

May 29/30, 2021

**A Tale of Two Kings**  
*Daring to Be the Church Series*  
**Acts 12:1-25**  
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You can't fight God and win. You can't. It may seem like a rather obvious statement but there are a lot of people who seemed determined to learn that for themselves. Which reminds me of our story this morning, where a first century king decided to do battle with God and ended up eaten by worms. If you have a Bible turn with us to Acts Chapter 12. Acts 12. This is the last time we'll be in Acts this spring, take a break for the summer, pick it up again in the fall. Chapter 12 verse one:

**Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. (\*NASB, Acts 12:1-5)**

So that opening phrase **now about that time**, could be translated, *meanwhile*. It's important to understand ancient historians were not that concerned about chronology. They sought to record historical events, but they really weren't all that concerned about getting things in chronological order. So, it's actually quite common that there are things going on in different geographical regions and those are recorded. So last week, Ryan took us through what was happening in Antioch. This is what was happening back in Jerusalem, basically during the same time. So, meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, Herod, the king. So now to understand this, it helps to get some background. Herod was not a name. It was a title, much like Caesar. So over the course of the New Testament, there are actually four Herod's that make an appearance. The first one is Herod the Great. Herod the Great was a powerful king. He oversaw a large area. He was a bit of a madman; he was the king during the Christmas story. So, he would have been the Herod that the Magi visited. He was the Herod that ordered the babies slaughtered. He was so paranoid that someone was after his throne, he ended up killing his own wife, he killed some of his children. So, he was a madman.

He was followed by Herod Antipas—who was his son. Antipas had a much smaller region. He was the Herod in the John the Baptist story that had John beheaded. He was also the Herod during the trial of Jesus. This is now Herod Agrippa. So, this would be the grandson of Herod the Great in Acts Chapter 12. Herod Agrippa was the son of one of the sons that Herod the Great killed. So grandpa killed his own son and that was Agrippa's father. So once that happened, then he sent him to Rome for an education. While getting his education in Rome, he made a few childhood friends. One by the name of Caligula, another by the name of Claudius. As Agrippa got a little older, he got himself in quite a bit of trouble and fled back to Palestine. He said something while in Palestine negative about Tiberius Caesar that the Caesar didn't like, so he threw him in prison and for all practical purposes, it seemed like Agrippa's life was over. Then Tiberius died and he was replaced by a Caesar by the name of Caligula, Agrippa's childhood friend. So, he takes him out of prison, makes him king over a significant area of territory. Caligula dies and he's replaced by another childhood friend of Agrippa by the name of Claudius. So, Claudius actually expanded Agrippa's territory to match what his grandfather had. So, he is a significant king with a lot of power. He was half Jewish and desperately

wanted the Jews to like him. He followed their traditions, he followed their laws, he even moved his primary palace from Caesarea to Jerusalem in order to win their favor. He was now figuring out that to win the favor of the Jewish leaders he must oppose this movement called Christianity. Especially now that Christianity was welcoming in the Gentiles. So he rounds up some Christians, puts them in prison, rounds up James the Apostle, and has his head cut off.

Now this is significant, because this is the first of the apostles to be martyred for the cause. He realizes this finds favor with the Jews. He has finally found a way for the Jewish religious leaders to like him. So now he arrests Peter and there's absolutely no question, his intent is to kill Peter. But it's the Feast of Unleavened Bread, sometimes referred to as Passover. So there's Passover day, followed by seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Sometimes all of that is referred to as Passover. During that period of time, you are not allowed to have trial, you are not allowed to do an execution. So, he's going to put Peter in the clink, he's got to wait seven days, he will bring him forth; the trial and the execution typically are all on the same day. He is guarded by four squads. So a squad is four soldiers, so four groups of four, which means he had a soldier chained to each arm and then two soldiers guarding the gate. This would have been excessive but there's a couple things going on here. Number one, this is Herod's big moment. If he can take down Peter, he will gain favor with these religious Jews. So this is his moment and he's not about to be embarrassed.

We also remember that in Acts Chapter Five, they arrested Peter, put him in the clink and he escaped so, he's not going to get away this time. So Peter is in prison, heavily guarded. Verse five tells us at the same time, the church was fervent in their prayers. That word **fervent** is the same word that is used for Jesus agonizing in the garden of Gethsemane. They're in absolute agony. I guarantee you this wasn't a group of people that said, "Well, it's Wednesday night at seven o'clock, we need to have a prayer meeting." These people were utterly terrified and rightly so. Perhaps they had come to believe that the apostles were untouchables. This is now roughly 10 years after the resurrection of Jesus, 10 years after Pentecost. The apostles had been arrested but always released. And now suddenly, the first of the apostles (this is James as in Peter, James and John—one of the sons of Zebedee) has his head cut off and now they have Peter and there's no question Peter's about to meet the same fate.

