

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL BY THE EXERCISE OF HIS SOVEREIGN POWER Acts 12:1-24

INTRODUCTION

What is it that you fear? When you are all alone and your mind is free to wander, what is it that creates terror in you? There is a lot to choose from, is there not? Even here in the United States of America, with our affluence and our insurance and our government programs, there still are things to be feared. We can lose our jobs, our homes, our spouses, our children, our retirement accounts and our health. We do live in a dangerous world. There really are things and people who can do us harm.

Yet, God regularly commands us to not fear, not to worry. Maybe you heard him tell you not to fear in the Isaiah passage we just had read for us: Isaiah 51:12-13, "I, even I, am he who comforts you. Who are you that you fear mortal men, the sons of men, who are but grass, that you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction? For where is the wrath of the oppressor?" Even though God acknowledges that we live in a dangerous world, yet he commands that we not fear the dangers that lurk in this world because of who he is and what he has promised.

In our passage today we are given, through the story of King Herod's persecution of the church in Jerusalem, strong reasons to not fear. Luke, in recording this story for us enables us to see that God rules over the rulers of this earth. When we are the most vulnerable and helpless we have nothing to fear because our Savior and friend and king, the Lord Jesus exercises his sovereign rule over all things. Though we may be hated by the powerful and some of us may be violently killed and others may be subjected to harsh treatment by those in authority, yet we are safe. This passage illustrates that though all men hate us and though we may be betrayed by our closest friends and family and though some of us may die untimely deaths, yet we are safe because our Lord Jesus is ruling over all earthly powers. This world is not out of control. We are not subject to the whims of men or nature or disease. All things that come to us, come to us from the hand of our sovereign king who loves us and therefore we do not need to fear.

MAIN POINT

Jesus exercises his rule over all earthly powers to show his church that...

I. We are safe, even in death (vv. 1-5)

We were told back in Acts 8-11 that following the death by stoning of Stephen that a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem so that many of the Christians in Jerusalem were scattered throughout Judea, Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, even as far as the Roman city of Antioch. However, we were also told that the apostles were not among those forced out of Jerusalem. After the conversion of the persecutor, Saul, the persecution in Jerusalem subsided. We were told as much in Acts 9:31, after the converted Saul is sent off to Tarsus Luke says, "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord." The violent persecution that had erupted at the time of Stephen's confrontation with the Jews in Jerusalem and which was in danger of erupting again when the converted Saul began preaching to the same Greek speaking Jews in Jerusalem, was quelled when Saul was sent away.

But now, due to the cunning political scheming of the cruel tyrant Herod, persecution again breaks out in Jerusalem against the church and this time not even the apostles are immune. Herod, the Roman appointed king of the entire region on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, in order to gain the favor of the Jewish people uses his legal and military power to systematically arrest and then kill the leaders of the Christian church. Herod's motives are not the motives of the Jewish people. He is not motivated out of religious conviction but

out of selfish political ambition. He wants the majority population of the country he rules, the Jews, to like him. So he persecutes the Christians, even arresting and killing one of the miracle working apostles in order to please the Jews. When he sees how much favor and thus power he obtains he decides to pursue the most famous of the apostles, Peter.

Verses 1-5 are a clear declaration of the danger that exists in this world. There are violent, powerful people at loose in this world who are opposed to us. Death can come upon us violently and suddenly. One moment James is a respected and loved apostle of the church: preaching the gospel, healing the sick, leading the church and the next minute he is dragged from his home, put on trial, condemned and executed by the governing authorities. Life can change in the blink of an eye. It appears in these five verses as if God is nowhere to be found, as if men are in control, as if we are subject to the vicious forces at work in this world. But nothing could be further from the truth. How can we know that even when we are suffering at the hands of cruel people or subjected to harm by carelessness or the apparently random forces of nature and disease and genetics that we are still safe? We know this because of what God has told us and promised us.

