

ACTS  
Supernaturalism and the Church  
Acts 12:1-25

The concept of supernaturalism is rapidly disappearing in our modern, scientific and technological society. When the average person hears of miracles, or God working, he scoffs or secretly to himself says, "Those poor, ignorant people who believe in the supernatural are at least two hundred years behind time." The whole spirit of our age is against any concept of the supernatural. If the supernatural gets any attention at all it is by those who are in the occult. The phenomenon of Satan worship, demonism and contacting the dead are dabbling in the supernatural, but these practices are evil and not from God.

The tragedy is that the spirit of the Enlightenment, rationalism and humanism have deeply infiltrated the professing church of Jesus Christ, so much so, that to speak of a supernatural working God in the twentieth century brings a puzzled look by those who claim to be Christian. The church today is in deep trouble because it has lost the concept of a sovereign, supernatural working God. As long as people who claim to be Christian think that God cannot, or will not, work supernaturally and that God is dependent upon man's schemes, intelligence, programs and ingenuity, then they will never see God work mightily. But when men stop depending upon themselves, and turn to God in simple faith, believing He is able to do the impossible, then they will begin to see and experience the mysterious workings of a sovereign God. The church today must develop a supernaturalistic mind and must resist and fight with all its might the antisupernaturalistic spirit of this godless age.

It was the concept of a supernatural working God that gave the first century church such confidence and power. They knew God through Christ and they lived like supernaturalists. In Acts 12, there are three major events, the murder of James, the deliverance of Peter and the destruction of Herod, which show us the sovereign and mystical workings of God. Just because we are two thousand years away from the first century does not mean that we, too, cannot also see the sovereign, mystical supernatural workings of God in our age.

SUPERNATURALISM IN THE DEATH OF JAMES (Acts 12:1, 2)

"Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them." -- About the time Gentiles were beginning to flood into the church at Antioch, Herod brought a persecution against the church in Jerusalem. About this same time, Barnabas and Paul were bringing the contribution from the Christians in Antioch to the Christians in Jerusalem. This is the fifth persecution against the church at Jerusalem in twelve years. This persecution came at the hands of Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Heron the Great (who attempted to put Christ to death). Herod Agrippa came to power under the reign of the Roman emperor Caligula and was given rule of Judea by Claudius. Because he had a Jewish mother (a Maccabean princess) and a Roman father, he became an adherent to the Jewish religion, becoming a very strict legalist. He has been described by secular writers as a mild, liberal and ambitious ruler. Herod was first and foremost a politician, and was always concerned about his image and popular support. He was ambitious to please the Jewish people to maintain their favor and it was this passion that led him to persecute the Christians. The Christians were growing numerically in Jerusalem and were not only becoming a religious but a political force. Furthermore, the Jews considered Christianity a cult of Judaism and multitudes of Gentiles were uniting with the church and calling themselves true Jews and inheritors of the covenants of the Old Testament. Jews hated Gentiles, so it is not hard to understand how they also hated Christians. Herod probably had no feelings one way or another about Christians, but he was a shrewd politician, and if persecuting Christians made the Jews happy, he would gladly comply.

"And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword." -- Herod put James the son of Zebedee to death by decapitation, which was the Jewish form of capital punishment at that time. James was the first Apostle to be martyred. This was James the brother of John. Jesus predicted that James would meet a violent death.

“But Jesus said to them (James and John), ‘You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?’ And they said to Him, ‘We are able.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.’” (Mark 10:38-39).

James was to be baptized or identified with death for the cause of Christ. It is interesting to note that these two inseparable brothers, James and John, both had violent deaths. James was the first apostolic martyr and John, the tradition tells us, was the last apostolic martyr and was put in a cauldron of boiling oil.

