

Sermon Given by

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### Acts 12:1-24 - "Prison Break"

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There's a scene change at the start of chapter 12, because the action moves back from Antioch to Jerusalem. We've seen the spread of the gospel in recent chapters with Cornelius a Roman – gentile – soldier converted in Caesarea and then a Jew/Gentile church in Antioch. But now we are back in Jerusalem – and still the advance of God's message continues – that final sentence of our reading in verse 24 is one of Luke's summary sentences, to end a section of his story: ***<sup>24</sup>But the word of God continued to increase and spread.***

So the scene may be different, but the theme is much the same: the continued advance of the good news of Jesus Christ. Indeed the ongoing reign of Jesus Christ. Never mind the fact that he has been rejected and crucified; never mind the fact that his church has been consistently opposed since the day of Pentecost. He is on the throne.

So the chapter starts with one apostle, dead, another in Prison and Herod triumphant; it ends with Herod dead, Peter out of jail and the Word triumphant. We often say that God is the hero of Bible stories and this is indeed a chapter all about God's sovereign control. He is on the throne. And each of the human characters demonstrate that in their own way.

Let's look at the start of the chapter and the lesson about God's power in James' death.

#### **A) God's power is not threatened by hostility and persecution.**

I'll read verses 1-2<sup>1</sup>***It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. <sup>2</sup>He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.***

The Herod mentioned there is the grandson of Herod the Great (who killed the entire male infant population of Bethlehem when Jesus was born); he was also the nephew of Herod Antipas, who had killed John the Baptist and presented his head on a platter to the dancing girl Salome. So the family genes are definitely being passed on to this Herod. In the current vogue for calling babies Biblical names, I don't think I've come across any Herods yet – surprise, surprise...

Herod selects a number of victims here, but one of some notoriety: James, the brother of John – one of the top three disciples.

Remember, he'd been on the mountain of Transfiguration with Jesus: just James and John and Peter were there for that moment; he'd also been taken aside with those three for when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He really was in the inner circle. And the death of one of the chief apostles is dealt with very matter-of-factly in a sentence: ***<sup>2</sup>He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.***

We might be tempted to ask why Peter was released and James wasn't: was there something wrong with James' obedience perhaps? Or was the church not praying when James was arrested? Or more sinister: had God somehow dropped his guard?

Well, the Bible doesn't answer that question as to why Peter would be released and James wasn't. But just because Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords doesn't mean that he withdraws all power from an earthly king so that he cannot harm God's people. He's in control, but he doesn't always anaesthetise his servants from all harm.

God's power doesn't eliminate persecution; he isn't threatened by it – he works through it, even if it isn't always clear to us how.

It certainly doesn't mean that just because a Christian suffers, that proves that God's will has somehow been frustrated. In fact we know that this is all part of God's sovereign plan, because James' death had been predicted. James would never have thought that Christ had lost control, because Jesus had predicted to him: **'You will drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the cup I am baptised with'**, in Mark 10.

Perhaps he also remembered Jesus reassuring words that his followers were more valuable than sparrows and that even a sparrow couldn't fall out of the sky unless God sovereignly purposed for it to happen.

So James' death wasn't a disaster. As one of the Psalms puts it: precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his saints. Herod might cut James head off, but he could not cut his soul off from the love and power of Christ.

If you think about it, both apostles in Chapter 12 were delivered from the clutches of Herod, but James was delivered much more safely and more permanently than Peter was - Peter was delivered **from** death, James was delivered **by** death. God was absolutely sovereign over it.

That doesn't for a second excuse Herod and the Jews from their wrong deeds. They were wicked in opposing God's people, and would be held responsible at God's bar. But even at that moment, God's power was unthreatened and he was working his purposes out...

The classic example of that is the death of Jesus, in whose steps, of course, James was following. That was the time when the enemies of God were doing their worst, rebelling against God in cold-blooded hostility. And it was also precisely the time when they actually fulfilled God's great plan to save rebel sinners, by Jesus bearing the penalty for their sins.

So that's the lesson that James gives us about God's power. God's power is not threatened by hostility and persecution; he doesn't guarantee us protection against it, but he is on the throne. To be Christian may not always mean an easy life.

But what a lifeline these verses are for persecuted or suffering Christians – or indeed for us... We may not be imprisoned literally, but maybe our life circumstances trap us. And this reminds us that just because the prison walls are not falling down doesn't mean that God's eye has been taken off us.

He is watching over us and he is working his purpose out. God's power is not threatened by hostility or persecution.

Let's move on however and look at a second point about God's power as we think about Peter and the whole episode of his release from prison...

**B) God's power works in response to our prayers.**

Let me read verses 3-5 to begin with. <sup>3</sup>*When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.* <sup>4</sup>*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.*

<sup>5</sup>*So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*

There is a sense in which God's power is limited, because God has chosen to work in answer to our prayers. As someone has put it: prayer moves the hand that moves the world.

So in verse 5 Luke is commending them: notice they prayed **to God** – they didn't have recourse to human authorities, by organising a human rights petition. They prayed **together** – as a church, supporting each other by meeting together. They prayed **to get an answer**. Verse 5 says 'earnestly', which happens to be the same word Luke uses of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he died. I find it encouraging that prayer was hard work like that for them and for Jesus – it is physically draining. But they did it...