Consider first of all the apostle James. We heard from the gospel of Mark a conversation that Jesus had with the two brothers mentioned in v. 2 of our text. James and John wanted to be Jesus' two top advisors when he set up his kingdom on this earth, which they were sure was going to happen at any minute. What did Jesus have to say about their impudent request? "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with..." What was Jesus saying to them? You both are going to die, like me, according to the will of God and for the glory of God. We know that it was God's will that Jesus die as he died, even though it was carried out by evil men who are justly punished for the evil they do. The whole Bible confirms that the cup that Jesus drank, the baptism he was baptized with was according to the will of God and for the glory of God. In the same way, it was God's good plan and will that James be killed by Herod in this fashion. In addition, Jesus told these apostles and us that even though we would be hated by all men because of him and even though some of us will be betrayed by our families and arrested and tortured and some of us will even be killed, "not a hair on your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life." That is either the saying of a lunatic or the most amazing promise. According to Jesus, James had his head cut off and not a hair on his head was harmed. He is safe and secure. Yes, he's dead. His friends and family are grieving. The church is mourning the loss of an important member, but he is safe because Jesus is Lord and Savior. He has entered into the joy of his master. Death has lost its sting because of Christ. He is in charge and by his life, death and resurrection he places his people in an unassailable condition. He is our fortress and we can never be shaken. We will never be put to shame, even when the worst thing that can happen to you, happens.

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- *And that...*

II. His plans alone stand firm (vv. 6-19)

When Herod sees how popular his decision to execute James is he sends his soldiers to arrest the chief of the apostles: Peter. Herod knows that arresting Peter and executing him is a risky business. He assigns 16 soldiers to keep watch over Peter, four at a time, in three hour shifts. Two are chained to Peter and two keep watch at the two doors that have to be entered to get into Peter's cell. He assigns these soldiers to guard Peter even though he is locked up in the heart of the Roman fortress in Jerusalem. He takes all these precautions because he knows there are lots of people in Jerusalem who love Peter and are loyal to him. He also does this because he knows the story of how these Christians overcame a Roman guard and stole the body of Jesus from his tomb so they could say the crucified Jesus was raised from the dead. So, like the Roman governor Pilate before him, he takes no chances but sets a guard to make sure Peter is executed after the Passover.

Things do not look good for Peter. Apart from the animosity and hatred of Herod and the Jews he can easily discern the numerous indicators that this is going to be the time of his death. He remembers Jesus' numerous

warnings that he and the other apostles would be hated and some killed just as Jesus himself was hated and killed. He remembers his conversation with Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when Jesus told him, like he did James and John, that he was going to be arrested and killed for following him. He cannot help but notice that the timing of his arrest, the Passover feast, fits exactly with the timing of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. The enthusiasm of the Jewish leaders for his death, being arrested by the Roman king who is the nephew of the Herod who was involved in the death of Jesus, being held by Roman soldiers, just like Jesus, all point to this being the time of his death.

We are told in v. 5 that the church was praying earnestly for him. While I'm sure they were asking the Lord to release Peter, especially during the first days after his arrest, I'm quite sure that by the night before his trial and execution was scheduled there were few, if any, prayers for his release. It is quite clear from their surprise at Peter's showing up at the door of John Mark's house that they were not expecting God to free him. I'm quite sure that most of the praying for Peter that was going on was for the strengthening power of the HS to maintain his faith and enable him to bear witness to Christ when he was put on trial. We can see that Peter himself did not expect to be released from prison. While the angel is releasing him he thinks he is dreaming. It's not until he is out of the prison that he knows what has happened. The fact that Peter sleeps while chained to two Roman guards the night before his execution is a mark of his confidence that he is safe in Christ, not that he expects to be set free. He knows that even though he will die on the next day, yet he has nothing to fear.