Why is it in Acts 12 that James is martyred and Peter is released? It was not that God loved Peter more than James or that James had reached a level of Christian maturity that Peter had not reached and was to be taken home to heaven, or that Peter was more useful than James. The final answer to this is found in the sovereign wisdom of God. The issues of life and death rest in the hands of a sovereign God and we will not get the full answer to this question of James's death until we get to glory. James's death, while executed by Herod, was appointed by God, and what may seem to us as a life cut short was for God a saint come home. Surely, this tells us that in the mind of God death is not as horrible as we think it is. It is not the bitter experience the human mind imagines it to be. For a Christian, death should be an anticipated event for it means entrance into heaven. We Christians have the promise, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints” (Psalm 116:15). From the human perspective, James's death was a tragedy, but from the perspective of a sovereign, supernatural working God, it was a fantastic blessing. God delivered James as much or more than He delivered Peter. He delivered James through death and Peter from death. God reserves the right to do as He pleases, but in the case of James, he was better off than Peter because he was in heaven.

Notice how little is said about the martyrdom of James and how much was said about the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7. Why? Could it be that the church had grown a little overconfident? They did not seem overly concerned about James's imprisonment. There is no mention of Christians holding a prayer meeting for James's delivery. Perhaps the church just felt that nothing could ever happen to any of the Apostles. They may have reasoned that God would deliver James without prayer because the church had grown complacent in prayer. This is speculation, but it runs true to what seems to be normal Christian experience.

## SUPERNATURALISM IN THE DELIVERANCE OF PETER (Acts 12:3-17)

### Detention of Peter (12:3, 4)

“And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.” -- Herod had gained such popularity with the Jews by the slaying of James that he thought he would do the same to the ring leader of the Christians, Peter. This would further fan Herod's vanity and allow him to go up Gallupstein popularity poll in Jerusalem.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread began on Passover Eve and lasted for seven days, so Peter was arrested at the beginning of the week.

“And when he had seized him, he put him in prisons delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people.” -- Peter was put under maximum security. Sixteen soldiers were to watch him around the clock in shifts of three hours each. Two soldiers guarded the cell door and two soldiers were chained to each arm of Peter. Perhaps Herod heard how Peter had escaped mysteriously from jail once before and wanted to take no chances for escape this time (Acts 5). The plan was not to put Peter to death until after the Passover, but Peter was in jail for seven days.

### Diligent Prayer for Peter (12:5)

“So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church of God.” -- The stunning, shattering effect of the execution of James apparently sobered up the church in Jerusalem. Perhaps they

realized that they could at depend upon the automatic deliverance of God. The situation was desperate and the Christians turned to God for a supernatural answer to their problem. Humanly speaking, here was absolutely no hope for Peter's escape. Then we read the words, BUT PRAYER. The Christians went to prayer. They petitioned their God. They asked their Sovereign to do the impossible, to work supernaturally, to work above and beyond the natural in delivering Peter. They knew the Old Testament promise, "And call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me" (Psalm 50:15). They prayed fervently and without ceasing and with one mind for the specific deliverance of Peter.

Apparently there was no immediate answer. Peter went into jail in the first part of the week and surely the people began to pray then. No answer on Saturday, none on Sunday, or Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday. Still no answer on Thursday or Friday. They prayed unitedly, continuously and specifically, but no immediate answer to prayer came. There was no answer but only silence from heaven. But these Christians persevered in prayer until they got an answer. Even though the power of Herod and the authority of Rome was against these Christians, they went to a higher authority; they approached the throne of God. "Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

When these Christians were in crisis, when they had their backs up against a wall, when they felt their own helplessness to do anything about the situation, they earnestly began to pour their hearts out to God. "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16b).

Fervent prayer accomplished much as we shall see. Prayer is essential, necessary and vital to the furtherance of Christ and His spiritual kingdom in this world. Did you know that the Lord Jesus Christ never left us any instruction on how to preach, but he did tell us how to pray. Why is it that in our seminaries and Bible schools and even churches no courses in prayer are taught? There are courses in theology, Bible, Christian Education, preaching and so forth, but there are usually no courses on prayer. Why is it that the vast majority of major theological works never deal with prayer when prayer is a basic doctrine of the Bible? Prayer is doctrine and we all need to become experts in this aspect of systematic and practical theology.

