

The Book of Acts - Chapter Twelve

Summary of Chapter Twelve

The chapter opens with a brief account of the martyrdom of the first apostle, James the brother of John, who had been a fisherman in Galilee when the Lord Jesus had called him to service. The man responsible for his death was King Herod Agrippa I and he appeared to do so for no other reason than to please the local population of Jews.

Having achieved this objective, Agrippa then had the apostle Peter arrested with the same intended outcome in mind. But it was the time of Passover, an eight day holy festival, and it would not have been appropriate to hold an execution during this time, so Peter was put in prison and heavily guarded.

The church held a prayer vigil throughout this time, God clearly heard their prayer and sent an angel, who miraculously freed Peter from the chains that bound him and led him out of the prison, past armed guards and through locked doors, into the streets of Jerusalem. Up until this point, Peter thought he was dreaming, but when the angel left him he realised his situation and went to his church to tell them what had happened. After this, he left and went into hiding for a while to escape the clutches of King Agrippa.

King Agrippa was fuming at the loss of this prize prisoner and had the city thoroughly searched. When he could not find Peter, he had the sixteen guards executed instead.

Agrippa then left Jerusalem and went to Cæsarea to hold discussions with leaders from the cities of Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia. Judæa supplied much of the grain to feed the populations of these cities and Agrippa was in dispute with these leaders, threatening not to supply food and thus condemning thousands of people to starve.

The leaders had managed to befriend Blastus, a key official of the king. When the king sat before them, dressed in regal splendour, the listeners proclaimed him to be a god. Despite worshipping as a Jew, he accepted their acclaim to his deity and an angel of the Lord struck him down in painful death.

Saul and Barnabas, who had been in Judæa delivering the offerings of the Antioch church to their poor brothers in Jerusalem, completed their mission and returned to Antioch.

IV Acts 12:1-13:3 - The Jerusalem church is persecuted

IV.a Acts 12:1-19a - Peter's miraculous escape from prison

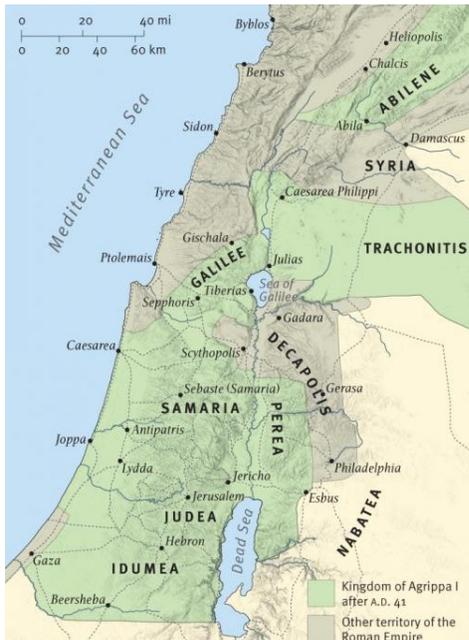
IV.a.i Acts 12:1-2 - The death of James Zebedee

¹ It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.

Acts 12:1

About this time. Luke has not written this part of Acts in strict chronological order as he clearly wanted to conclude the story of the church in Antioch, including Saul being called out of obscurity in Tarsus, before returning to matters in Judæa.

King Herod was Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great. He grew up in Rome and, because his childhood peers later became emperors, he was granted rule over various territories in Judæa in AD37, until his kingdom reached the full extent of his grandfather's territory in AD41-44. His persecution of the Christians may have been an attempt to curry favour with the Jews (v.3).



The green areas of the map show the extent of the land over which King Agrippa I had jurisdiction.

Herod the Great, Herod Agrippa I grandfather, ruled the land at the time of Jesus birth. He ruled Israel and Judah from 37-4BC. He was an Idumæan and was appointed king of the Jews under the authority of Rome. Idumæa was formally Edom, a land to the south of the Promised Land given to Jacob's twin brother Esau, the story of which is told in Genesis Chapter 36. But by this time it incorporated the southern portion that was formerly the land given to the tribe of Judah.

² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

Acts 12:2

The martyred James was Jesus' disciple, son of Zebedee and brother of John, not to be confused with James, the brother of Jesus and author of the book of James, who became a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church (v.17). Jesus had predicted his suffering: <<"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with" >> (Mark 10:39).

He was beheaded with a sword by Herod Agrippa I, who had a reputation for being a zealous proselyte even though his heritage was Edom. Jesus had said: <<Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword>> (Matthew 10:34). The OT prophets were often killed in this way: <<They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated>> (Hebrews 11:37). But we can protect ourselves with: <<the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God>> (Ephesians 6:17b).

Roman Catholic tradition has it that James had travelled to Spain to evangelise that nation before returning to be martyred but this lacks historical evidence other than the claims made by some of the regions he is supposed to have visited.

Many ask, 'Why did God allow this prominent apostle to be killed when he saved others?' This is another of the mysteries that we cannot answer but suggestions include:

1. To rouse other apostles to greater actions rather than 'nesting' in Jerusalem, so most!
2. To show that even his inner core, James had witnessed Jesus transfiguration, were dispensable to the service of the kingdom and to bring forth the truth of Jesus words: <<Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father">> (Matthew 20:23).

James death was joyfully welcomed by many Jews and Peter's would not doubt have met with similar acclaim. It occurred around the time of the Passover, at a time when Jews should be celebrating their freedom from slavery. Here, they demonstrate their bondage to Satan through their wicked and sinful desires to kill those who were witnesses of God's glory and proclaimed the very words that could have set them free indeed.

IV.a.ii Acts 12:3-6 - Peter put in prison

In some ways, this is one of the most humorous stories in scripture. Here we have Peter, the chief apostle, in prison and awaiting death. Down the road, his home church, who were used to witnessing miraculous works and many answers to prayer on an almost daily basis, are praying earnestly for Peter's release. When Peter turns up at the door, having been miraculously released by providential intervention, they can't and don't believe it! Why do we even bother to pray if we do not expect our prayers to be answered?

The church had lost Stephen and James; had they lost Peter too it would have brought them: <<sorrow upon sorrow>> (Philippians 2:27b). The king's decree draws near and execution must occur and no decree can be revoked: <<Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring — for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked>> (Esther 8:8), and: <<Now, O king, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered — in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed>> (Daniel 6:8).

³ When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Acts 12:3

Why this pleased the Jews is not specified. Perhaps the persecution following Stephen's death (Acts 8:1) had escalated but was not recorded in scripture for us.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, the seven days following the Passover meal, were considered holy and not to be desecrated by an execution. God had said: <<Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come>> (Exodus 12:17). Ironically, this was close to the anniversary of the Lord's crucifixion about a decade or so earlier. It seems that God kept trying to open the hearts and minds of the people by making it so obvious what was going on but they just did not see it: <<For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them>> (Matthew 13:15).

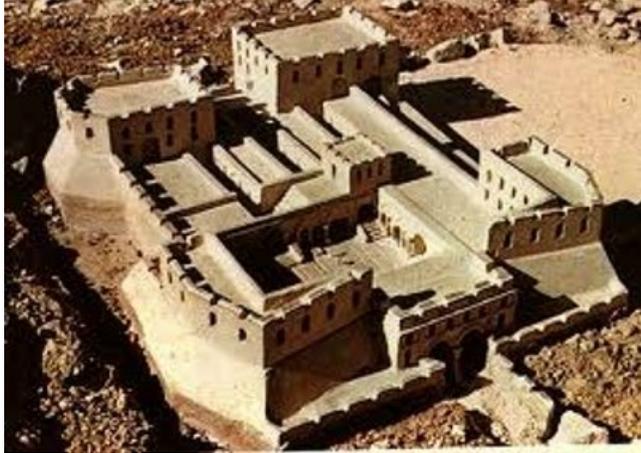
⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

Acts 12:4

The prison was probably the Tower of Antonia, which was at the north western corner of the temple complex and was the quarters of the Roman garrison.

