job, anytime anything went wrong, they said *I* was responsible!”

 Speaking of being responsible for things, here in our text in Acts 12, the Roman Empire was undergoing a *famine* that we read about in the last few verses of Chapter 11 (27-30). And the superstitious pagans who lived in the Roman Empire believed that things like famineswere caused *by the gods.* But rather than blame *their own* gods, King Herod decided to blame *the God of the Jews,* of course. And—not surprisingly—he decided to take it out on the Jews themselves.

 **“Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church” (Acts 12:1).**

About the time of the famine described at the end of Acts 11, Herod decided to vex certain of the Jewish kingdom church. Blaming Jews for a natural disaster like a famine reminds me of how the Jews were *later* blamed *for bubonic plague.* That was because the washing of hands and other baptisms required by the law of Moses made it so that Jews didn’t *catch* the plague as much as others. When they seemed to be *immune* to the plague, they naturally got accused of being the *source* of the plague.

 And I believe the same thing was going on here in Acts 12:1. The Jews seemed all but immune to this famine because of the relief package that Paul had collected for them among the Gentiles, the one we *also* read about at the end of Acts 11. That kind of charity was *unheard of* in the Roman Empire, so rather than believe that *that* was the reason the Jews weren’t suffering from the famine, Herod chose to believe that the God of the Jews was favoring them. And that gave him the excuse to start *persecuting* them.

 Of course, we know who was *really* behind Herod’s decision to vex God’s church. It was the devil, of course. Back in the *early* part of the Book of Acts, he’d been using *unsaved Jews* to vex and persecute the 12 and the kingdom church. But Satan lost the *leader* of that persecution when God saved Saul of Tarsus, and made him the Apostle Paul. When *that* happned, then *this* happened:

 **“Then had the churches *rest* throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria…” (Acts 9:31).**

When those unsaved Jews lost the leader of their persecution, it sucked all the wind right out of their sails, and they left the 12 and the kingdom church alone.

 But when Satan saw his *religious* leaders stop persecuting God’s people, he stirred up the *civil* leader of the land, King Herod, and prompted *him* to vex the church instead. You may have noticed in Acts 12:1, however, that Herod only decided to vex “certain” of the church. So let’s read on in our text to find out *which* members of the church he went after first:

 **“And he killed James the brother of John with the sword” (Acts 12:2).**

Now it’s not hard to figure out why Herod went after poor James here. James was one of the 12 apostles, and Herod naturally went after the *leaders* of the church first.

 But as you look at verse 2, don’t you think it’s a little odd that the description of James’ death here only takes up *one verse* in the Bible? I ask that because when *Stephen* was killed back in Acts 7, the Bible takes *60* verses*—a whole chapter—*to describe *his* death—and he wasn’t even an apostle! So how come an apostle like James is getting treated like his death wasn’t as important here?

 The answer to that question is a dispensational one. When those unsaved Jews killed Stephen, that was their way of saying that they didn’t want Jesus of Nazareth to be their king, and they didn’t want *the kingdom* that the 12 apostles were offering them. That’s when God put the kingdom program “on hold,” so to speak, and the focus of the Book of Acts began to move *away* from the 12 apostles and the kingdom program, and center on *the Apostle Paul* and God’s *new* program of grace for the Body of Christ. And *that’s* why the death of one of the *12* apostles gets mentioned only in passing here.

 Now if you don’t *believe* that God put the Jewish kingdom program on hold in Acts 7, take some time and read *the rest* of the Book of Acts. You’ll see that the 12 apostles never got together to *replace* James, the way they replaced *Judas* after *he* died. If that doesn’t tell you that God wasn’t *continuing* with the kingdom program, I don’t know what will. Don’t forget, the Lord made a promise to the 12 when He told them,

**“…ye….shall sit upon *twelve* thrones, judging *the twelve tribes of Israel”* (Matthew 19:28).**

I’m terrible at math, but even I know that you need *12* apostles to sit on *12* thrones. So when they didn’t replace James here, that gives us all the proof we need that the kingdom program was on hold, and God was now focusing His attention on *the Apostle Paul,* and *not* on the 12 apostles.

 The sad thing about all that is that in our own day, pastors and Bible teachers *continue* to focus on the 12, and the kingdom program, and *not* on Paul! That’s why there’s so much doctrinal confusion in the professing church. I mean, not knowing who your apostle is *way* worse than not knowing who your governor is. If you live in Illinois, and you follow the governor of Indiana, you’re going to be confused about *man’s* laws. But if Paul is your apostle (Rom.11:13), and you follow *Israel’s* apostles, you’re going to be confused about *God’s* laws! And that’ll make a mess of your life faster than you can say Jack Robinson.