So when God acted, it was in answer to their prayers. There is a sense in which God limits his power by working in response to prayer. But if it doesn't sound too contradictory, God's power was not limited by their prayers. Because his answer exceeds all that they could have asked or imagined.

It was more than Peter seems to have anticipated to start with, if I read verses 6-11

<sup>6</sup>*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.* <sup>7</sup>*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.*

<sup>8</sup>*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.* <sup>9</sup>*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.* <sup>10</sup>*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.*

<sup>11</sup>*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."*

Luke piles on all the details to highlight how miraculous the escape was: the fact that Herod had killed James surely makes Peter's release even more unlikely. Apart from the two soldiers he's physically chained to, there are numerous sentries and guards to get passed and gates to be opened.

It's very telling how Peter seems dazed and confused by what happens – he's strangely passive while the angel walks him out of jail. I'm sure he had prayed about it, but he was surprised and he almost has to pinch himself when he finds himself out in the street. 'I'm not dreaming'.

And the church were surprised as well. Let me pick up the account in verses 12-16

***<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. <sup>14</sup>When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"***

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

***<sup>16</sup>But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.***

That is very true to life, isn't it? When the answer comes it exceeds all the prayers...

God's power works in answer to our prayers and he even goes beyond our prayer. His control is such that he is able to do more than all we can ask or imagine...

If we forget that we won't pray – or we'll end up praying unambitious or trivial prayers. What a tragedy it is that up and down the land it is the church prayer meeting which is dying. Not only is it the most important meeting it is the most exciting one. God's challenge to us tonight is to join together in prayer regularly – because his power works in response to the church's prayer and then far exceeds those prayers.

Let's finally think about Herod again and the light that this strange incident in verse 19-24 sheds on the theme of God's sovereignty.

### **C) God's power brings human pride to judgment...**

Let me read those verses again...

***Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. <sup>20</sup>He had been quarreling 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.***

***<sup>21</sup>On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. <sup>22</sup>They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." <sup>23</sup>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.***

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

The lesson of this strange episode is that God topples his enemies like dominoes... There is a pact being formed between the sacred and secular authorities here. At the start of the chapter, Herod loves the approval of the Jewish leaders that he gets when he has James killed. Later it is something of an unholy alliance again. A different region – Tyre and Sidon – desperate for food, curry favour with the king who controls their food supply. He makes a speech and they know which side their bread is buttered on so they praise him: ‘this is the voice of a God’!

And Herod loves it. He loves the approval of men and doesn’t give God the glory. Which is blasphemy. And God immediately topples his enemy.

Quiet possibly we feel a little uneasy about this sort of story. Maybe we even feel that we are in the domain of fairy tales here. Isn’t this a little like Aesop’s fables – a slightly incredible tale, with a moral - like the one about the frog who inflated himself and then exploded. Certainly many people have discredited it as unbelievable – a tale just created to make a point.

However interestingly this incident is corroborated by non-Christian history – it is reported by the Jewish writer Josephus. Peter and Rhoda don’t get any mentions outside Christian writers, but Herod was a big fish and he does get independent corroboration...

Medical science also lends its witness to this actually happening. A former British medical professor confirmed that many people in the Ancient Near East harboured intestinal worms, which can form a tight ball and therefore an acute intestinal obstruction – and that may be what Luke is describing here.

But the thing to notice is the final verse of the section, which we began with tonight, verse 24: But the word of God continued to increase and spread...

Verse 23: Herod died; verse 24 – God’s word spread. In the language of Psalm 2, If the Kings of the earth take their stand against the Lord and against his Anointed One, saying let us throw off their shackles, it doesn’t bother God in the slightest. The one enthroned in heaven laughs – he has them in derision.

He has power and wisdom enough to expose any arrogance from some tin-pot ruler like Herod and to cause his gospel to advance. God’s power must judge human pride and rebellion.

But actually something even more significant is happening here. When Luke tells us that the word of God is spreading he is making it clear that the word of God is spreading from Herod, from Jerusalem, from Israel... to the Gentiles. Since Israel’s leadership is opposing God, God’s power is going to advance the gospel into Gentile territory. God’s salvation is being sent to the Gentiles and they will listen...

From now on in Acts, Jerusalem is in the murky background, the focus goes off Peter onto Paul; off Judea and Samaria and towards Greece and Rome.

In this episode, Herod was part of an alliance of the sacred and secular leadership of Israel. What never occurred to him was that in siding with the Jews, he was actually opposing God.

And that can only ever end one way. To persecute and imprison Christians will never put God in an impossible situation. If he purposes to get the gospel out of Jerusalem, it is futile to oppose him.

I wonder if you realise how much we owe to the prayer meeting in Acts 12? We owe it nothing less than our salvation. That's no exaggeration! Because the real miracle, the real answer to prayer wasn't so much the escape of Peter. The real miracle was that God's message reached to the Gentiles – reaching even to us.

God is committed to the spread of that Gospel and nothing and no-one must get in the way of that. How vital for us to take that to heart as we look forward to a week of outreach next month...

Will you join me in **receiving** the gospel, **learning** it thoroughly and **passing it on**? Nothing matters more to God than the spread of his word and he will sweep away any opposition to that mercy mission. God's warning to us is not to hinder his work but to prosper it. It's futile to try to hinder his work – because God's power will bring all opposition to judgement.

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(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)