### Deliverance of Peter (12:6-11)

"And on the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison." -- Peter probably expected to be executed, for he knew that the Lord Jesus had predicted that he would die a martyr's death.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.' Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God" (John 21:18, 19a).

With death by decapitation imminent, what was Peter doing? He was sleeping. He had unshakable confidence in the sovereign will of God and knew that all things work together for good to them who love God, to them who are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). Instead of being restless, fearful and in the agony of apprehension, he was sleeping. He had perfect peace and was not pacing the floor, biting his fingernails or wailing with agony. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee" (Isa. 26:3). He was perfectly relaxed in a sovereign, supernatural working God. "Be still (relaxed), and know that I am God . . ." (Psalm 46:10).

Here we have the first result of the prayers of the saints. Peter was kept in the peace of God in the midst of the most intense circumstances. Prayer can move God to cause His people to rest and relax in the midst of crisis.

"And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared, and a light shown in the cell, and he struck Peter's side and roused him, saying, 'Get up quickly.'" -- Peter was in such a sound sleep that the angel had to give him a hard poke in the side. Without waking the guards, his chains fell off, dropping to the floor without a sound. This was a supernatural act.

God waited until the last moment to intervene. God delayed to teach the saints the lesson of persevering prayer and to teach Peter to rest in the Lord. We must never mistake a delay in answered prayer for a denial of our prayer.

“And the angel said to him, ‘Gird yourself and put on your sandals.’ And he did so. And he said to him, ‘Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.’” -- Peter was told to put all of his clothes on. You would think the angel would say, “Hurry up, Peter, run for your life!” But Omnipotence is never in a hurry, for everything was under divine control. Peter understood and believed Psalm 34:7: “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them.”

“And he went out and continued to follow and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought it was a vision. And when they passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.” -- Peter thought he was having another vision until he passed through the great iron gate of the prison which opened automatically (Godomatically), and then he realized that he was delivered. Then the angel departed. Why? God only uses the miraculous when it is absolutely necessary. After being delivered, Peter could find his own way to the home of Mary. A clear-cut supernatural event is a rare event. Most of the time Christians must operate by faith in the promises of a faithful God.

“And when Peter came to himself, he said, ‘Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.’” -- Peter readily recognized that this whole event was the work of a supernatural, sovereign God.

How important is prayer? It is basic, essential and necessary for the furtherance of Christ's kingdom in this world. The prayers of these saints somehow moved upon God to deliver Peter from prison. Prayer did not change God's secret plan, but God ordained these prayers as a means to bring about the ultimate end of the deliverance of Peter. From our human perspective, prayer does cause God to work for us. When the saints pray, God intervenes. This shows the tremendous power of prayer which God has placed at the disposal of His people. Prayer somehow causes God to bring about His sovereign plans and purposes. Prayer is the major weapon, tool, instrument God has given His church to overcome its enemies and to further the cause of Christ in this world. Oh, if we could only understand how effective the prayers of a righteous man who prays perseveringly can be!

### Doubt of the Disciple (12:12-16)

“And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together praying.” -- The whole church in Jerusalem was praying for Peter's deliverance but they could not meet together in one place. Therefore, they were meeting in homes all over the city. One of these homes was that of a wealthy Christian woman, Mary.

“And when he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. And when she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate.” -- Rhoda (Rose) was a Christian who had been praying with the others. She went to the door, and when she heard Peter's voice, she recognized it and ran to tell the others. Peter was left at the door. This young girl became so excited she forgot to let Peter in. However, Rhoda was the only person in that whole crowd who believed God had miraculously delivered Peter. Everyone else doubted it was Peter.

