

29—Acts 12.1-25—The Spread of the Gospel in a Chaotic World

- I. Introduction
 - a. How many of you were Beatles fans? I wonder if you recall in 1966 what John Lennon said about Jesus.
 - i. Here's what he said: "Christianity will go," he had said. "It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I know I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now. I don't know which will go first—rock & roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right, but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It's them twisting it that ruins it for me." (Rolling Stone Magazine)
 - ii. I'd be curious to hear what you thought about that then and what you think about that statement now after the service.
 - b. In our text today, Herod tries to stamp out Christianity and gain his own popularity and power.
 - c. The grass withers and flowers fade but the word of the Lord will endure forever.
- II. Main Point
 - a. I think the main point is the word of the Lord continues to spread in a chaotic world in which persecution and death comes to his people, along with deliverance of his people, and judgment to those who deny him his glory.
- III. Outline
 - a. The Martyrdom of the Apostle James
 - b. The Deliverance of the Apostle Peter
 - c. The Death of King Herod
- IV. Exposition
 - a. Not every section of scripture is as action packed as this one. Last week's—share the gospel, make disciples and have fruit-bearing faith—may appear quite dull compared to this story. It is that old narrative of good vs. evil. There's some incredibly difficult parts and some very humorous parts. It is the kind of story many people love to read. There are twists and turns that you could not have anticipated. And the villain gets his due reward in the end. But before we get to the end, we have a tragic scene to begin the story: the martyrdom of James.
 - i. Luke seems to tie previous scene together with the words "About that time."
 - ii. We left off with this last week: (Acts 11:29-30) ²⁹ So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.
 1. This story ends with: (Acts 12:25) ²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service.
 2. Luke describes to us what happened between the time Barnabus and Saul left Antioch and returned from Jerusalem.
 - iii. One of the main characters of this story is King Herod. This would be Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great who was the King that called for the slaughter of all the babies under 2 years old when Jesus was born. So, he was taught well how to wield the sword.
 1. It was a not unusual as a Roman territorial king to do such things as he does here.
 - a. It says in v. 1 that Herod the King laid hands on some who belonged to the church to do evil.
 - i. Yes, his purpose for arresting Christians was to do violence! Can you imagine a world where, like a state governor, could have disciples of Jesus killed just because he wanted to do evil?
 - ii. This evil intention wasn't to vex or mistreat but to murder.
 - iv. The victim was the Apostle James, John's brother—the sons of Zebedee. You know they were fishermen. Regular people serving the Lord.
 1. This is the second martyrdom but the first apostle to be murdered.

2. As you might recall, the apostles stayed in Jerusalem when many disciples fled after the death of Stephen.
3. For some time, they avoided the persecution in Jerusalem.
4. But let's pause for a moment and ask, why?
 - a. First, we live in a broken, sin-cursed world. Because of the fall, all are sinners by nature.
 - b. Add to that an evil man with authority from the kingdom he rules in to do such violence to those people who were not citizens of Rome. So, you see an example of the abuse of authority.
 - c. Also, Jesus promised this would happen. In John alone, here's what Jesus said.
 - i. (Jn. 15:20) 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.
 - ii. (Jn. 16:2) Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.
 - iii. Specifically, Jesus seems to foretell the death of James in Mark 10:39.
 - d. Additionally, James was obviously numbered among those to be martyred. Yes, there are a specific number who will die a martyr's death according to Rev. 6.
 - i. (Rev. 6:9-11) ...I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" ¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.
 - ii. When the text says he was killed by the sword more than likely that meant he was beheaded.
 1. Be sure of this, (Lk. 21:18) ...not a hair of your head will perish.
5. You might be thinking, "So what does this have to do with me?" I do not foresee myself getting arrested for being a Christian.
 - a. You're right. That's very unlikely. But Christians have lived and died under such conditions for most of church history.
 - i. There are other dangers here. Pleasure can be far more dangerous than pain. Pleasure often goes unchecked. Faith that has not been tested, is it true faith?
 - ii. What would you do if all your pleasures were taken away? Would Jesus be enough?
 - iii. There's no way for us to test this. Only God can do that. I do not desire that anyone not pass the test but I do desire that if you are deceived that it would be exposed and turn to Jesus.
 - iv. It's not delusional to think that persecution of Christians might return to America someday.
 - v. Does the death of James give you pause? Does it encourage your faith or cause you to think: "If this is what happens to those who follow Jesus then I want no part of it"?
 1. I have thought long and hard about suffering over the years and it has not pushed me away but rather confirmed my belief in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.
 2. These apostles who saw Jesus' death on the cross and then go on serving him to the point they are murdered were not following a dead Jesus.

