

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 14, Acts 12-13

6-Min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Today, we're going to dive into this incredible story of power, persecution, and a really dramatic reversal of fortunes, all from the Book of Acts. It's basically a clash between two completely different kinds of authority. And that really brings us to the central question of this whole explainer.

What happens when you have a guy with all the power in the world on one side, and a group with, well, seemingly none on the other? What happens when those two forces collide? Alright, so let's set the stage. We're talking somewhere around 41-44 AD. The place is Judea, and our two forces are about to have a major confrontation.

I mean, the sheer imbalance of power here is just staggering. On one side, you've got King Herod Agrippa I. And this isn't just some local ruler, okay? He's the grandson of Herod the Great; he's got royal blood, and he's buddies with the emperor back in Rome. He holds what's called the power of the sword, which is the literal power of life and death.

And the church? They don't even have buildings. Their leaders are getting thrown in jail, and pretty much their only weapon seems to be holding prayer meetings in people's houses. Now Herod was a bit of a people pleaser.

He was actually very popular. And to keep that popularity with the conservative religious establishment, he decides, you know what? I'm going to make a big public show of force against this new Christian movement. And he does not hold back.

He goes all in. He arrests James, one of the top three apostles, and has him beheaded. When Herod sees how much the crowd loves this, he doubles down.

He arrests the movement's most prominent leader, Peter. The plan is to make a huge public spectacle of him, which almost certainly means an execution, right after the big festival ends. And this is where you get a real chill down your spine.

For anyone who knows the story, the timing is just this haunting echo of the past. Peter gets arrested and is set to be killed during the exact same festival where Jesus himself was executed. You know, the situation looks completely and utterly hopeless.

So with Peter locked away, what can the church possibly do? Well, all they can do is pray. But here's the thing. Peter isn't in some local jail.

We are talking a maximum security situation. Okay, just picture this for a second. Peter is literally chained to two elite Roman soldiers.

Two more are standing guard right outside his cell door. And all of them are part of a 16-man squad working around the clock in shifts. Escape isn't just improbable; it is humanly impossible.

No way out. Period. And then, the impossible happens.

An angel just appears in the cell. The chains literally fall right off his wrists. He walks past the sleeping guards and the massive iron gates to the prison; they just swing open, all by themselves.

It is so unbelievable that Peter himself thinks he's dreaming, or maybe having some kind of vision. Now, this next part is my favorite, because it's so wonderfully human and, honestly, a little comical. Peter goes straight to the house where the church is gathered, you know, the very people who are up all night praying for his release.

But when the servant girl Rhoda hears his voice and tells everyone, Peter's at the gate, they don't believe her. They tell her she's crazy, and then they suggest it must be his ghost. They were literally praying for a miracle that they weren't actually expecting to get.

So now the story cuts back to King Herod. He's about to find out his prized prisoner is missing, and, well, his reaction is exactly what you'd expect from an arrogant tyrant. Herod is, to put it mildly, enraged.

He can't accept a supernatural explanation, so he just assumes it was incompetence, or maybe the guards were bribed. To save his own honor and make a terrifying point, he has the four guards who were on that shift executed. He just wields the power of death so casually and so cruelly.

A short time later, Herod's in the city of Caesarea. He makes this grand appearance in the public theater, decked out in these magnificent silver robes that are just shimmering in the sun. And some diplomats from Tyre and Sidon, who really want to get back in his good graces, start shouting this crazy blasphemous praise, yelling, that's the voice of a God, not a man.

And Herod, he just soaks it all in. He loves it. And in the very moment he accepts being worshipped as a God, divine judgment just falls on him.

Instantly. Both the Book of Acts and the historian from that time, Josephus, both record his absolutely horrific death. He's struck with severe stomach pains and dies a few days later, as the text graphically puts it, by being eaten by worms.

So let's just look at the final scoreboard here. The man who wielded the sword, King Herod, meets this gruesome, humiliating end. The man he threw in prison, Peter, walks free.

And James, while he was martyred, becomes this foundational figure for the faith. It turns out, the ultimate power. It wasn't sitting on that throne after all.

But the story doesn't end with Herod's death. Actually, his fall happens at the same time as a major shift. While all this drama was going down in Jerusalem, a new center for the Christian movement was rising up in the city of Antioch.

And let me tell you, it looked very, very different. I mean, just look at this leadership team. It is incredibly diverse.

It's cosmopolitan. You've got Barnabas from Cyprus. Simeon, whose nickname Niger means the black, was very likely of North African descent.

Lucius is also from North Africa. Menahan was actually a childhood friend of another one of the Herods. And of course, Saul of Tarsus.

This right here is the new face of the church. It's global, and it's outward-looking. So while this incredibly diverse group is praying and fasting, they get this prophetic call to action.

They're told to officially send out two of their best leaders, Barnabas and Saul, to start a brand new, intentional mission to the wider world. This is an absolutely pivotal, game-changing moment. So their first stop is the island of Cyprus.

And right away, they walk into what you could call a power encounter. The Roman pro-consul there, a guy named Sergius Paulus, is actually interested in their message. But his court magician, a sorcerer named Elimas, tries to interfere.

And Saul, filled with the Holy Spirit, confronts him directly, calls him a child of the devil, and pronounces a temporary blindness on him, which happens instantly. And you've got to pay close attention right here. It's in this exact moment, standing before a Roman official named Sergius Paulus, that the author switches from calling him by his Jewish name, Saul, to his Roman name, Paul.

Now that is not random. It signals a permanent shift in his mission. He is now primarily the apostle to the non-Jewish Roman world.

So, it all comes back to where we started. King Herod Agrippa's power was visible, it was political, it was deadly, and it ended gruesomely right there on his throne. Paul's authority, on the other hand, was spiritual.

It seemed insignificant, but it launched a movement that would reshape history. It really makes you stop and ask, what is the true source of power, and how should we really measure it?