

## MONDAY 25 July "Double Crisis" (Acts 11:27-12:3)

Good morning my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

*Have you seen disasters or crisis actually result in good things, in benefits to people?* There's an old adage... 'necessity is the mother of invention'. As you look back over your life, *can you see any examples of how your life today is better because of something that resulted from what appeared to be a tragedy in your past?*

I left you yesterday in the city of Antioch, Syria amidst a wonderful time in the history of that city. Barnabas and Saul were in Antioch and their days and evenings were filled with the privilege of teaching the deeper truths of Jesus and the things Jesus taught to people in Antioch who were trusting in Jesus. *The word "**Christian**" was being used for the first time, to describe these followers of Jesus in Antioch because their lives were so radically different as a result of the life transforming work of the Holy Spirit within them.* During the full year Barnabas and Saul were teaching in Antioch, something significant happened. Acts 11:27 says a man came from Jerusalem by the name of Agabus and he **"through the Holy Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman empire."** That would have been shocking news and would have resulted in people starting to stockpile food as they were able.

**'Famine'** is not a word we use very often, nor is it an experience most of the human race alive today has ever had. But if you've been watching the global news lately, **'famine'** is a word more and more describing Afghanistan, Yemen, and several drought-stricken countries in Africa. *Currently, according to the World Food Programme, about 50 million people worldwide are starving in or on the brink of famine.* For people living in the middle east, **'famine'** has terrorized their region many times going all the way back to the days of Joseph in Egypt in the Bible book of Genesis. Luke the author of Acts reports: **"This famine did occur during the reign of Claudius."** (Acts 11:28) History confirms Claudius was the Roman Emperor from 41-54AD and during that time there was widespread drought and famine in many places across the Roman Empire, particularly the region around Israel. Evidently up in Antioch, Syria, 400 miles to the north, it wasn't as bad, so when word began coming about the food shortages down south, these generous Jesus followers in Antioch decided to do something practical. You might call it "Love in Action"!

The record says: **"The Jesus followers, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the Jesus followers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul."** (Acts 11:29,30) This was a historic moment. I presume this means many Jesus followers in Antioch and surrounding areas of Syria, probably many of whom were Gentiles, perhaps including Damascus, but also it may have included Samaritan Jesus followers in Samaria, all felt a burden for the starving Jewish Jesus followers in Jerusalem and the southern province of Judea. *They began sending financial help and maybe even cart loads of food and other supplies to the starving in*

*Jerusalem! Amazing how God can work in the lives of people even in the middle of crisis.*

Can you see what a big deal that is? Jerusalem is where it all began! The apostles and leaders of the Jesus movement were all there in Jerusalem. The Gospel had rippled out from Jerusalem to other cities and towns, now reaching several hundred miles away, and most of this, away from Jerusalem "**Christians**", had never seen Jesus, or heard Him speak, or watched a miracle. Many of them had never met any of the apostles or heard them speak. *Do you see we're now into the third, fourth and even fifth generation of people hearing the Gospel of Jesus from those who heard it from someone else.* This, my friends, is the very exciting miracle of 'spiritual reproduction' and in the 20 years after Jesus returned to heaven, the Gospel spread rapidly in this organic way. Paul himself summarized this when he wrote to Timothy, a few years later, with this instruction: "**The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to reliable people who will be qualified to teach others also.**" (2 Tim. 2:2) **I call that "4-Gen Disciplemaking"**. Can you see the four spiritual generations? Paul > Timothy > reliable people > others also. And that my friends is how you and I have heard the Gospel of Jesus... from people who heard it from others.

Sadly, the famine wasn't the only crisis affecting that region of the world in those days. The record tells us: "**About this time King Herod arrested some of these Jesus followers intending to persecute them. He had James the brother of John executed with the sword! When he saw this met with approval from the Jewish leaders, he set about to seize Peter also.**" (Acts 12:1-3) Who is this "**King Herod**" and why would he do such horrible things? His full name was King Herod Agrippa I, grandson of King Herod the Great. There are four different King Herods mentioned in the Gospels, did you know that? King Herod the Great was the patriarch of this royal family. He had rebuilt the Temple mount and was the King over the Jews in Jerusalem when Jesus was born. The Magi from the east had met with this King Herod the Great, and you'll recall in his paranoia he had the infant boys slaughtered in Bethlehem. (Matt. 2) This King was partially Jewish by birth and was assigned by Rome to rule over Jews in the entire region of Palestine. When he died the region was divided into four, each ruled by one of his sons also called King Herod, because it was the Herodian family. When Joseph, Mary and little Jesus returned from hiding in Egypt, you'll recall they settled in Nazareth, Galilee, because they feared King Herod Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, who was reigning in Judea. (Matt. 2:22)

King Herod Antipas was the king who ordered the horrific execution of John the Baptist remember, (Matt. 14:1-12) and before whom Jesus stood trial (Luke 23:7-12). King Herod Agrippa I is the one mentioned here in Acts 12 calling for the execution of James and the arrest of Peter and finally King Herod Agrippa II is the one before whom Paul stood trial in Acts 25 & 26. *Each of these men in their own way had profound influence on the story and spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the first century.* Each King Herod walked a delicate path of trying to maneuver his political career holding both the favor of the Roman Caesar in Rome and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Often these Herod's found themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place with no good options.

Many people died at the hands of these Kings Herod and a great many people were horribly persecuted in these Kings' attempts to protect their position and keep some degree of peace in and around Jerusalem.

The Jesus followers were perhaps an even greater problem for the Herod's than Jesus Himself had been, for they numbered in the many thousands and the movement was gaining momentum all across Palestine. *For King Herod Agrippa I, like his father and grandfather before him, bloodshed, execution of the leaders of this Jesus movement seemed his only way to control it.* Thus, James the apostle, the brother of John and one of the closest friends of Jesus was arrested and executed by King Herod Agrippa I. That event shocked the apostles and the entire movement. When Peter was then abruptly imprisoned by this King Herod, we can imagine great fear swept through the region and every Jesus follower was on the lookout, fearful for their life! *With James dead and now with Peter imprisoned, the apostles were facing a leadership crisis.* Ironically, the record says, **"This happened during the Feast of Passover!"** (Acts 12:3)

Anniversaries are important, aren't they? I'm sure there are several you celebrate. *For the apostles and this Jesus movement the Jewish festival of Passover was a very important anniversary, especially in Jerusalem, for it was that weekend when Jesus was arrested, tried, beaten and executed by crucifixion. But it was also that weekend Jesus had risen from the dead as a victorious Savior!* Each year at Passover I have no doubt the Jewish religious leaders, the apostles and closest friends of Jesus, the huge and growing number of Jesus followers throughout the region... all remembered and in various ways honored that Passover weekend which changed the world. On this particular Passover weekend, I doubt there was much celebration but rather the Jesus movement gatherings were subdued, reflective, prayerful as they prayed for Peter's release; Jesus' protection of them all; and the guidance of the Holy Spirit as to what to do next!

So, let's pause right here as we contemplate the world in which you and I are living these days. *What crisis is happening in your part of the world? Famine? Political Crisis? Economic disaster? Religious persecution? What is God doing in the midst of the crisis? What is the focus of your prayers these days as you seek to live a God honoring life in a world of crisis?* Tomorrow it will be exciting to see what God did in the crisis of Acts 12.

**Today's Scripture is Acts 11:27-12:3.**