

# The Context Bible

Life Group Lesson 28

July 7- 13, 2014

## Acts 9:19 – 13:12

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### Introduction to the Context Bible

Have you ever wished the Bible was easier to read through like an ordinary book – cover to cover? Because the Bible is a collection of 66 books, it makes reading like an ordinary book quite difficult. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that the later writers of the New Testament were often quoting or referencing passages in the Old Testament. In fact, much of the New Testament makes better sense only if one also considers the Old Testament passages that place the text into its scriptural context.

You are reading a running commentary to The Context Bible. This arrangement of Scripture seeks to overcome some of these difficulties. Using a core reading of John's gospel, the book of Acts, and the Revelation of John, the Context Bible arranges all the rest of Scripture into a contextual framework that supports the core reading. It is broken out into daily readings so that this program allows one to read the entire Bible in a year, but in a contextual format.

Here is the running commentary for week twenty-eight, along with the readings for week twenty-nine appended. Join in. It's never too late to read the Bible in context!

### *Week Twenty-eight Readings*

<p><b>7 /7 Saul Proclaims Jesus in Synagogues</b> <b>Acts 9:19b-9:22</b> Matt 28:16-28:20 Pslm 148</p> <p><b>Saul Escapes to Jerusalem</b> <b>Acts 9:23-9:31</b> Pslm 70-71</p> <p><b>Healings and Restored Life</b> <b>Acts 9:32-9:43</b></p> <p><b>7/8 Peter and Cornelius</b> <b>Acts 10:1-10:8</b></p> <p><b>Peter's Vision</b> <b>Acts 10:9-10:33</b> Lev 11 Lev 17 Ex 22:31</p>	<p><b>7/9 Gentiles Hear the Gospel</b> <b>Acts 10:34-10:43</b> Deut 10:12-10:22</p> <p><b>The Holy Spirit Falls on Gentiles</b> <b>Acts 10:44-10:48</b> Eph 3 Rom 16:24-16:27 Ezek 47:13-47:23</p> <p><b>Peter Reports to the Church</b> <b>Acts 11:1-11:18</b> Ezr 1-2</p> <p><b>7/10 The Church in Antioch</b> <b>Acts 11:19-11:30</b></p> <p><b>The Death of James</b> <b>Acts 12:1-12:5</b> Mrk 10:32-10:45 Pslm 57</p>	<p><b>7/10 cont'd Peter is Rescued</b> <b>Acts 12:6-12:19</b> Pslm 123 Pslm 116 Pslm 124 Pslm 125</p> <p><b>7/11 The Follies of Pride &amp; the Death of Herod</b> <b>Acts 12:20-12:25</b> Deut 16:21-17:13 Prov 15:25 Eccles 7 2 Tim 3:1-3:9 Prov 25:26 2 Chron 26 Pslm 73 Prov 17:7</p>	<p><b>7/12 The Follies of Pride &amp; the Death of Herod</b> <b>Acts 12:20-12:25</b> Deut 17:14-17:20 Deut 28 Prov 11:7-11:11</p> <p><b>Barnabas and Paul to Cyprus</b> <b>Acts 13:1-13:12</b></p> <p><i>7/13 Off</i></p>
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**READING PURPOSE:** This week's core reading follows Acts through several significant vignettes of early church history. We read of Saul/Paul beginning his Christian walk proclaiming Jesus as Lord with its attendant problems as the persecutor becomes the persecuted. We read of the gospel first coming to a Gentile family. We read of some in the church persecuted to death while Peter is rescued from that fate. Then we read of Herod's death, a significant event in its own historical right.

The context readings focus heavily on godly reactions to the circumstances that surrounded those historical vignettes. We try to see through God's word, how we should react and behaviors we should avoid.

### **The Converted Saul/Paul (Acts 9:19b-9:31)**

Paul's conversion was not a gradual move toward Jesus as Lord. The picture is more like the breaking of a dam, with all the waters that had been held in check flooding forth with great force. Paul "immediately" begins proclaiming Jesus as the resurrected Lord and Son of God in the synagogues (Acts 9:20). This was not well received by all the Jews, and Paul had to be spirited out of Damascus with his life under threat. Paul got to Jerusalem safely, but found that most disciples thought his conversion a ruse. They thought Paul was trying to infiltrate their ranks to bring them further persecution and death. It took Barnabas to stand up and give Paul a fair hearing. Once the disciples understood what had happened to Paul, he was able to move freely among them and continue his teaching and preaching.

