

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Of God And Kings

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Acts 12:20-25

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 12:20-25; that's on page 921 in your pew Bibles. We are jumping back into our series on the Book of Acts and this morning we are looking at the second half of the story that was told to us a few weeks ago by Pastor Matt. You will remember that King Herod laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed the Apostle James with the sword. He seized the Apostle Peter and threw him into prison – but as Pastor Matt told us, earnest prayer was made for him, to God, by the church – and an angel of the Lord was sent to release him. That story was an illustration of the great truth that is celebrated in Psalm 68:20:

“Our God is a God of salvation, and to GOD, the Lord, belong deliverances from death.” (Psalm 68:20 ESV)

Hallelujah!

Now if the story ended there it would still be cause for celebration - but actually, as you probably know, the story in Acts 12 gets even better because not only is our God the God of salvation, not only is he the one who gives deliverance from death, he is also a God of power, Providence and judgment. He breaks the arm of the evil doer. He pulls the teeth of the lion. He sits as Sovereign even over the kings of the earth. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 20:

Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. ²¹ On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. ²² And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" ²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. ²⁴ But the word of God increased and multiplied. ²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. (Acts 12:20–25 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

We sometimes refer to Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostle as "Luke the Historian". He was a travelling companion of the Apostle Paul and that explains in part his knowledge of this incident. With your Bible open in front of you, ZOOM out just a little bit so that can see the verse that comes immediately before this particular story. As I mentioned, the story as a whole takes up all of chapter 12, so look now at the last verse in chapter 11. There was a famine at this time that had particularly affected the Christian poor living in Jerusalem and so the church in Antioch had gathered funds and had determined to send them to Jerusalem. Verse 30 tells us:

And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:30 ESV)

Now look again quickly at the LAST verse in our story in chapter 12 – verse 25 says:

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. (Acts 12:25 ESV)

Are you seeing that? Saul – or Paul as we typically refer to him, was IN JERUSALEM for ALL of the events of chapter 12. He was almost certainly IN THE PRAYER MEETING that was conducted in the house of John Mark as per verse 12. He and Barnabas were apparently recruiting John Mark as a Jr. Partner in their future endeavours; we will hear about in chapter 13. So Paul was THERE when all of this went down and he was almost certainly Luke's primary source for everything recorded for us here in chapter 12 – but interestingly, he was not the only person interested in aspects of this story. The Jewish historian Josephus also records the part about the

strange and sudden death of King Herod. He records it much the way Luke does. He says that Herod acted arrogantly, allowing himself to be spoken of as a god. Immediately after that, Josephus records:

“A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner.”
(Antiquities 19:346 JOSEPH)

He goes on to say:

“Accordingly he was carried into the palace; and the rumor went abroad everywhere, that he would certainly die in a little time.” (Antiquities 19:348 JOSEPH)

Which he did just 5 days later.

Historians have often been intrigued by the sudden and excruciating death of King Herod. Dr. Rendle Short, a medical historian contends that the symptoms here described suggest an infestation of intestinal worms which may have balled together to create an “acute intestinal obstruction”¹ that would have led to a slow and agonizing death. As you can imagine, it was viewed by many at the time as an act of Divine judgment – which is no doubt why Luke felt compelled to share it. He wants us to understand that:

1. God is Sovereign even over kings and those in authority

This is a constant theme in the pages of Holy Scripture. And to be clear – we’re not just talking about Jewish Kings or Christian Kings – we’re talking about ALL KINGS and ALL THOSE who exercise authority. The first time Bible reader is often surprised by how many times the narrative is seemingly interrupted by a prophetic oracle against a foreign power. The book of Jeremiah for example is LITTERED with oracles against kings and governments, nations and powers that are not in covenant relationship with Yahweh. One begins to come to the inevitable conclusion that ALL people and ALL POWERS are subject to the Sovereignty of God – whether they know it or

¹ Dr. Rendle Short in *The Bible And Modern Medicine*

not. He holds his COVENANT PEOPLE to a HIGHER STANDARD – but he holds ALL PEOPLE – and all rulers - to some kind of GENERAL STANDARD.