3. And if the resurrection of Jesus is true—and it is—then no matter what happens to those who follow Christ, everything will be gain not loss!
 4. And as I've said before, the suffering of Jesus' disciples reveal Jesus' sufferings through them. Our sufferings are not meaningless!
- b. Now, let's consider the second point: the Deliverance of Peter.
- i. But before we see his deliverance, let's take a look at Herod to see deeper into his heart and into the hearts of those watching.
 1. After the death of James, he saw that his senseless murder pleased the Jews.
 - a. Ironically, the same word for "pleased" was used in Gen. 3:6 when Eve looked at the fruit and it was a delight to her eye.
 2. You must know a little something about people like Herod.
 - a. He's not the emperor of Rome. He's a king within this vast super power. These kings were not always in good graces with the emperor. Herod had the privilege of friends in high places but his friends were not always in good graces either. But he could keep a very good gig for himself if he took care of the people he ruled. Gifts. Roads. Beautiful buildings. And the annulation of unwanted, useless people within his reign.
 - b. Herod values his own power and glory more than these disciples of Jesus.
 - ii. The setting of Peter's arrest was strangely familiar. It was during the Days of Unleavened Bread.
 1. Jesus was arrested during the same festival.
 2. It will prove to be a providential timing because Herod knows he should not carry out any violence during the feast. Therefore, Herod intends to bring the same judgment against Peter after the Passover.
 - iii. So, Herod had Peter put in prison.
 1. The details of how Peter is guarded seem to imply that he is a dangerous criminal but he's not.
 - a. Four squads of soldiers were to guard him. This is four groups of four. The group of four would have rotated every three hours to makes sure they were alert and not asleep.
 2. Yet, as Rome flexes its muscles with iron bars, iron chains, and many soldiers with iron swords, the church prays.
 - a. This scene appears to be an impossible situation. How should the church respond in such situations?
 - b. I mean, the church can't protest. They can't appeal to any law to stop this. They do not take up the sword. They don't hire another nation outside of the Roman Empire to come to their aid.
 - c. They pray earnestly for Peter to God.
 - i. Why? Because they are powerless but God is all powerful. Because this is exactly how life is meant to be lived by faith. It's how Israel, on their best days, used to live when their enemies outnumbered them.
 - iv. This is how we ought to live as a church.
 1. Our enemies outnumber us. They are more powerful than we are. We really don't have anything else more important or more hopeful than to trust and obey God.
 2. To live by faith is to pray. In particular, the church prayed together. This is very important!
 - v. Well, let's now look at the impossible situation.
 1. While Herod has plans to bring Peter out the next day, something happens the night before!

- a. Peter is asleep between two soldiers, bound by two chains with two guards outside the prison door.
 - i. He may have been doing this for almost a week. Yet, Peter seems to be sleeping or shall we say resting in the sovereign hands of Jesus.
2. God has different plans than Herod.
 - a. He sends an angel.
 - i. We are told it's night time—"that very night" v. 6.
 - ii. And if I were going to help someone escape, I probably would try not to use any light but the angel of Lord lights up the prison cell.
 - iii. He struck Peter hard to wake him up.
 - iv. He commands every move Peter needs to make.
 1. Again, I would hope this was self-evident or at least I would be whispering.
 - v. The chains fall off—surely that made a lot of noise.
 1. But they just fell off. No key needed.
 - vi. Peter obeyed every command. Why wouldn't he?
 - vii. Luke adds this statement about how Peter was processing this.
 1. Kind of like when I was in growing up, my mom would come wake me up for school. I would often fall back asleep and dream that I had gotten up and was ready to go only to find out that wasn't real when my mom alarmed me with another call to get up.
 2. Peter doesn't know if this is real or he's seeing a vision.
 3. It adds to the fact that God is doing this while Peter is merely a recipient of what's going on.
 - viii. They pass by guards who were probably awake.
 - ix. They come to an iron gate that just opens like the doors at Walmart.
 - x. He's led down the street and then the angel leaves him.
 - b. Peter's conclusion?
 - i. (Acts 12:11) ¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."
- vi. After realizing this, Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark.
 1. The church is gathered there and were praying. What time of the night is uncertain.
 - a. There's something normal and right about the church gathered to pray together to the Lord.
 - b. They do not summon a prophet as Israel normally did. They were praying together with Jesus as their Great High Priest who intercedes for his church.
 2. Peter knocks on the gate.
 - a. You need to imagine this gate and wall around Mary's house as tall and sealed up where the person on the outside cannot be seen.
 - b. The servant girl, Rhoda, goes to see who it is.
 - i. It could be that Herod has his soldiers looking for more apostles. This had to be a tense moment.
 - c. Though she cannot see him, she recognizes his voice and, in her joy, ran back to report that Peter was at the gate even though she failed to let him in.
 - d. Listen to the response:
 - i. The feeble, weak church says to Rhoda, "You are out of your mind!"