Matthew 28:16-28:20; Psalm 148, 70, 71

Paul's immediate move from persecutor of the church to proclaimer of the good news is the natural move of one who follows Jesus. The last instructions Jesus gave his eleven disciples were to go into the world making and baptizing disciples, teaching them as Jesus had taught while on earth (Matt 28:16-28:20). Paul took up the same role as the disciples and began his teaching.

Psalm 148 well expresses the reactions of Paul. It is a Psalm of praise that walks through different levels of praise before getting to the praise by people. First, the praise is called out from the heavens and heavenly beings. From the heavens, God is to be praised by his angels and the heavenly hosts (Pslm 148:1-148:2).

From there the praise moves to inanimate objects, material things that have no will or volition. The moon and stars are called to praise God, as are the waters in the heavens (rain and snow). One might reasonably ask two questions. First, *why* are inanimate objects called to worship? Second, *how* can inanimate objects worship? These two natural questions actually accentuate a real factor in worship that we should not miss. It is a factor that fit Paul well at this phase in his life.

The answers to both questions are contained in the Psalm. The elements are made by God. They praise God by being what they are, by being what they were made to be. This principle for the inanimate applies directly to the animate. We are God's people. We are made by God. We praise God by being what we were made to be.

Consider Paul. Paul was not only made by God, but he was born again by the saving power of the resurrected Jesus. Paul brought praise to God by being who God called him to be, by doing what God made him to do. Paul would later encourage the Ephesian believers to understand that the salvation of God in Jesus makes us God's "workmanship." We are, in that sense, like the stars and moon. We are God's handiwork. Paul further expressed this idea to the Ephesian churches adding that we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10). This is what Psalm 148 calls forth.

After calling praise forth from the creations of God, animate and inanimate – mountains, hills, fruit trees, birds, fish, even insects – the Psalm moves to the call for people to praise God. The praising of God is not reserved for a certain group of people. It is not simply for the priests or the kings. Everyone should be praising God, "all peoples," male and female, young and old, should praise God. God not only made all of us; he has saved us! The One who is above all has raised up a horn (a symbol of strength), bringing strength to his people, to those near him. Yes, God should be praised, and is praised as we do, as we were made to do. Paul's worship reflected Psalm 148 in his life.

One would hope that in praising God and following his will, life would be rosy and dandy. Paul learned quickly that was not to be his lot as a believer. Paul moved in praise, teaching Jesus as the Son of God in the synagogues, but the persecution that Paul had earlier authored, was almost immediately written onto Paul's life. This would place Paul into two other Psalms supplied for contextual reading.

Psalms 70 and 71 are cries of the persecuted. Psalm 70 is the voice of one who is wrongly persecuted. Like Paul in Acts 9, there are those seeking the life of the psalmist, even as the psalmist is urging all to seek God's marvelous salvation (Pslm 70:4).

Psalm 71 goes into more depth. In this Psalm, again the psalmist is lamenting the persecution, but does so with deliberate prayers for rescue from God. The psalmist recounts that his life was not a spontaneous event, but was something God called forth. From earliest memories, the psalmist sought God and praised him. For years, the psalmist seemed to others as God's miracle, God's chosen sentinel (Pslm 71:7). No doubt Paul seemed that to those who were now persecuting him as well.

But as time changed for the psalmist, God's "portent" became one whom others thought abandoned and isolated. The psalmist wanted and needed protection and salvation from God. This was not simply to spare the life or feelings of the psalmist. The psalmist was

on a mission. The psalmist planned to continue to proclaim God, his deeds of salvation, his mighty deeds, and his righteousness (Pslm 71:15-71:16).

The psalmist cried for help from God, but the cry issued from faith, not fear. The confidence of the psalmist was that the saving God would rescue and place the psalmist exactly where the psalmist should be. The psalmist would again praise and proclaim God to the people.