We see that dynamic played out very clearly in the Book of Amos. God sends the prophet to deliver oracles of judgment against the nations. Amos 1:13 for example says:

¹³ Thus says the LORD: “For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border.
¹⁴ So I will kindle a fire in the wall of Rabbah, and it shall devour her strongholds, with shouting on the day of battle, with a tempest in the day of the whirlwind;
¹⁵ and their king shall go into exile, he and his princes together,” says the LORD.
(Amos 1:13–15 ESV)

So apparently, the Ammonites committed excessive atrocities in the conduct of war – and for that transgression, their king will go into exile and the nation will suffer catastrophic defeat at the hands of her enemies.

God holds the NATIONS – even pagan, unbelieving nations – accountable to some sort of universal code of conduct; some sort of natural law which is revealed in creation and imprinted on the human heart. All human beings have a conscience – and that conscience tells us stuff – it sets limits – it reminds us of our humanity. It whispers into our souls: you are not a god and don’t ever abuse a pregnant woman.

And if you ignore that little voice, according to the Bible, you get a visit from Almighty God.

The LORD holds the nations to some kind of general standard – and he holds his covenant people to a significantly higher standard. Thus just a few verses later in Amos it says:

⁴ Thus says the LORD: “For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have rejected the law of the LORD, and have not kept his statutes, but their lies have led them astray, those after which their fathers walked. ⁵ So I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem.” (Amos 2:4–5 ESV)

And the people of Judah are like, “Hey now! What the heck!! The Ammonites were ripping open pregnant women and all we’ve done over here is break a few of the 10 Commandments. How come we’re getting the same basic treatment as they got?”

And the answer comes in the next chapter:

“You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.” (Amos 3:2 ESV)

Do you see that? The closer you are to God, the more he holds you accountable for your behaviour. So the bar is very high in here – but the point of this story in Acts 12 is to remind us that there is still a BAR for people out there. There is a bar for people, and there is a bar for kings and all those who exercise authority.

God watches. God sees. And God comes – and that’s the second reason I think Luke felt compelled to share this story. He wanted to remind us that:

2. God regularly intervenes in human history

God is not a disinterested clockmaker; he didn’t set the universe in motion and then wander off to play croquet. He is personally and Providentially INVOLVED. This was the point that was being made – so spectacularly – in the Book of Zechariah. Do you remember the 8 Night Visions in the Book of Zechariah? Several of those Night Visions had to do with this particular theme. In the first Night Vision the prophet saw a group of horsemen and he was told:

“These are they whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth.” (Zechariah 1:10 ESV)

So these were ANGELIC SPIES! These were reconnaissance agents! They were collecting information on behalf of Almighty God! It was a colourful and symbol laden way of saying that God knows exactly what is going on down here on planet earth. He is not in the dark. He is fully

informed.

In the second Night Vision the prophet sees FOUR BLACKSMITHS or FOUR CRAFTSMEN and he is told:

“these have come to terrify them, to cast down the horns of the nations who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter it.” (Zechariah 1:21 ESV)

So the CRAFTSMEN represent AGENTS OF PROVIDENCE that God has prepared to terrify and punish those who have opposed his covenant people. God is saying: Listen, I have TOOLS and TECHNICIANS that are perfectly suited to the problem at hand, so don't you worry about that.

And then in the final Night Vision the prophet sees 4 chariots charging out from the very throne room of God! They come out through the gates and then they split off in various directions. Old Testament scholar Anthony Petterson says here:

“Whereas the horses in the first vision were involved in surveillance on behalf of the Lord, these horses and chariots subdue the nations as his heavenly army and are an expression of his sovereignty over all the earth.”

That's the point!! Not only does God see, not only does God care, not only does he have plans – HE ACTS!!! When the time is right, when the fruit is ripe, when the hour has come GOD RELEASES POWERFUL AGENTS OF PROVIDENCE WHO EXECUTE HIS JUDGMENTS ON THE EARTH.