So suddenly, it seems like it's all falling apart. It's all coming unraveled. They had to have been absolutely terrified. Their fear drove them to their knees. Another way of saying this would be I am quite certain that the prayer meetings on a battleship are much better attended than prayer meetings on a cruise ship. They were terrified and they had nowhere else to turn. Verse 6:

**On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell and he struck Peter's side, and he woke him up saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting. (Vs. 6-11)**

I do find it interesting that God waited until the night before to rescue Peter. These people were in agony for a week. But the night before he is to be brought out, tried and executed, the angel of the Lord shows up. I also find it worth noting that Peter is sound asleep. He is going to be executed in the morning, but he is so confident that whatever happens his life is in God's hand. He is sound asleep. So much so that Luke makes an effort to tell us the angel had to kick him in the side and wake him up, "Hello, I'm here!" This light shines, he kicks him in the side, he wakes him up, and then it's a series of statements as if Peter is so confused and so groggy that the angel is saying, "Okay, put on your shoes. Okay, put your pants on. Okay, put on your belt, put on your coat. Okay, we're leaving now." And I think all that is meant to kind of communicate that Peter wasn't expecting this. He's sleepy, he's groggy and the angel is walking him through this. The chains fall off, they walk through past the guards and then Luke is so determined to make sure we understand this wasn't somebody busting Peter out. This was miraculous that he tells us ultimately, the final gate that opens to the street just opened all by itself. Peter thinks maybe this is a vision and we remember Peter has had some visions from God. Maybe that's why he thought that but suddenly he's on the street, the angel disappears, and he realizes this is the real deal and he better do something quickly.

In verse 11, Peter speaks. Whenever you're looking at a biblical narrative, you always notice the main characters, and the first words out of the mouth of a main character are often very important. This is the first thing that Peter says, when he says:

**Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod.**

That's what this passage is about. Herod has decided to challenge God—to win the favor of the Jewish people—and Peter is declaring that you can't stop this. You can't fight God and win. It's not going to work. Verse 12:

**When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and we're praying. When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate but ran and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. They said to her, "You're out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel." But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place. (Vs. 12-17)**

So Peter regains his wits and realizes he's got go somewhere. He's in the street, he is very vulnerable. The gate into these houses is on the street so he's very vulnerable. He goes to Mary's house, the mother of John Mark. Now a lot of scholars believe that the upper room of Mary's house, was the upper room where Jesus and His disciples met the night He was arrested. They think it's also the room they were in when Jesus appeared to them after the resurrection and that's probably the same room here. That may or may not be the case, but it seems I would say likely. Whatever the case, Peter knows where to go, and he goes and he finds them. So he's knocking on the gate, a servant girl by the name of Rhoda comes, she hears his voice, but she is so excited that it's Peter, she doesn't open the gate. She runs back to the prayer meeting and she tells them that Peter's knocking at the gate. Here they are fervently praying that Peter would be released, Rhoda says Peter's at the gate, and they say you're out of your mind. They're praying for release but it's not possible. You're crazy or maybe it's like his ghost. It's his spirit. But eventually she convinces them. I chuckle a little bit when Luke tells us Peter's

still outside the gate knocking, “Somebody let me in.” Just imagine, you're just down the road from this prison, it's nighttime, you're in the street, you're waiting for the footsteps coming down the road and you're like, “Somebody let me in!” So they open the gate and they're amazed. Obviously, they're excited and the text says that Peter raised his hand to quiet them down. This is the middle of the night and he's thinking, “You know we need to be quiet, people, or they're going to know and they're going to find me.” So, he quiets them down and he explains to them what has happened. He says specifically tell James.