These psalms seem to be written precisely for one in Paul's position. The remarkable thing about the psalms is their ability to speak into so many situations of our lives. It is not hard to find a Psalm that directly applies to whatever we are experiencing. They become a prayer book useful in daily life.

### **Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18)**

Peter was an orthodox Jew. Certain practices accompanied orthodox Jews. There was to be no cavorting with pagans, and only kosher food was to be eaten. Peter was challenged on both these fronts as God sent him to preach the gospel to Cornelius.

#### Leviticus 11, 17; Exodus 22:31

The Cornelius story begins with Peter in Joppa, a Mediterranean coastal town around ten miles northwest of Lydda. Peter was summoned to Joppa by the fledgling church there when one of their group fell ill and died. Peter arrived and prayed over the woman named Tabitha – meaning “gazelle.” (Luke also translates it into Greek as “Dorcas.”) The woman was then rose from the dead. This became known throughout Joppa and many more came to the Lord.

While Peter stayed at the home of Simon the tanner<sup>1</sup>, something was occurring thirty miles to the north in the important Roman seaport town of Caesarea.<sup>2</sup> A Roman military cohort was stationed in the town, led by a centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius was,

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<sup>1</sup> Some note that as a tanner, Simon would routinely work with animal hides that would, at times, make him “unclean” under Jewish law. Additionally, we read scholars who add that the smells of a tanner would place his location typically close to the sea so that sea winds would disperse the smell. Both of those may be insights Luke intends to convey. Luke will note later the seaside location, and the uncleanness finds importance in light of what is to come, however, we should add that Simon was a common first century name, and Luke was in the habit of identifying people closely enough that his readers could trace back his sources and verify his writings or get more detail should they wish. So the note about “Simon the tanner” in Joppa could just as easily be Luke's source identified sufficiently for Theophilus to follow-up, should he wish. We see the angel gives this same information to Cornelius so that Cornelius can locate Simon later.

<sup>2</sup> This narrative is the longest one in Acts. In it, we read several duplicative accounts. Both size and duplication are indicators of the importance Luke was attaching to this account. We will see this

a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God (Acts 10:2).

Cornelius was not Jewish, but he worshipped the Lord, and lived up to many good Jewish practices. He was, what was often termed a “God-fearer,” someone who worshipped with the Jews, followed many Jewish laws and practices, but never converted to Judaism. Paul would find many of these at the synagogues in the mission field. While it is impossible to generalize why the God-fearers did not fully convert, most scholars recognize that a common objection for the men was the conversion requirement of circumcision.

Around three in the afternoon, Cornelius was praying and he had a clear vision of an angel tell him his piety and prayers were important to God. The angel instructed Cornelius to send men to Joppa to the house of Simon the tanner by the sea. They were to ask for a houseguest named Peter. After the vision Cornelius sent two of his servants and a “devout soldier” to do exactly that (the soldier was also likely a God-fearer and Luke notes that Cornelius not only sent them, but informed them of the whole vision.)

At noon the next day, Peter was praying on the rooftop of Simon’s house. Peter was hungry, and while Simon’s attendants were preparing lunch, Peter fell into a trance. He saw a sheet-like cloth descend from heaven with all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds on it. Peter heard a voice telling him “Rise, Peter; kill and eat” (Acts 10:13). Peter recoiled and declined, adding that he had never violated the kosher eating laws on unclean meat.

The dietary laws under the Law of Moses were quite clear (Lev 11). Lamb, yes; rabbit, no. Mediterranean sea bass? Yes! Crawfish? No! Peter knew these laws, and as Leviticus 17 made clear, they applied not only to Jews but also the Gentiles who dwelt in their midst. As for those Gentiles who did not follow the dietary laws, the Jews were to have nothing to do with them (Lev 17:8-17:16).

God instructed him to touch and eat unclean animals, something expressly forbidden in Leviticus 11. Peter was challenged to understand that the time for God’s dietary laws was changing. Historically, those laws served to isolate Israel from pagan communities. We can see the effect of it in archaeological digs today. One of the clearest indicators that archaeologists are digging in an Israelite site versus a Philistine site is the absence of pig bones. Philistines were big pork eaters. Not so the Israelites.