He does not sit passively on his throne. God may be slow – but he is never indifferent. He measures the devil's chain and from time to time, when it is necessary, he makes appropriate adjustments. We see that time and time again in the Old Testament – and Luke wants to make sure that we are seeing it here. John Stott comments helpfully on this story in Acts 12 saying:

“At the beginning of the chapter Herod is on the rampage—arresting and persecuting church leaders; at the end he is himself struck down and dies. The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God triumphing. Such is the power of God to overthrow hostile human plans and to establish his own in their place.”

Praise the Lord!

God is Sovereign over hostile human powers – and he is eternally and faithfully committed to the health, growth and triumph of his people. That’s the third thing Luke is eager for us to see in this story.

3. God is committed to the health, growth and triumph of his people

Look again at the very end of this story. Listen again to the final 3 verses in this narrative. Luke says:

²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. ²⁴ But the word of God increased and multiplied.
²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. (Acts 12:23–25 ESV)

Do you see that?

Luke is not trying to be subtle here – he is putting all the cookies on the bottom shelf. He wants us to understand: it doesn’t matter if the kings of this world are trying to kill us. It doesn’t matter what powers and authorities are arrayed against us. Brothers and sisters:

If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. (Romans 8:31–34 ESV)

That's the point here, isn't it?

If God is for us, then who can be against us? If Christ is interceding for us what plans can succeed against us?

God is for us – just as he was FOR CHRIST in raising him from the dead on the third day. He is not FOR US in the sense that he will not allow us to suffer – again see Christ on the cross – but he is FOR US in the sense that he will never allow us to be destroyed. He will monitor and measure the devil's chain such that we are pressed but not crushed, persecuted, not abandoned, struck down – but not destroyed.

He will DESIGN and CONTROL our environment to stimulate maturity, to eliminate impurity and to maximize our potency in mission.

God knows what he is doing. He has tools at his disposal. And he is maximally committed to the health, growth and triumph of his people.

Herod raged.

Herod died.

But the Word of the Lord increased and multiplied – thanks be to God! That's the point of this story and in the time we have left, I want to draw out a couple of personal and practical applications.

Applications and Implications:

1. This story should temper our reliance upon statecraft

By statecraft I mean the attempt by some to change our situation as Christians by means of the political process. To state the obvious, that isn't what happened in this story. In this story the Christians were being harassed and hunted down. Let me read again the first line in this story:

“About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.” (Acts 12:1 ESV)

So this story begins with an OUTBREAK of state sponsored persecution. But then notice all the things that Luke DOESN'T SAY after that. He doesn't say: “So the church banded together and violently resisted the oppression of this tyrant.”

It doesn't say that.

And it doesn't say: “The church created a super pack to support ambassadors and dignitaries to petition Rome.”

It doesn't say that either.

It doesn't say anything about politics or statecraft; what it says is that:

“earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.” (Acts 12:5 ESV)

Prayer has always been the default response of Christian people to the outbreak of persecution.

Now – is that to say that politics is not a legitimate option for believers?

No! Of course not – it has just never been a PRIORITY OPTION for believers, at least not, in our best days. There have been times when we have looked to statecraft to advance the cause of

Christ instead of turning to prayer. We think of the Crusades for example. Not our finest hour.

And yet – for some reason – this option has returned to prominence among many younger Christians in North America today. The reappearance of theonomy as a force to be reckoned with among evangelical Christians is perhaps the greatest surprise in my ministry lifetime. T. David Gordon remarks upon this phenomenon saying:

“Possibly due to their postmillennialism, possibly due to their (understandable) heartbreak over the decline of the West, and possibly for other reasons, they have simply placed statecraft higher on their agenda than it is on other people’s agenda.”

That’s my fundamental concern with that movement. They are prioritizing approaches that have not typically been prioritized by Christians in the past.

Now, to be clear, I’m not saying that it is bad to vote – by all means vote! I’m not saying that is bad to be involved in the political process – by all means get involved. What I am saying is: do not put your trust in those things. Those things should be your third, fourth, fifth or sixth priority. Your main TRUST should be in DIVINE PROVIDENCE and your DEFAULT RESPONSE to persecution and difficulty of any kind ought to be BELIEVING PRAYER.