“And they said to her, ‘You are out of your mind!’ But she kept insisting that it was so. And they kept saying, ‘It is his angel.’” -- When Rhoda said Peter was at the door, they said, “Rhoda, you're crazy! You've popped your cork! You're not playing with a full deck!” Rhoda broke up this prayer meeting by desperately trying to convince these disciples that their prayer had been answered. Their first doubt was that of a rationalist for they said Rhoda was mad. Their second doubt was that of a mind of superstition, for they were ready to believe it was Peter's angel but not his person.

These Christians were praying in belief, but they were not praying with expectancy. Believing prayer says God

can; expectant prayer says God will. Jesus Himself taught, “And everything you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive” (Matt. 21:22). Real prayer always expects God to work in a supernatural way. Surely this event in Acts merely illustrates how very human we all are and how much we do doubt when we are praying. But God honors what faith He does find in any of His children.

“But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened, they saw him and were amazed“ -- This is a very humorous incident. Rhoda leaves Peter at the door and Peter continues to knock. Rhoda, filled with excitement, tries to convince these praying Christians that Peter is at the door. Peter continues knocking. They argue about the situation. Peter continues to knock. The whole affair is like a three ring circus all because these disciples refused to believe that their prayers had been answered. They finally went to the door and they were amazed. They were surprised that God had worked supernaturally.

Aren't all Christians like these dear disciples? When we have an obvious answer to prayer, we rejoice and talk about it as if we are really surprised. Are we surprised, or were we really not expecting an answer? Perhaps we believe but we do not pray with expectancy. Those who pray with expectancy get answers to prayer. Remember, “You have not because you ask not” (James 4:2).

#### Declaration of Peter (12:17a)

“But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, ‘Report these things to James and the brethren.’” -- The excitement ran high in that room as Peter gave a blow by blow account of his deliverance. I suppose the saints felt a little ashamed that they had any doubt, but this supernatural deliverance of Peter encouraged them to pray more. Then Peter told them to go tell James and the other brethren what had happened.

#### Departure of Peter (12:17b)

“And he departed and went to another place.” -- Peter was a marked and hunted man. Thinking of his personal safety, he departed into hiding in an unnamed place. Why did Peter go into hiding when he had just been delivered from prison? Was he a coward? No, he was a wise and prudent man. He was not foolhardy, but filled with common sense. He was ready to die for Christ, but he was not going to put himself into a situation which would lead to his death. He was not going to die unnecessarily. Unfortunately, there are many Christians who have died foolhardedly when the logical course of events could have led them out of martyrdom. Only the grace and leading of God can tell a person when to stay and die and when to flee to serve Christ another day.

#### SUPERNATURALISM IN THE DEMISE OF HEROD (Acts 12:18-23)

##### Disappointment of the Soldiers (12:18-19)

“Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter.” -- There was pandemonium in Herod's army that day as they feverishly searched all over the city for Peter and could not find him. They had no human explanation for a supernatural event.

“And when Herod had searched for him and had not found him! he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.” -- Herod was cold-blooded as well as stiff-necked and hardhearted. Sixteen innocent soldiers died because of this man's stubborn unbelief. He would not believe that Peter's deliverance was a supernatural act of God. Herod, as an antisupernaturalist and humanist, had no respect for the value of human life.

Antisupernaturalists and humanists often claim to be the protectors of man and his right, but these same people are often the first to put people into prison and to death who do not agree with them.

##### Destruction of Herod (12:20-23)

“Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country.” -- Herod, for some reason went to Caesarea which was predominantly a Roman city. While there he became angry with the inhabitants of the cities of Tyre and Sidon. Consequently, Heron was putting a food squeeze on these cities.

“And on an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. And the people kept crying out, ‘The voice of god and not of a man!’” -- Josephus the Jewish historian, tells us that the “appointed day” was the day Herod had special athletic games in honor of Caesar's birthday. On this day he donned a robe of pure silver, beautiful beyond descriptions so brilliant in its reflection of the sun's rays that it mesmerized the crowd and sent awe over those in this magnificent theater. Herod sat upon his throne, high above the crowd, and gave a dazzling speech, for he was a golden tongued politician. The crowd pampered this pompous king and fed his ego so as to gain his favor and they shouted, “Not a voice of man but a voice of god!” So vain was Herod that he believed that he was a god. He was so demented that he convinced himself he did have divine power. He was called a king, but in reality he was a vain and vile fool to take the powers of God to himself.