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similarly in the conversion of Paul, a story Luke includes three times, each time with a slightly different, yet important emphasis.

Peter was getting a graphic message that just as Jesus had taught that new wine would burst old wineskins (Matt 9:17), so the gospel message was set to merge the division between Jew and Greek. Peter was about to experience this first hand.

The heavenly reply was blunt and no doubt startling,

What God has made clean, do not call common (Acts 10:15).

Luke then pointed out that this happened “three times.” Now this may be a reference to Peter’s hard-headedness, but we should also note that Luke frequently finds the expression of “three” to note a divine touch. There were three men sent for Peter (Acts 10:19), and many other “threes” in Acts (see especially, Acts 2:41; 5:7; 7:20; 9:9; 17:2; 19:8; 20:3; 28:17).

Deuteronomy 10:12-10:22; Ephesians 3; Romans 16:24-16:27; Ezekiel 47:13-47:23

After his vision, Peter pondered its meaning when three messengers from Cornelius arrived. The Spirit told Peter to go with the three, and he did so, leaving the next morning on the 30-mile trek north, and taking a few other Christian brothers with him.<sup>3</sup> In light of all else, this should not have surprised Peter. As far back as Deuteronomy, God had made it clear while Israel was chosen, God also had compassion and looked after others. The Israelites were instructed to care for sojourners, foreigners who lived in their midst (Deut 10:12-10:22). In Ezekiel 47:13-47:23 we read of God’s intention to provide sojourners their own places even within the expanded kingdom of Israel.

It took a day for Peter and crew to get to the centurion’s house, and when they arrived, Cornelius was ready. He had assembled his entire household, likely including servants and attendants as well as family. When Peter came in, the Roman centurion fell at Peter’s feet! Peter reached out and touched the centurion (“lifted him up”), something shockingly “unclean” for a Jew to do! Peter told Cornelius as he helped him up, “Stand up; I too am a man” (Acts 10:26). As Peter saw all the people gathered, and he clearly recognized that they had familiarity with Jewish law and custom, he came to the point bluntly:

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<sup>3</sup> Even in this passage we see the hints to Luke’s significance in pointing out the number “three.” Luke does not number the brothers who went with Peter, he simply say, “Some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him.” This draws a measure of emphasis on those times that Luke does specify the numbers, which he does repeatedly in this Cornelius story. It also emphasizes events like Paul’s conversion where Luke retells the conversion precisely three times. We will see in Peter’s recounting of the story, that the number of brothers that accompanied him was six (Acts 11:12). For Peter, this indicated a complete set of people going together, for he made seven, a number that stood for completeness.

“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me” (Acts 10:28-10:29).

Cornelius repeated his experience to Peter, and it was as if a light went off in Peter’s mind. Peter replied,

“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-10:35).

Peter then recounted the story of Jesus to the gathering, affirming not only his good life, and unjust execution, but his resurrection. Peter closed with the purpose of Jesus’ experience:

“...he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:42-10:43).

At this point, the Holy Spirit fell in a visible and audible way on all those who heard the word. The Jewish brothers that had accompanied Peter were stunned to see the Holy Spirit poured out on Gentiles! Peter declared that God was at work, the Gentiles embraced Jesus in faith, and there was no reason that they should not be baptized, circumcised or not!

Paul’s writings show the amazement in that first century context that the wall between Jew and Greek was so readily demolished in the work of Christ. In Ephesians 3, Paul spoke of it as the mystery of Christ that was

revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit (Eph 3:5).

We see that revelation first hand by the Spirit to Peter in this account. In Rom 16:25-16:27, Paul explained the mystery of God in Christ was moving the world to obedience of faith.

It moved Paul to worship, invoking an oft-quoted reference to the work and power of God:

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph 3:20-3:21).

## Ezra 1-2

Not surprisingly, in our marvelously fallen world, when Peter got back to Jerusalem from this world-changing experience, he received criticism from a number in the church for going to the Gentiles and eating with them. Peter then recounted the specific events, beginning with his prayer vision of the “three times” that he was instructed, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 11:9). After this, even the critical brothers “fell quiet” and glorified God, amazed to see that even to Gentiles, God “granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18).