The point Luke is making by telling us all the details of Peter's imprisonment, and then all the comical details of the angel's awakening him and leading him out of the prison and then the humorous reception at John Mark's home is meant to emphasize that his release from prison was entirely a work of God and contrary to every human expectation. Herod, the Jews and the Roman soldiers expected to kill him. The church and Peter himself expected he would be executed. However, God had other plans. He was not responding to the faith-filled prayers of the church, he was acting according to the pleasure of his own will. I made a list of over 20 details in this story that are parallel to the details of Jesus' arrest, death and resurrection. To mention a few: both take place at the time of the Passover feast in Jerusalem, Jesus and Peter are both freed early on the Sunday morning following the Passover Sabbath day, in both the tomb and the cell an angel appears and makes the place bright, Roman soldiers sleep while release is gained, doors are opened by supernatural power, the first one to know freedom has been granted is a woman, the woman upon reporting the release from death to the other disciples is not believed, Peter and Jesus appear to a group of disciples gathered behind locked doors and the list goes on. God organized all these details and Luke records them for us to show us that just as the Romans and Jews knew that Jesus was dead and gone and just as no one expected Jesus to rise from the dead, not even the disciples, so also there was no human expectation that Peter would be freed, all expected him to die. Yet, God raised Jesus from the dead and God released Peter from prison.

It is God's purposes that stand, not mans. He says to Israel in Isaiah 43:13, "No one can deliver from my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?" Psalm 33:10-11 says, "The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations." And the apostle Paul says that God is working out all things in conformity to the purpose of his will. Kings and faithless Christians cannot stop God from accomplishing his perfect and good will. That fact does not mean that we do not pray. It is because God is able to do whatever God is pleased to do that we pray. When trouble comes upon a member of the church the rest of the church gathers together in prayer for that member. While there was nothing they could do to help Peter physically, there was one thing they could do, they could ask God to give to Peter, what he has promised to give to his people. They asked God to cause his name to be treated as great and glorious by Peter and others whether he lived or died. They prayed that God would cause his kingdom to come to this world, that he would rule over all things for his glory. They prayed God cause his will to be done on this earth just as it is done in heaven by Peter, his family and the church. They prayed God would give Peter the physical necessities he needed to do his will while he lived. They asked God to forgive Peter's sins for the sake of Christ. Mostly they asked God to keep Peter from temptation and from falling into the traps and snares of the devil. Peter's sleeping quietly through the night before his trial and execution is a miracle of God's grace as much as his release and this was the result of the prayers of God's

people for him. People holding fast to Jesus in the face of great loss and suffering is a great miracle of God and this only happens as we help one another by our prayers.

We cannot pass the story of Peter's release by without recognizing that God did not release James, the brother of John. Why did James die but Peter was miraculously delivered? It would be perverse for anyone to suggest that the church did not earnestly pray for James like they did for Peter so that James died because no one prayed but Peter lives because the church prayed. It would be perverse to suggest that James was killed because he didn't have enough faith while Peter had faith. Peter's release shows that if God had wanted to preserve James' alive he could have done so. The only answer to why James died and Peter was rescued is because the good and gracious and powerful God, according to the wisdom of his eternal purpose determined that now was the time for James to die and for Peter to live. If this story communicates one thing, it is this: God is in charge here, not men. Jesus rules over the rulers and he can do whatever he is pleased to do. We do not live in a random universe or in a universe where God wishes he could stop bad things from happening but he cannot interfere with human free will. God does whatever he pleases and no one and nothing can prevent him from doing what he wants. Whether we live or die we can always know that our God is in control and therefore we are safe. *Jesus exercises his rule over all earthly powers to show his church that...*

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III. His justice will be executed on his timetable (vv. 20-23)

King Herod is a very evil man. He is not a man who acts according to religious conviction or devotion to Roman law. Rather he is a man who acts only according to his own self interest. If an action will increase his power and/or destroy the power of competitors then he will do it. He kills James and arrests Peter in order to ingratiate himself to the Jews, even though they are innocent of breaking any Roman law. After Peter is found missing and though he conducts an investigation which does not prove the guilt of anyone, yet he kills the dutiful soldiers who were guarding Peter. When the citizens of Tyre and Sidon do something that makes him mad, he stops all shipments of food into these two port cities and starves them into submission. When the citizens of Tyre and Sidon flatter him in order to get into his good graces by declaring that he is a god and not a man, he does not repudiate and deny the claim but accepts it as honor due to him. Clearly Herod is among that list of evil, brutal, arrogant tyrants who have plagued human societies throughout the ages. Everyone who reads this story, except perhaps other evil tyrants, recognizes that this man deserves to die. It is wrong that he is able to use his power to unjustly deprive his subjects of their rights. So when Herod is killed in this gruesome fashion by the angel of the Lord we are happy. If this were a movie the whole audience would clap and shout their approval that such a vicious man has met such a just end.

