

Acts 12:1-24

Introduction

The passage we're looking at this morning brings this section of the book of Acts to a close. It started in chapter 9, and it's described how the message about Jesus spread from Jerusalem to the Gentile, or non-Jewish, world. It has brought us here, to chapter 12, which was just read for us. The chapter begins and ends with King Herod. Sandwiched between the references to *him*, we are told about the apostle Peter and his miraculous escape from prison. The stories are extraordinary. They're a million miles away from our own experience. And the challenge for us is to understand what God's teaching us today, as we read about these two men and what happened to them roughly 2000 years ago.

It will help us to be reminded of the background. Persecution had broken out in Jerusalem by the religious leadership. They hunted down, arrested and put to death the growing number of Jews who were putting their faith in Jesus. That had caused these Jewish Christians to flee from Jerusalem to the Gentile, or non-Jewish, world, taking the good news of Jesus with them. Wherever they went, they were telling people about Jesus and new churches were being born, not only of Jews but of Gentiles too. Because of this persecution, the message about Jesus was being proclaimed to all kinds of people, and was spreading further and further away from Jerusalem, just as Jesus had foretold. And in chapter 11, we read about one such church,

These verses take us back to Jerusalem, where the apostles who led the church, had remained. And they begin by telling us about a new wave of persecution that breaks out against them. As the gospel advances around the world, God is preparing us, the readers, for the persecution it will inevitably attract. We'll read the story and then reflect on what it teaches us. So, firstly then, in Jerusalem, there is a fresh persecution; our first heading.

Fresh persecution

Please look down at verses 1 to 5. **It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. 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.**

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

The King Herod who's mentioned here is Herod Agrippa the First, who reigned between 41 and 44 AD. Here he is, on a coin from that period. Herod Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great, and through some clever political manoeuvring he ruled over a huge territory that was as vast as that of his grandfather and included Judea.

Herod was a Roman citizen with a Jewish heritage. He's well known to us from archaeological records, like this coin, and from the writings of Josephus, the Jewish historian, and Philo of Alexandria, who was a Jewish philosopher. He was known to be anxious to maintain the Roman peace in his territory. And that may explain why his attention had turned to the growing church in Jerusalem. It's very likely that he saw the growing Christian movement as a threat to his regime and that would explain why he sought to destroy it.

His first move was to put one of the leaders of this movement to the sword. It was James the brother of John, the sons of Zebedee. Jesus had warned James and John that they would drink his cup and share his baptism, meaning that they would share his suffering. And that's what happened. James was executed. John would later be sent into exile. And when Herod sees that the execution of James pleased his Jewish subjects, he seizes Peter as well. But it was the time of the Jewish Passover, which meant that the trial would have to wait. So, he puts Peter in prison. It's not the first time Peter has been put in prison. And he'd already escaped on one occasion, back in Acts chapter 5. So, Herod takes no chances with this jailbreaker. Four squads of four soldiers are assigned to guard him, presumably taking it in turns during the various watches of the day and night. And Herod's intention is clear. Seeing that the execution of James had met with widespread approval among the Jews, he intends to bring Peter up for public trial and execution at the first possible opportunity.

Humanly speaking, Peter's predicament looks hopeless. But then we're told that **the church was earnestly praying to God for him**. And in response to their prayer, what follows is a divine deliverance; our next heading.

Divine deliverance

Please look down at verse 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.**

The details underline the hopelessness of Peter's situation. It was normally considered enough for a prisoner to be chained to one soldier, but Peter is chained to one either side of him, with two more looking on. The situation couldn't be more desperate. Not that Peter's too concerned. Somehow, he's fast asleep!

And then we get to verse 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.** The angel tells Peter to wrap his cloak around him, then leads him out of the prison. Amazingly, he walks straight past the guards, who do nothing. And when he gets to the heavy prison gate, it opens by itself; the first automatic door! Just as the details of Peter's arrest and imprisonment made clear the hopelessness of his situation, these details make it abundantly clear that this escape is all God's doing. Peter contributes nothing. He doesn't even realise what's going on until he finds himself outside. But then on the street, a safe distance from the prison, he finally realises that this is all God's work.

Look at verse 11. **Then Peter came to himself and said, 'Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.'**

Then he heads off to the church prayer meeting. It's being held at the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, who's traditionally believed to be the author of Mark's Gospel.

When a servant named Rhoda hears Peter knocking at the door and calling out to those inside, she recognises his voice. And in her excitement, what does she do? She rushes off and leaves him standing there! He's just escaped from prison, probably desperate to get out of sight, somewhere safe. But he's left standing in the street, while Rhoda goes and tells everyone inside that he's at the door. It's got to be one of the most comical moments in the Bible. And it gets even more farcical. The people inside have been praying for Peter for days. They may even have been praying through the night for him. But when Rhoda tells them the good news that he's standing outside, they tell her that she must be out of her mind. God's answer to their prayers had taken *them* by surprise just as much as it had taken Peter by surprise. Isn't that sometimes like our own prayers! We plead with God to do something. And then we're surprised when he does.

There's some excitement over Peter's arrival at the house, and he needs to quieten everyone down to speak to them. But when he recounts what had happened, they finally grasp that God had answered their prayers in a truly remarkable way. And before leaving, Peter tells them to go and tell the story to James, the brother of Jesus. To begin with he had been sceptical about his brother's claims to be the Son of God, as you would be. But having met the risen Jesus after his resurrection, he had now become a leader of the church. And Peter wants him, and the whole church, to know what God had done.