If the church had thought through its own Jewish history, it would have remembered Ezra 1-2. In those chapters we read the historical account of Persian king Cyrus, a Gentile pagan, ordering the rebuilding of the temple. Ezra recounted people that came back into Jerusalem. What we see in Cornelius is the beginning of the reversal response. The Gentiles gave authority for the Jews to reassemble and rebuild. The Jews were now going back out to bring the pagans into the family of God.

### **Further Church Developments (Acts 11:19-11:30)**

#### **The Death of James (Acts 12:1-12:5)**

#### **Peter’s Rescue (Acts 12:6-12:19)**

Luke’s narrative shifts after the report of Peter to the church. He refers back to the mistake made by the Jews that were persecuting the church. As Luke had already noted, in the Jewish effort to stomp out the church by persecution, the Jews just managed to spread the church as the persecuted believers dispersed into surrounding areas. Luke informed his readers that the persecution spread the church “as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch” (Acts 11:19). Antioch was the third largest city at the time, lagging behind only Rome and Alexandria. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that the Jews were especially populous in that cosmopolitan city.<sup>4</sup> Even in those distant places, however, the church was only spreading among the Jews. A few unnamed men from Cyprus and Cyrene (a coastal city in modern Libya, west of Egypt) did speak to Greek-speakers (“Hellenists”), who were not Jewish. As such, they did

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<sup>4</sup> Josephus, *B.J.*, at 7.45.





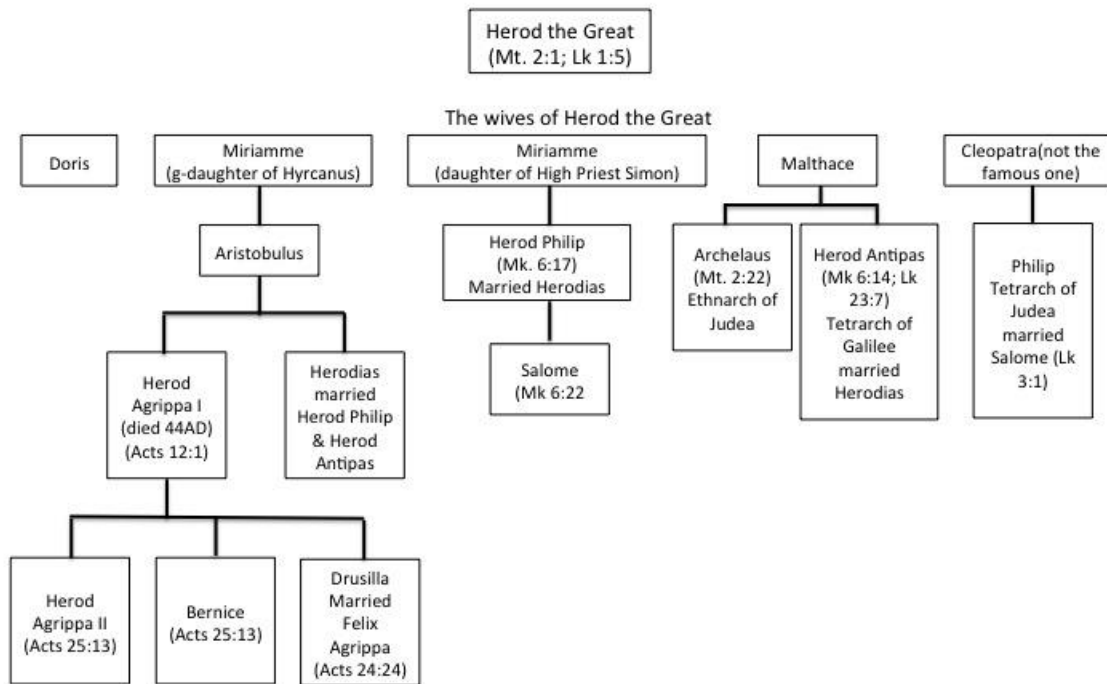
not preach Jesus as “Christ” or “Messiah.” Such would have been meaningless to Gentiles totally unfamiliar with the hope of Israel. Instead, they preached Jesus as “Lord” and “Savior,” both concepts familiar in the Greek world as a need for anyone hoping in an afterlife.