 Now I don’t know how Satan got Herod to go after James first, but I know *why.* It was because he knew that James was supposed to write one of the books of the New Testament, and he wanted to *stop him* from writing it. If you’re wondering, “How do you know that?”, let me tell you something about James. The name *James* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew name *Jacob,* the way *Francois* is French for *Frank.* And Jacob was the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham, the father of the Jews. As such, *he too* was a father of the Jews. That’s why God told him,

**“Thy name shall be called *no more* Jacob, but *Israel…”* (Genesis 32:28).**

Jacob—or *Israel—*was the father of all “the children of Israel,” i.e., the Jews. And it was the Jews God used to write the Bible! Romans 3:1,2 asks and answers the question,

**“What advantage then hath the Jew?....unto them were committed *the oracles of God.”***

“The oracles of God” is another name for *the Bible.* Every book in your Bible was written by a Jew. Even Luke, a book that some affirm was written by a Gentile. Romans 3:2 says otherwise.

 Now that means God *spoke* through the sons of Jacob in the Old Testament when they wrote the Old Testament Scriptures. And God was *about* to speak through *James,* the New Testament version of Jacob, in the New Testament epistle of James. Take a look at the nickname that the Lord gave James when He chose him to be an apostle:

**“Jesus…ordained twelve…And *James* the son of Zebedee, and *John* the brother of James…He surnamed them *Boanerges*, which is, *The sons of thunder”* (Mark 3:7,14,17).**

Now here I have to point out that the Lord didn’t nickname James and John “the sons of thunder” because they had such *thunderous* personalities. They had *anything but* thunderous personalities! Think back to what happened when they wanted to ask the Lord for special consideration in the kingdom. Matthew 20:20,21 says,

**“Then came to Him *the mother of Zebedee’s children with her sons…*desiring a certain thing of Him. And He said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto Him, *Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on Thy right hand, and the other on the left, in Thy kingdom”***

Does that sound like *men* with *thunderous* personalities? I mean, two men who have to hid behind their momma’s skirts to ask the Lord for the best seats in the house in the kingdom sound kind of *mousy* and *wimpy* to me. Do you remember those old television commercials for Hefty trash bags? They’d show how strong Hefty bags were and say, in deep, manly voices, “Hefty, hefty, hefty!” Then they’d show how weak the competition’s bags were, and in squeaky voices say, “Wimpy, wimpy, wimpy!”

 That was James and John! So the Lord must have named them the sons of thunder for *another* reason. And the reason is that, in the Bible, *thunder* is associated with *the voice of God.* Psalm 29:3-8 says,

**“…the God of glory *thundereth…*The voice of the LORD is *powerful*…full of majesty…*breaketh the cedars…divideth the flames of fire…shaketh the wilderness...”***

Do you see how thunder as associated with the voice of God there? We see it again, this time in the New Testament, when the Lord prayed,

**“Father, glorify Thy name.  *Then came there a voice from heaven,* saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again. The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, *said that it thundered…”* (John 12:28,29).**

Now let me be perfectly clear here. Those verses aren’t saying that thunder *is* the voice of God speaking to us outside of the Scriptures. I mean, there’s no hidden messages from God in thunder that we have to try to decipher to get some fuller revelation from God other than the complete revelation of Him that we have in our completed Bibles. If you record thunder and play it backwards, the way all you old hippies did with the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club Band* album to find whether Paul McCartney was dead or not, you’re not going to hear God say how much He dislikes the Cubs, and wants the White Sox to win the World Series again. No, those verses are saying that God’s voice *sounds* like thunder. That explains why the people of Israel were so *afraid* of His voice when God spoke to them in Exodus.

And James and John were called the *sons* of thunder because they were about to become *part* of the voice of God when God used them to write books of the New Testament, and use His voice to speak to us *through His Word.* John ended up writing *three* books of the New Testament. And when Herod killed James here before he could write *his* epistles, God used *another* Jew named James to write it! At that point, Satan probably said, “I just can’t win!”