The use of four squads of four soldiers reflects Roman practice: one squad of four soldiers for each of the four three-hour watches of the night.

Passover refers to the entire spring festival that unites Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.



⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

Acts 12:5

The mention of the church earnestly praying continues Luke's emphasis that every step in building the church is due to God's blessing and supernatural intervention, and the need for the church to be constantly in communion with God through prayer.

⁶ The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.

Acts 12:6

Peter was sleeping. Again, we see the reaction in scripture of those who are truly living the reality of their salvation. Peter is facing death and yet can sleep peacefully while chained to armed guards in a prison cell. We can think of David, as he fled from his son Absalom: <<I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me>> (Psalm 3:5), and the Psalmist writes: <<we were like men who dreamed>> (Psalm 126:1b). All of us would do well to remember the Lord said: <<Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?>> (Matthew 6:27).

But with God on our side we need not fear, for: <<The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them>> (Psalm 34:7), and: <<Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident>> (Psalm 27:3).

IV.a.iii Acts 12:7-10 - Peter released by an angel

Peter was half asleep throughout his escape from prison. The angel had to rouse him and direct him (vv.7-8), and he remained in a stupor until the angel led him through the gates and into a side street (vv.9-11).

⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

⁸ Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. ⁹ Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ They passed the first

and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Acts 12:7-10

Peter had experienced heavenly visions before and knew how realistic they are. Therefore he followed the angel as if in a dream, perhaps like the Babylonian exiles: <<When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed>> (Psalm 126:1).

They passed the first and second guards, who would have been watchful and not asleep: <<as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day" >> (Romans 11:8).

How often is it that our life in Christ seems too good to be true!

The iron gate leading to the city opened before him, perhaps not as spectacular as the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21), or the Jordon River (Joshua 3:13 and 2 Kings 2:8), but still miraculous and powerful: <<This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armour, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut>> (Isaiah 45:1).

This is not what we normally have in mind when we say that Christ sets the prisoners free but he does so both physically and spiritually: <<As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit>> (Zechariah 9:11).

Tradition says that Peter's chains were kept by a soldier as a sacred relic and then presented to Eudoxia, a wealthy Samaritan women, who donated much of her wealth to the cause following her conversion. She was martyred in AD107. The early Roman Catholic Church dedicated a day in remembrance, not of Peter's miraculous escape, but for the alleged works of the chains. It is called Festum St. Petris Vinculorum and is held on 1 August, which seems a strange date as Peter was imprisoned during Passover that always occurs in March or April! Such is the folly of men who focus on Religious tradition rather than faith in Christ.

IV.a.iv Acts 12:11-17 - Peter visits the church

¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."

¹² When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.

Acts 12:11-12

The house of Mary is thought by some to have been the location where the church met both for the appointing of Matthias as the twelfth apostle (Acts 1:26), and when the Spirit was poured out on them at Pentecost (Acts 2:1). Mary was the sister of Barnabas. It would seem that her house was indeed blessed, perhaps like that of Obed-Edom, who looked after the Ark of the Covenant for a short while: <<The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the Lord blessed him and his entire household>> (2 Samuel 6:11).

John, also called Mark, will become a major figure in the next three chapters, going with Paul and Barnabas on the first part of their first missionary journey but then leaving them. This was a cause of contention between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:37-39). Mark regained Paul's favour later: <<My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin

of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)>> (Colossians 4:10), <<Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry>> (2 Timothy 4:11), and: <<And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers>> (Philemon 24). Mark accompanied Barnabas on a missionary journey to at least Cyprus: <<They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus>> (Acts 15:39), and he was also known to have worked closely with Peter: <<She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark>> (1 Peter 5:13). There is substantial testimony from the early church that he wrote the Gospel of Mark, clearly reflecting the eye-witness testimony of Peter.