This outreach was effective, and a large number were coming to faith. It came to the attention (and likely shock) of the church in Jerusalem. They took a bold step, and decided to send the Son of Encouragement, Barnabas, to minister in Antioch. Barnabas arrived and was excited over what God was doing there. Barnabas was a natural choice not only as an encourager, but also as a native of Cyprus and a holy man in tune with the Jerusalem church leadership. He made a decision to get some additional help, and his first choice was Paul, who had returned to his homeland of Tarsus several years earlier (Acts 9:30). Luke has already told us that Paul had successfully argued with Greek-speaking Jews in Damascus, and Barnabas knew of Paul’s versatility in both languages and cultures – Greek and Hebrew. Barnabas was not sure where Paul was, but decided to go personally and look for him. He found Paul still in Tarsus, and obviously still faithful to the Lord who had called him a decade earlier. Paul chose to go with Barnabas to Antioch and the two of them ministered and taught there together for a whole year. The church grew large, and Luke tells us it was there in Antioch that the word was first

coined, “Christians” (Acts 11:26). This is the Greek noun built off the name/title “Christ.” It is roughly equivalent to saying “Christ people.”

The church was separated by miles, by language, and by race, but it was united in the love of Christ. Luke evidenced that when he wrote of a famine that was prophesied in the land, and the “brothers” in Antioch sent aid to the “brothers” in Judea. Barnabas and Paul delivered the aid by hand.

Meanwhile, the church was facing another bout of persecution under Herod Agrippa I. We should add that this Herod was Agrippa I, one of many Herods referenced in the New Testament descended from Herod the Great. With the help of Josphus’s Jewish histories, we can reconstruct the family tree and give references to help place the different people in the New Testament.



*From five wives, Herod the Great produced a number of ruling officials.*

Mark 10:32-10:45; Psalm 57

Herod Agrippa I executed James the son of Zebedee and brother to John the apostle. James becomes the first apostle to be martyred. Writing almost 300 years later, the early church historian Eusebius preserved a touching early church record about this death:

“Herod the King stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the Church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.” And concerning this James, Clement, in the seventh book of his *Hypotyposes*, relates a story which is worthy of mention; telling it as he received it from those who had lived before him. He says that the one who led James to the judgment-seat, when he saw him bearing his testimony, was moved, and confessed that he was himself also a Christian. They were both therefore, he says, led away together; and on the way he begged James to forgive him. And he, after considering a little, said, “Peace be with you,” and kissed him. And thus they were both beheaded at the same time.”<sup>5</sup>

In tandem with this reading, we have paired Mark 10:32-10:45. The Mark passage recounted a time when James and his brother John were seeking a special role with Jesus. One wished to sit at Jesus’ right hand and one at his left when Jesus “came into his glory.” The two really had no clue what was coming for Jesus or the church at large. Jesus quizzed them lightly whether they would be able to sustain what Jesus sustained such that they could have such a place. James and John both assured Jesus they could and would follow him. Jesus noted that their special role would be simply that, a role of following Jesus into earthly persecution in pursuit of God’s will. Undoubtedly, that prophetic promise was ringing in James’s ears as the sword swooped down decapitating him.

Along with those words of Christ, one wonders if James took solace in a psalm like Psalm 57. In this Psalm, the psalmist pleads for God to have mercy and be there when the enemies threaten and storms of destruction set in. With confidence in God’s steadfast love, the Psalmist trusts that God’s purpose will be fulfilled. In that there is praise for God, even if one dies in the process.

#### Psalm 123, 116, 124, and 125

Seeing how it pleased a number of people, Herod then arrested Peter, with plans to kill him as well. This was during Passover, and Herod put Peter under heavy guard in prison to execute him after the conclusion of Passover. Meanwhile, the church was in earnest prayer for Peter.

On the night Peter was to be brought out, Peter was sleeping chained between two sleeping guards, with two more guarding the door. An angel came to Peter and awoke him, releasing his chains while the guards slept. The angel had Peter put on clothes and walked him right out of the prison undetected. Peter thought the whole thing was a

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<sup>5</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 2, 9:1-3.

vision or dream, fully expecting martyrdom like his fellow apostle James. Once Peter was free in the city, he realized it was no dream, but was real.