But do you know who *else* was about to write a book of the Bible? I’ll give you a hint. It’s the next apostle that Herod goes after in the next verse of our text. After verse 2 says that he killed James, verse 3 says,

**“And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.).”**

Satan inspired Herod to go after Peter because *he too* was about to write a book of the Bible. So Satan wanted *him* dead too! The only thing that kept him from killing Peter right away, as he did with James, was that “then were the days of unleavened bread.” The days of unleavened bread were one of Israel’s 7 feasts, and *during* Israel’s feasts, the religious spirit of the Jews ran so *hot* that the Jews didn’t like seeing a man killed on the feast day. Back when Israel’s unsaved leaders were thinking of killing the Lord,

**“…they said, *Not on the feast day,* lest there be an uproar among the people” (Matthew 26:5).**

That explains why Herod didn’t kill Peter during the days of unleavened bread. He didn’t want to incite a riot among the people! But we know Herod *planned* to kill Peter, because of what we read in the final verse of our text in Acts 12:4:

 **“And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.”**

Herod knew the Jews wanted Peter dead, because he saw how it pleased them when he killed James. But rather than killing Peter on the feats day, and causing an uproar among the people, Herod planned to wait until the feast was over, then bring Peter forth to the Jews and let *them* kill him!

 You say, “How do you know that?” Well, do you see those words “bring him forth” there in verse 4? If those words sound familiar, it’s because of what happened when the Jews eventually *did* get the Lord arrested on a feast day. John tells us,

**“Pilate therefore took Jesus…and saith unto them, Behold, *I bring Him forth to you…*Pilate therefore…*brought Jesus forth…* and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King!” (John 19:1,4,13,14).**

If you know your Bible, you know *why* Pilate brought the Lord forth to them. It’s because of what happened in the parallel passage in Matthew 27:

**“…at that feast *the governor was wont to release unto the people a prisoner, whom they would….*Therefore when they were gathered together, Pilate said unto them, Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus...?...They said, *Barabbas*. Pilate saith unto them, *What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?* They all say unto him, *Let Him be crucified”* (Matthew 27:15-17,21,22).**

On feast days, Roman rulers always offered to release a condemned prisoner to the Jews and spare him the death penalty. Herod knew that if he offered to release *Peter* to them that they’d choose some *other* Barabbas instead, and Peter’s blood would be *on the Jews’ hands,* and not on *his* hands. Politicians just *love* to get other people to do their dirty work, as I’m sure I don’t have to tell you.

But to make sure Peter didn’t escape, verse 4 says that Herod delivered him to “four quarternions of soldiers.” Now *one* quarternion of soldiers was a group of *four* soldiers, as the “quarter” part of that word implies. We know that Roman prisoners were usually chained to a detail of four soldiers because of what we read about the Lord when He was arrested:

 **“Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments, and made *four* parts, *to every soldier a part…”* (John 19:23).**

See how that shows prisoners were guarded by four soldiers? But Acts 12:4 says that *Peter* was guarded by *four* quarternions of soldiers. Even a non-mathlete like me knows that that means Herod assigned *sixteen* soldiers to guard Peter.

 And it’s not too hard to figure out why. Do you remember what happened back in Acts 5:17-19?

**“Then the high priest…and all they that were with him… laid their hands on the apostles, *and put them in the common prison.* But the angel of the Lord by night *opened the prison doors, and brought them forth*…”**

The last time anyone threw Peter in jail, God staged a *jailbreak,* a jailbreak that Herod must have heard about, so he *quadrupled* the number of soldiers guarding Peter.

 But now, when it says Herod intended to bring Peter forth to the people “after Easter,” that’s a verse that Bible teachers used to criticize the *King James Version* of the Bible. They say that the word “Easter” doesn’t belong in the Bible, because Easter was a pagan celebration that somehow got combined with the Jewish feast of passover, so verse 4 should read “passover,” not *Easter.* And it’s true that the Greek word translated “Easter” there is *pascha,* which is translated “passover” in every other place it appears in the New Testament.

 But it is a serious mistake to assume that every time a word appears in the Bible’s Greek text that it always has to be translated the same way. No language on earth works that way, and Greek doesn’t either. Every language has what we call *homonyms.* You may remember learning in school that homonyms are words that are spelled the same way, but have different meanings.

 I like to use the word “trunk” to demonstrate this. A trunk can be the back of a car, or the front of an elephant. It can be the base of a tree, or a large piece of luggage. It is spelled exactly the same way in each of those uses. Only the context in which the words is used can determine the meaning of the word.

 Did you ever hear this joke? What do you call a short fortune-teller who escapes from prison? A small medium at large! That’s an example of how the context of the words “small,” “medium” and “large” changes the *meaning* of the words.