“And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.” --- Josephus tells us that at the end of this speech, as Herod was lifted up with pride and vanity, he was immediately seized with violent internal pains and that he lingered in agony for five days before he died in A.D. 44. God, however, struck Herod with some kind of disease of the intestines that caused worms to eat him up from the inside out, with these worms crawling out of the openings in his body. What a horrible death!

Why did God smite Herod? Because he actually believed he was like God or God. He actually was convinced that divinity was incarnated in him. God has said that He will never share his glory with an angel or man. “I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images” (Isa. 42:8). Whenever men begin to believe that they can substitute for God, judgment is imminent. When man puts man on the throne, the axe of God is about to fall. This is what is happening in our society today. Men, because of the spirit of rationalism and a salvation like trust in sciences has said man can solve his own problems, for man is his own god. They believe that man has the right to take life in abortion; that through genetic engineering man can be altered; that through cloning man can be reproduced; that defective children and useless old people can be destroyed because they are a hindrance to society. Today's men are making decisions that belong to God alone. Man is making himself like God; therefore, judgment is imminent! Perhaps we are at the precipice of disaster in our society. Perhaps we have passed the point of no return because of our antisupernaturalistic tendencies. But perhaps, if God's people pray, God will hold back His judgment and allow another generation to grow up in liberty, freedom and relative peace so the gospel can be preached before the great and terrible judgment at the second advent of Christ. “But prayer” is our only hope as our great nation teeters on the brink of disaster.

Does not the death of Herod teach us the certainty of divine retribution? Herod killed James, God's man, and God killed Herod, the devil's man! The Scripture is clear, “What a man sows he shall reap” (Gal. 6:7) and “Vengeance is mine; I will repay saith the Lord” (Rom. 12:19)! Herod got away with nothing and, in time, the sovereign God brought a supernatural death to this vain, conceited, pompous king. The Bible says of Herod and all like him, “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God” (Psalm 9:17). God keeps a score book and always evens the score with those who forget God.

#### SUPERNATURALISM IN THE DISSEMINATION OF THE WORD (Acts 12:24, 25)

“But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.” -- Nothing could stop the onward march of the gospel and the advance of the church, for “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18b). The sovereign, supernatural working God is behind the spreading of the gospel and the word of the Lord “shall accomplish that which He pleases and shall prosper in the thing whereto He sends it” (Isa. 55:11). Kings and kingdoms have fallen, republics and democracies have bit the dust, dictators and great nations have come and gone, but the word of the Lord supernaturally grows and multiplies. Nothing can stop God from accomplishing His purposes in this world through the preaching of the gospel.

Hymn:

O Where Are Kings and Empires Now

“O where are kings and empires now  
Of old that went and came?  
But, Lord Thy Church is praying yet,  
A thousand years the same.

Unshaken as eternal hills,  
Immovable she stands,  
A mountain that shall fill the earth,  
A house not made with hands.”

“And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.” -- Barnabas, Paul and John Mark, who were to become great missionaries to the Gentile world, were allowed to be in Jerusalem during these events mentioned in Acts 12. They were observers, but they would remember what happened to James, Peter and Herod, and when in difficult circumstances themselves, they would cling to a sovereign, supernatural working God to deliver them miraculously.

## CONCLUSION

God not only works supernaturally in the events of this world, but He gives a supernatural salvation to all who trust in Christ. He takes spiritually blind, deaf and dumb sinners and shoots life into them by the power of His Holy Spirit. Sinners come alive and place their faith in Jesus Christ to save them from the penalty of sin and the consequences of sin which is eternal judgment.

God has commanded you to believe in Christ for salvation. Arise, sinner, and trust Christ as your Lord and Savior!