Peter came to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many believers were on an all-night prayer vigil. Certain Psalms surely ministered to Peter and the church, expressing their prayers and concerns. We use four in this lesson that demonstrate the solace that can be found and the faith that can be expressed as Psalms are read into life's circumstances.

Psalm 123 speaks of times of oppression from the "proud," a sin we will see was the ultimate downfall of Herod. The help comes from God, not from any earthly source. The psalmist seeks God's mercy and looks to God for deliverance. That does not mean that God would not use an earthly vessel to accomplish his deliverance, but it does mean that the faithful credit that deliverance to God!

Undoubtedly, Peter was looking over his shoulder the whole way, nervous and anxious to get to a safe place. Peter knocked on the door, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer. Rhoda asked who was there, and Peter affirmed it was him. Rhoda recognized Peter's voice, but in her excitement to tell everyone, failed to let him in and rushed in with the news. For this reason, I nominate Rhoda as the patron saints of all absent-minded people (dare I say "airheads"?). No one believed Rhoda, but Peter kept knocking on the door until they answered it and found him to be there. All were amazed at God's answer to their prayers, and Peter shushed them long enough to detail what happened.

Psalm 116 would have spoken at that moment to the church and to Peter as he recounted those events. The Psalm speaks of God's deliverance from death for one who was in great distress. Calling upon the name of the Lord, the psalmist was delivered and preserved to the glory of God.

For you have delivered my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling;  
I will walk before the LORD  
in the land of the living (Pslm 116:8-116:9).

The result of this salvation is another voice proclaiming God the Savior!

What shall I render to the LORD  
for all his benefits to me?  
I will lift up the cup of salvation  
and call on the name of the LORD (Pslm 116:12-116:13).

Peter instructed those there to pass along the news. He knew the source of his deliverance. As Psalm 124 recounts, if the Lord had not been on his side, he would surely have died. But instead, with God as helper and sustainer, Peter could join the psalmist in saying,

Blessed be the LORD,  
who has not given us  
as prey to their teeth!  
We have escaped like a bird  
from the snare of the fowlers;  
the snare is broken,  
and we have escaped! (Pslm 124:6-124:7).

Peter then left, going underground to unknown places (apparently to Luke as well as to us!).

In a classic understatement, Luke recorded that when the day came, the day when King Herod was expecting a big execution,

There was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter (Acts 12:18).

Herod had the whole town turned upside down searching for Peter. Herod put Peter's guards to death for their seeming incompetence, before leaving Judea for Caesarea.

Herod would have done well to heed the admonition placed in the words of Psalm 125. Those who trust in the Lord cannot be moved. The Lord surrounds his people like the mountains surround Jerusalem. But the wicked, the crooked, and the evil people will be removed, even as God works for his trusting children.

### **The Follies of Pride and the Death of Herod (Acts 12:20-12:25)**

Deuteronomy 16:21-17:20; 28:1-28:68; Proverbs 15:25; 25:26; 17:7; 11:7-11:11; Ecclesiastes 7; 2 Timothy 3:1-3:9; 2 Chronicles 26; and Psalm 73

It was while in Caesarea that Herod, an angry and temperamental man upset with the people of Tyre and Sidon, was approached by a group of people who sought peace. Herod, very oversold on his self-importance, put on royal robes to give audience to those who sought his favor. After delivering an oration, Herod was relishing the likely feigned adoration of the people, who cried,

The voice of a god, and not of a man! (Acts 12:22).

Herod should have known better. Deuteronomy was clear, no one is to worship anyone or anything as God other than YHWH, the one true God. That certainly should extend to allowing anyone to worship yourself!