Finally, attention switches back to the prison, where there's a great commotion. No one understands what could have happened. They look everywhere but Peter can't be found. In the Roman Empire, it was normal for soldiers to be put to death if they allowed a prisoner to escape. And that's what happens. Herod orders that the soldiers be executed.

But that's not the end of the story, and the passage ends with Herod coming under divine judgement. That's our final heading.

Divine judgement

In verses 20 and 21, we're told that **Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.** We're told that he had been quarrelling with his neighbours in Tyre and Sidon, and they sought an audience with him to ask for peace. The Jewish historian Josephus, who wasn't a Christian, records details of this visit to Caesarea in his own writings. He doesn't mention the meeting with the people from Tyre and Sidon. But he tells us that Herod visited Caesarea for a festival in honour of Caesar. And he recounts the circumstances surrounding Herod's death, which we also read about here. The two accounts differ in some of the details, which demonstrates that they are independent accounts. But the general thrust of them is the same.

In his book *Antiquities of the Jews*, which you can still buy today, Josephus writes that on the second day of the festival, Agrippa entered the theatre at daybreak, 'clad in a robe made altogether of silver, of quite wonderful weaving.' He describes how astonished the people were at the radiance of his silver robe when it was touched by the first rays of the rising sun. It must have been dazzling. And he says that they shouted out, 'Be gracious to us! Until now we have revered you as a human being, but from now on we confess you to be of more than mortal nature.' It's very similar to what it says in verse 22. **They shouted, 'This is the voice of a god, not of a man.'** Of course, no faithful Jew could accept the honour due only to God. Yet Josephus records that 'the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery.' And we read in verse 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.** Likewise, Josephus says that the king was seized with violent pains in his belly and was carried into his palace where, five days later, he died. A professor of surgery at Bristol University has suggested that it could be a case of intestinal worms, which was apparently not uncommon in Asia at that time. Whether that's the case or not, the passage makes clear that the primary cause of the affliction was divine. Because he had failed to give praise to God, Herod was struck down by an angel of the Lord. And then, the passage ends with the words in verse 24: **But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.** And that little note helps us to understand what this passage is teaching us.

Conclusion

I said at the beginning that the challenge of these verses is to understand what God's teaching us today through these extraordinary events. And the key to doing so is to see the great reversal that happens in these verses. The passage begins with Herod attempting to halt the progress of the gospel in verse 1 by persecuting the church. It ends with the statement that the gospel continued to spread and flourish in verse 24. Despite the fresh persecution that broke out in Jerusalem, the word was spreading, people were coming to faith and the church was growing. John Stott helpfully wrote this:

At the beginning of the chapter Herod is on the rampage – arresting and persecuting church leaders; at the end he is struck down himself. 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.

It's this great reversal that should instruct and encourage us today. Jesus taught that persecution is inevitable for those who follow him. But these verses are teaching us that although tyrants may be permitted to oppress the church for a time, they will not last. Persecution can neither hinder nor derail God's purpose. Jesus had spelt out that purpose in chapter 1, verse 8: **'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'**

Over the last few weeks, we've been following the story of one moment in the spread of the gospel around the world as it first travelled out from Jerusalem to the Gentile nations. But that work continues today as believers share the good news of Jesus all over the globe, even

here in Hastings. And these verses are telling us that nothing can derail that project. That's the confidence that you and I need to have. There may be times when the Christian faith is under attack and appears to be on the ropes. That may be what we're seeing in this country at the moment, particularly in some schools and universities, and in some of the laws that are being passed. And that can be really discouraging, particularly if we're at the sharp end of it. You might be experiencing it in some of the policies that are being introduced at work, restricting your freedom to express your faith. You might be picking it up in people's general attitudes towards the Christian faith. But God's purpose of taking the gospel to the nations and gathering believers to his Son will prevail. And that should encourage us all to stand firm.

There's no promise here that every believer will be rescued from persecution or attack. We should note that while God miraculously delivered Peter from certain execution, he didn't rescue James the brother of John from the sword. We can only leave the different fates of these two disciples to God's sovereign will. God deals with each of us according to his will. There's no promise that he will rescue us from the individual trials we go through. But there is the promise here that God's people will ultimately be vindicated. I think that's why Peter wanted the whole church to know what had happened, and why it's been recorded for us here. No matter what those who oppose the gospel might throw at us, God's purpose will prevail. He will build his church and vindicate his faithful people. So, stand firm! One day, we will live with him forever in the glory of a new heaven and a new earth. And one day, all who oppose the gospel, like Herod, will be defeated and destroyed.

So, these verses also serve as a warning to any who are putting themselves in opposition to Christ and his gospel today. If that's you, you might not have authority to put Christians to the sword. Nonetheless, you might mock and disparage and insult their faith. But a day of judgement is coming. The Bible sounds that warning not to gloat over you but to appeal to you to change sides while you can. The good news of the gospel is that Christ died on the cross to win forgiveness and life for all who come to him in faith. He died so that enemies of God can be welcomed by God as friends. As more than friends. As sons and daughters. And the invitation to come to God through Christ is extended to everyone today, even to those who are currently most vehemently opposed to him. If that's you, please don't leave here today without finding out how you can learn more about Jesus and the invitation of life that he holds out to you. He will turn no one away. All are welcome.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, though we may be living at a time when it can feel as though the Christian faith is under attack in this country, we thank and praise you that your purpose will prevail and your enemies will not triumph. Please help us to stand firm in our faith whenever we face opposition, confident in the victory of Christ. And please help us to keep extending the invitation to come to you through him to those who are around us, that they too might know your love and receive your mercy. We ask it in Jesus' name and for his glory. Amen.