 And in the context of Acts 12 here, it would be a *mistake* to say that Herod intended to bring Peter forth to the people after *passover,* because passover was *already past!* They were in “the days of unleavened bread,” remember? Those days *followed* the passover.

 We know that passover was a one-day affair because of what we read in Leviticus 23:5:

 ***“…the fourteenth day* of the first month...*is the LORD’S passover.”***

And we know that the days of unleavened bread came *after* the passover from several Scriptures, including II Chronicles 35:17, where it says,

**“…the children of Israel that were present *kept the passover* at that time, *and the feast of unleavened bread seven days.”***

That means Herod couldn’t have been waiting until after *Passover* to bring Peter forth, for passover was already past. He intened to bring Peter out after the pagan observance of *Easter,* which obviously *followed* passover that year.

 And that just makes sense if you think about it. I mean, don’t forget who it was that was doing the “intending” in Acts 12:4. It was the unbelieving, unsaved, pagan king of the Roman Empire. Do you really think his day planner would have said, “Bring Peter forth after passover?” No! It would have read, “Bring Peter forth after *Easter.”* That’s what he would have called it. And our *King James Version* translators were the only ones smart enough to translate *pascha* as “Easter,” the way Herod would have said it. All other English translations get it wrong.

 Next, there was a *reason* Herod was so eager to please those unsaved Jews. And I know you’re going to find it hard to believe, but the reason had to do with *money.* The Jews were well-known for their ability to make money. It was an ability that God gave them, as we see expressed when the Jews were told,

**“…thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: *for it is He that giveth thee power to get wealth…”* (Deuteronomy 8:18).**

That was written around 1500 B.C. That means, by the time Herod was king, the Jews had been getting wealth *for 1500 years.* How much wealth do you figure they’d have gotten *after a millennia and a half?*

The point is, when you have wealth, you get treated *better* by rulers in government like Herod. Don’t tell me you’ve never noticed that the streets in *your* neighborhood have more potholes than streets in *rich* neighborhoods. I don’t even have a *streetlight* at the end of my street. I have to search for Lahon Road in the dark when I come home late.

 Now in *addition* to the accumulation of 1500 years of wealth, those unsaved Jews had gotten even *richer* recently here, because of what the Lord said when He was asked,

**“Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said…*sell all that thou hast,* and distribute unto the poor…” (Luke 18:18,22).**

The Lord told the Jews that if they wanted to be saved, they had to have what we call a “fire sale,” in which *everything must go,* as they say. And we know that that’s what *believing* Jews did at Pentecost, for it says in Acts 4:34,35:

**“…as many as were possessors of lands or houses *sold them…*and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.”**

But now, let’s think this through. Who do you think those believing Jews sold their lands and houses *to?* Their unsaved Jewish neighbors would be the most likely buyers! And once those unsaved neighbors heard they *had* to sell their possessions, that would have created what we call a “buyer’s market,” and those unsaved Jews would have been getting lands and houses *for pennies on the dollar,* and raking in the cash.

 And *that* explains why Herod was so very eager to please those unsaved Jews. It also explains what we read later in Acts:

**“Felix, *willing to shew the Jews a pleasure,* left Paul bound” (Acts 24:27).**

 **“Festus, *willing to do the Jews a pleasure,* answered Paul…” (Acts 25:9).**

Every Roman ruler in the Book of Acts bent over backwards to please those wealthy unsaved Jews!

 And listen. Money from unsaved men can make rulers *today,* in our own day, start persecuting *us.* So you best stay on the good side of governmental leaders instead of clamoring against them, as some Christians seem so prone to do these days. I’m telling you, you don’t have to be a psychic to see that there may be trouble brewing for Christians down the road. When it comes, you want the government on your side, not on your back.

 And the only way that that’s going to happen is if your rulers know that you do what your apostle Paul tells you to do when it comes to the powers that be. Pray for them, obey them, and pay your taxes to them, with no *railing* on them, no matter *what* you see other Christians do. Let this passage be a lesson to you, a lesson you take to heart. It just might spare you a lot of grief down the road, and enable you to continue to preach Christ when railers have been silenced.

 But if you’re not saved, you need to know that today, in the dispensation of grace, you don’t have to sell *anything* to be saved. You actually kind of have to *buy* something. God says that the Lord Jesus Christ paid for all your sins when He shed His blood for them on the cross of Calvary. If you buy that, God will save you. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31).