Luke's inclusion of this vignette places Herod in stark contrast to Peter, the man who escaped the "god's" clutches. When Cornelius, the Roman centurion bowed to Peter as recounted several chapters earlier, Peter lifted him affirming, "I am just a man." This Peter walked in God's blessings. Herod, however, allowed the idolatrous adoration proclaiming him special. His end was different than Peter's. Instead of God's blessings, Herod was struck immediately with an intestinal disease ("worms"), which led to his death! (Acts 12:23). The first century historian Josephus recorded the death this way,

Now, when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea, ... and there he exhibited shows.... At which festival, a great multitude was gotten together of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province. On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another ... that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature." Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. ... A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner...his pain was become violent. ... And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign.<sup>6</sup>

Luke finished this section with the marvelous affirmation that even as the fake god died, and the words of his oration faded into the unknown pages of history, the word of the real God increased and multiplied (Acts 12:24).

In contextual support of this story, we read just a smattering of the great deal the Bible has to say about pride. The passages are by and large self-explanatory. The real question is, how do we identify pride and what can we do to stay away from it? Take, for example, King Uzziah, a good king who tried to do right before the Lord for over 50 years. He accomplished many great things on behalf of and in the name of God. Yet even he had a problem with pride. Uzziah's pride was tinged with religiosity, as if his was "holy pride."

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<sup>6</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 19:343-350.

But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense (2 Chron 26:16).

When Uzziah was confronted, his response was not contrition, he was angry with his challengers. Uzziah then bore the brunt of God's punishment (leprosy) till his death.

Ecclesiastes 7 gives very wise instruction to people to help guard against pride. Paul takes time in 2 Timothy 3:1-3:9, to explain that pride, arrogance, and foolishness will grow over time, not diminish. Often, Paul explained, this will give an appearance of godliness. In truth, though, it is powerless. For what persons, proud in themselves, are even looking for God's power and work?

It is in staying close to God, in seeing him in grandeur, that one keeps humility. No one seeing God has reason to boast or be proud. No one reliant upon God for every little and big thing, will ever want to be self-reliant. This is the teaching of Psalm 73. The wicked and the proud may seem to have something we wish for, but the truth is we should run to God's sanctuary. Let us have what God will give us, no more, and no less. Let us look to the hand of God and, in the words of the old hymn,

Forbid it Lord that I should boast. Save in the death of Christ my Lord.

### **Questions for Discussion**

Consider building questions around these passages:

1. Do you see the way you live your life as praise to God? Are you doing the things he made you to do? How can you tell? How can you improve?
2. Have you found the Psalms to nourish your spiritual life? Which Psalms? When and how?
3. How do you react to the praise of people? Does it go to your head, or are you quick to acknowledge God's hand at work, giving him the praise? What can we do to better set our guard against the evils of pride?

*Week Twenty-nine Readings*

<p><b>7/14 Paul and Barnabas at Pisidian Antioch</b></p> <p>Acts 13:13-13:52 Zech 7 2 Kgs 22-23</p> <p><b>7/15 Paul and Barnabas at Galatian Cities</b> Acts 14:1-14:28</p> <p>Paul Writes the Galatians – The Gospel Gal 1:1-1:10 Prov 16:1-16:3</p> <p>Paul to the Galatians – Paul’s Call Gal 1:11-1:24</p> <p>Paul to the Galatians – the Apostles Gal 2:1-2:10</p> <p>Paul to the Galatians – Opposing Peter Gal 2:11-2:14 Prov 10:8</p>	<p><b>7/16 Paul to the Galatians – Justified by Faith</b></p> <p>Gal 2:15-2:21 Luk 18:9-18:14 Prov 25:27 Luk 18:18-18:30 Rom 9:1-9:13 Mal 1:2-1:5 Rom 9:14-9:24 Jer 18 Rom 9:25-9:33</p>	<p><b>7/17 Paul to the Galatians – Justified by Faith</b></p> <p>Gal 2:15-2:21 Isa 10 Isa 45:1-45:13 Rom 10 Prov 25:25 Rom 8:1-8:17</p>	<p><b>7/18 Paul to the Galatians – By Faith not Works</b></p> <p>Gal 3:1-3:9 Num 28-29 Heb 11:1-11:10 Gen 12:1-12:3</p> <p><b>7/19 Paul to the Galatians – By Faith not Works</b></p> <p>Gal 3:1-3:9 Heb 11:11-11:31 Josh 2 Heb 11:32-11:33</p> <p style="text-align: center;">7/20 OFF</p>
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