Now if you identify as a theonomist today and you are offended by what I just said – understand this: I am only talking to you if your priorities are out of whack. If you are trusting first and foremost in DIVINE PROVIDENCE and you are relying first and foremost on BELIEVING PRAYER and you are only leaning on politics and statecraft to a much lesser degree, then I’m not talking to you. We’re on the same page. I’m saying that this text is saying that it is GOD who ultimately controls the length of the devil’s chain. He is Sovereign over kings and leaders. He is the one who raises up and he is the one who casts down, so when there is a king who opposes us, our FIRST response must be as it is here – in Acts 12. We must put our trust in EARNEST PRAYER made TO GOD by THE CHURCH.

If that is not the FIRST thing you do; if that is not the thing you hope most in – then you have not properly apprehended the message of this passage – and the message of the Bible as a whole. As

King David said, 3000 years ago:

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. (Psalm 20:7 ESV)

If you're not doing that, then your faith is not the faith of the Bible – Old Testament or New.

And then secondly, in terms of implications and applications:

2. This story should prepare us for the experience of limited suffering

Now notice there that I said “limited” not “light”. The suffering in this story in Acts 12 was LIMITED but it was certainly not LIGHT. It was not light for the APOSTLE JAMES was it? James DIES in this story – he had his head cut off, so that's not light, but it was limited, because Herod meant to do the same to Peter but he was thwarted by the intervention of the angel. He meant to do the same to many more Christians but he was thwarted again this time – if Dr. Rendle Short is to be believed – by a giant ball of intestinal worms.

So God LIMITED the duration of the persecution experienced in Jerusalem by the early church. And that is typically the pattern that we observe over the course of history. We talked about this back when we were working our way through 1 Peter. 1 Peter was written to a group of Christians living in Bithynia-Pontus in what is today northern Turkey. Things were getting difficult for them and Peter wrote to encourage them to carry on in the mission. He told them not to exaggerate the difficulties they were facing and not to run into the barn, as it were, at the first sign of rain. It turned out to be very good counsel, because there was no formal, fatal persecution of Christians in that region for a further 50 years. When persecution did break out in AD 112 it was short – it lasted less than one year. And then there was peace again – for more than 200 years. And then in AD 323 it broke out again. And it was bad. Simon Baker tells the story this way, he says:

“Roman governors were free to punish dissident Christians, shut down some churches, demolish others and, in the case of the bishops in the province of Bithynia-Pontus south of the Black Sea, murder key figureheads in the Christian clergy. According to Eusebius, their bodies were chopped up and thrown into the sea as food for fish”.

Thankfully, this intense outbreak of persecution AGAIN lasted less than a calendar year. In AD 324 Licinius lost a civil war with Constantine, who subsequently united the Empire and legalized Christianity throughout the land. So things went from very bad to very good in a little less than 12 months.

That’s what I mean by limited suffering.

God does sometimes lengthen the devil’s chain and with that permission he takes a bite out of the Bride of Christ – but this does not happen outside the control of Providence. That BITE always ends up serving a greater purpose. It sends nominal Christians running out of the church and back into the culture they never really left in the first place and it creates strength, resolve and identity in those who are left behind.

And it is usually followed by a great leap forward – as it was here in Acts 12.

Which leads us to our final reflection on this story:

3. This story should remind us that the progress of the Great Commission is assured

Yes – there may be some ups and downs. Yes – there may be an occasional pruning. Yes – there may be some painful seasons. But the overall trajectory is onward, upward and outward. How do I know this? I know this because Jesus said this on multiple occasions. He said:

“I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”
(Matthew 16:18 ESV)

“The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. ³² It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31–32 ESV)

“This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:14 ESV)

My dear friends, I’ve read the end of the story, I’ve taken a peak at the last chapter – and we win! Jesus will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The kingdom of heaven will emerge in the midst of this dark and fallen world like a mustard plant taking over the garden. It will begin small, but its growth and progress is inevitable. The branches of this kingdom will spread throughout the whole earth, as a testimony to all nations – and then the end will come.

So in the meantime – relax. Fret not yourself because of evil doers. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Refrain from anger. Forsake wrath. Pray, preach and pursue the Great Commission. And lo – HE will be with you always – even to the end of the age.

Thanks be to God, let’s pray together.