Were praying. Paul states that we should: <<pray continually>> (1 Thessalonians 5:17), especially as a group for: <<Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven>> (Matthew 18:19).

¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognised Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

Acts 12:13-14

Rhoda's failure to open the gate on account of her joy adds a touch of humour and heightens the suspense.

¹⁵ "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

Acts 12:15

You're out of your mind. Rhoda didn't let Peter in due to her joy and excitement although she would have known his voice well from listening to his teaching and prayer. She didn't get a very Christian, loving response from the others!

It must be his angel. Peter's angel uses the Greek word *angelos* that is also used for messenger, e.g. speaking about John the Baptist: <<After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?>> (Luke 7:24), <<This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you'>> (Luke 7:27), and speaking of Jesus: <<And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him>> (Luke 9:52).

Some who subscribe to the Latin Vulgate translation speak of an angel that is an exact replica of a person, in this case Peter, who comes to earth at the time of death to collect the 'about to die' original. Although there are numerous testimonies that may indicate interaction between angels and human spirits, the idea based on the Vulgate translation borders on superstition.

¹⁶ But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

Acts 12:16-17

Peter is an answer to prayer. Instead of doubt the church should have reacted in the way David did when he proclaimed: <<Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!>> (Psalm 66:20).

James here is the brother of Jesus: <<I saw none of the other apostles – only James, the Lord's brother>> (Galatians 1:19), not James the brother of John, who had recently been killed by Herod, (v.2). From this point forward in Acts, James seems to have the most prominent leadership role among the apostles in Jerusalem, see Acts 15:13-21 and 21:18. Though James was not one of the original Twelve, he apparently became an apostle as well: <<Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles>> (1 Corinthians 15:7), <<I saw none of the other apostles – only James, the Lord's brother>> (Galatians 1:19), and: <<James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews>> (Galatians 2:9). The book of James also seems to be written on his own apostolic authority, not as a spokesman for someone else: <<James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings>> (James 1:1).

For some reason Peter no longer remained the leader and spokesman for the apostles in Jerusalem but left for another place. Luke does not specify where Peter went, some have suggested either Rome or Antioch; he was back in Jerusalem later for a conference recorded in Acts 15:7-21.

Peter seeking a safe place does not imply lack of faith or trust on his part for there is nothing in scripture that speaks against self-preservation unless it specifically goes against a person's call or involves denying Jesus as Peter had done before, which is something disciples should never do and Peter never repeated that mistake. For Jesus had often avoided the mob as it was not his time or the way he should die, e.g. <<Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp>> (John 10:39), and Peter showed how it should be when he was brought before the Sanhedrin: <<But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" >> (Acts 4:19-20).

IV.a.v Acts 12:18-19a - Herod's reaction to Peter's escape

¹⁸ In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ^{19a} After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Acts 12:18-19a

Herod had a thorough search made for Peter but could not find him, as with the Jewish leaders when they searched for Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch: <<Instead, the king commanded Jerahmeel, a son of the king, Seraiah son of Azriel and Shelemiah son of Abdeel to arrest Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet. But the Lord had hidden them>> (Jeremiah 36:26).

By executing the guards, Herod was following Roman practice, which specified that soldiers who lost their prisoners were subject to the same penalty as that due to the prisoners. Since the soldiers knew that their lives were at stake, they certainly would not have all fallen asleep, apart from the miraculous intervention of the angel who rescued Peter.

The Roman punishment for losing a prisoner was death and Herod adopted this. It had been so in the days of the Israeli kings as well: <<As the king passed by, the prophet called out to him, "Your servant went into the thick of the battle, and someone came to me with a captive and said, 'Guard this man. If he is missing, it will be your life for his life, or you must pay a talent of silver.'" "That is your sentence," the king of Israel said. "You have pronounced it yourself" >> (1 Kings 20:39-40). Did Peter bear any responsibility by his escape? Who does Satan blame when God sets a captive free and holds a party in heaven? See the parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke 15:1-7.