There are three things I want you to pay attention to in this story of Herod's execution by God. First, the reason God executes Herod is because he "did not give the glory to God." Obviously this ultimately refers to the fact that he permitted people to worship him as if he were a god. But, it should not escape your notice that this is the same thing that Paul says about all human beings in Romans 1:21, "although they (all human beings) knew God they ...did not glorify him as God..." Like Herod we are all far more impressed with ourselves and with the pleasures of creation than we are with God himself. There is no human who gives the glory to God as he is due. Thus, when you and I cheer that Herod got what was coming to him we should recognize that we are also agreeing that it would be right for God to do the same thing to us. We are no different than Herod and we deserve the same death. So the death of the tyrant Herod should cause each of us to ask how we will escape the same fate.

Second, Luke definitely intends for us to look beyond the death of Herod to the final judgment that is coming upon the world by calling attention to the fact that he was "eaten by worms." In Isaiah 51 God describes that day when his arm will bring justice to the nations. Listen again to what he says in vv. 7-8, "Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts: Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified

by their insults. For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool. But my righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations." The just execution of Herod reminds us that nobody is getting away with anything. Evil men and women will flourish for a time but in the end they will be eaten by worms. We do not need to fear people and what they may do to us. We do not need to take revenge on those who threaten and harm us. It is a remarkable thing in this story that the church, which numbers in the thousands does not do anything but pray. The prayers of the church show that we are looking to God to execute justice. We refuse to make people pay for what they do to us. We know that one day, according to God's sure word, our enemies will be eaten by worms while we experience God's salvation forever.

The third thing to notice here is that while Herod is executed, the citizens who also did not give glory to God but to Herod, did not perish. There is more than one guilty person here. Why are they not all killed in this fashion? Not every tyrant or child molester or terrorist or gossip meets such a terrible end in this life. Sometimes evil tyrants get what they deserve, like Herod, like Sadam Hussein but sometimes they live out their lives and die a "natural" death, like the butcher, Joseph Stalin did. God is not only in charge of which Christians escape the sword but of which evil people escape the sword in this life. We do not look for perfect justice here but at the end. We leave it in God's hands as to who suffers his just wrath now and who suffers it later. We are not in charge of these things, God alone is.

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IV. His purpose to save his people by his word cannot be thwarted (v. 24)

In many ways, v. 24 is the high point, the climax of this story for Luke. Kings and soldiers and the adherents of other religions may oppose the gospel of Jesus Christ, but nothing and no one can halt its advance. The two verbs, "increase and spread" are the two verbs used in Genesis 1 where God blesses the human race and says: "Be fruitful and multiply". These two verbs are used to describe what happened to Israel while living in Egypt under the oppression of the wicked Pharaoh, they were fruitful and multiplied. In Acts 6:1 we were told that the number of disciples was being multiplied. In other words, when it says that the word of God was being fruitful and multiplying, it means that the number of people who were being added to the people of God was increasing by means of the word of God. God's purpose from the beginning of creation was to fill his perfect world with perfect, worshipping people. The way in which God is going to fill his world with his people is through the proclamation of the gospel by the church. When God remakes this world, creating the new heavens and the new earth it will be fully populated, it will be filled, because God, through his church by means of his word and his Spirit will have caused the church to be fruitful and to multiply in order that the world is filled with his holy people. This is going to happen with certainty, in spite of all the evil people and demons who oppose it because he is the ruler over all rulers.

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