IV.b Acts 12:19b-24 - Herod's death

Chapter 12 begins and ends with Herod Agrippa I. The persecutor of the church now brings about his own death.

^{19b} Then Herod went from Judæa to Cæsarea and stayed there a while.

Acts 19b

Cæsarea was the seat of the Roman government and had a mixed Jewish and Gentile population. Cæsarea was commented on in Acts 8:40.

²⁰ He had been quarrelling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

Acts 12:20

A trusted personal servant to a high government official was also referred to as a chamberlain; the Greek literally means 'the one over the bedroom', but such a person would have had much wider responsibilities than this and Blastus would no doubt have acted as a personal advisor in matters of state such as this.

²¹ On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people.

Acts 12:21

Josephus gives added detail that Herod's royal robes were made of silver that sparkled in the sun, provoking the crowd's acclamation.

²² They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." ²³ Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

Acts 12:22-23

Because Herod did not give praise to God. In contrast to Peter's instantaneous rejection of worship in Acts 10:26b <<"Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself" >>, Herod receives this wrongful praise with delight. In both cases the instinctive response to an unexpected situation revealed the condition of the man's heart.

An angel of the Lord struck him down: <<Repay them for their deeds and for their evil work; repay them for what their hands have done and bring back upon them what they deserve>> (Psalm 28:4), and: <<Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me">> (Matthew 28:18), clearly shows that Jesus had the God-given right to deal with Herod in this way.

In Jewish Antiquities 19:343-350, Josephus supports Luke's account by recording: <<That Herod came down to Cæsarea to celebrate the festival of Cæsar: that the second day of the festival he went in the morning to the theatre, clothed with a splendid robe mentioned before (woven fine silver that bedazzled the crowd); that his flatterers saluted him as a god, begged that he would be propitious to them; that hitherto they had revered him as a man, but now they would confess to be in him something more excellent than a mortal nature. That he did not refuse nor correct this impious flattery but presently, after looking up, he saw an owl perched over his head, and was at the same instant seized with a most violent pain in his bowels and griped in his belly, which

were exquisite from the very first; that he turned his eyes upon his friends, and said to this purpose: 'Now, I whom you called a god, and therefore immortal, must be proved a man, and mortal'. That his torture continued without intermission, or the least abasement, and then he died in the 54th year of his age, when he had been king 7 years'>>.

We are often puzzled as to why some people apparently deserving of swift judgement receive it, while others don't. It could depend on their sin as God seems to be particularly intolerant of personal pride as with Herod. For example, King Nebuchadnezzar was a brutal man who had thousands of people put to death, but it was his pride that brought divine judgement swiftly on him: <<he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you>> (Daniel 4:30-31), and speaking to Job, the Lord said: <<look at every proud man and humble him, crush the wicked where they stand>> (Job 40:12). Here, Herod probably died for his prideful arrogance when worshipped by the people instead of giving glory to God. After all he was a proselyte and claimed to be zealous for God.

How often do we wish that God would deal with all such men so swiftly? Men like Hitler, Stalin, Saddam, Milosevic, Mugabe, etc. to name but a few. But where would the list end and what would the criteria be: <<for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God>> (Romans 3:23)? Thank God for His grace and mercy.

²⁴ But the word of God continued to increase and spread.

Acts 12:24

The word of God continued to increase. No power can triumph over the word of God: <<So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith>> (Acts 6:7), and: <<The word of the Lord spread through the whole region>> (Acts 13:49), and those who attempt to harm God's people will in the end face judgment themselves. Again, we see the church being grown out of adversity and persecution.

IV.c Acts 12:25-13:3 - Barnabas and Saul sent off

²⁵ When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

Acts 12:25

Finished their mission. That is, their famine relief journey to Jerusalem: <<The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul>> (Acts 11:29-30). Having completed that mission, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with John Mark accompanying them (v.12). This was about a year after the events recorded above. See comments made on Acts 11:24.