So the James' get confusing in this text. So, James, as in Peter, James, and John is dead; got his head cut off. This is now James, the half-brother of Jesus, who is the author of the book of James in the New Testament, who emerges as the leader of the Jerusalem church. So go tell James what has happened, and Peter disappears. We really don't know where Peter went. He makes a couple other appearances but from this point on, he will always be a fugitive on the run. Verse 18:

**Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.** (Vs. 18-19)

One can just imagine the moment when Herod wakes up and realizes this is his big day where he's gonna bring Peter out, he'll be tried, he'll be executed, and he will win the favor of the religious Jews and then someone brings word, “Oh king, by the way, we can't find Peter.” This would have been chaos, the ultimate embarrassment. So, he investigates the guards, concludes they must have been in on it. According to Roman law if a prisoner escaped, the guards were subject to the same penalty that that prisoner would have received. So, they're taken out and they're executed. At that point, it would have been very embarrassing, very difficult to remain in Jerusalem, so Herod gets out of dodge, goes up to Caesarea, and is going to stay there for a while until things calm down. Verse 20:

**Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country.**

So one of the things to notice is the way this paragraph starts, **now he was very angry**. We don't even know who **he** is, without the previous paragraph. It's a way this is written to tell us this is an ongoing story. This is not a new story. This is the completion of that story. The **he**, of course, is Herod. We know that this is about five months later. We know that because we know Agrippa died in August of 44 and we know when Passover was. So about five months have passed, and God is waiting for his moment. So the people of Tyre and Sidon did something that made Herod really angry. Herod oversaw the area of Galilee, which is very fertile, which is where the crops grow, which supplied a lot of food to a lot of people. Herod is angry so he cuts off the supply chain. So the people of Tyre and Sidon are running out of food and they have to do something. So they put together a delegation and they're going to come and try and make peace with Herod so they can get some food. Verse 21:

**On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. The people kept crying out, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.**

So an interesting dynamic here is that the first century Jewish historian Josephus, also recorded this event. So we pick up a few extra details from him. This was some sort of a celebration about Claudius the Emperor, like it was his birthday or something and so Herod Agrippa was going to do something big and as part of that celebration, he's going to give this speech. So according to Josephus, he comes out in this all-silver robe that glistened in the sunlight, he takes his seat on what is called the Judgment Seat or the Bema Seat and there he delivers a speech. Now, one thing that's worth noting is Luke loves to record speeches. One-third of the book of Acts are sermons or speeches, but neither Luke nor Josephus record one single word of Herod's speech. It was like there's no point. But he delivers this speech and the people say, **this is the voice of a god, not the voice of a man.**

So in 2000 years it's helpful to understand politics are politics and you have to play the game. This is a delegation who's there desperately needing food. Ready to do whatever is necessary to win the favor of Herod. Do you really think there was anyone sitting in the audience thinking, "This is a god?" But you play the game, "Wow, this is the voice of a god!" God has been waiting for five months for the right moment to make His statement, "You can't fight me and win." Done. So He immediately strikes him. According to Josephus, Herod collapses on the stage, is in agony, they carry him back to his palace. He survives five more days with some sort of an intestinal worm in agony and he dies. Luke isn't all that concerned with the details: God struck him, he was eaten by worms, and he died. It's a pretty graphic statement. Verse 24, then wraps up the story:

**But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.**

Herod dead. The church marches on. You can't stop this. You can't stop this! So, what is the relevance to us today? One of the things we wrestle with in this story is Peter was rescued. We like that. James got his head cut off. We don't like that. In a nutshell, this is the way it is and this is the tension that often causes us so much frustration and heartache. Why was Peter rescued and James had his head cut off? Why are some healed and some die? Why do some get this and others get that? And there isn't a single person in this room that can answer that question. I don't know. All you can do is trust God. He's got His reasons, but you have to trust Him. The message of the Book of Acts is not, "If you trust God, you'll always be rescued." As a matter of fact, the message in the Book of Acts is quite the opposite of that. Stephen is already dead, stoned to death. It's kind of gruesome way to die. James has had his head cut off. Yes, Peter was rescued. That's wonderful. But he eventually will get caught and he'll be crucified for the cause of Christ. James, the half-brother of Jesus, who was the head of the Jerusalem church, will be thrown off the temple and will be beaten to death in the streets of Jerusalem. Pretty much all these guys will die for the cause of Christ, but they will do so willingly. Not one of them will recant from their belief in not only a crucified, but a resurrected Savior. Every one of them knew it was true and they believed this is a message worth dying for because they knew without question at the end of the story, Jesus wins and the church triumphs and nobody can stop that. Nobody.

This is Memorial weekend. It is a weekend set aside to remember those who paid the ultimate price that we might have our freedom. And we have to be reminded that in the history of Christianity, no nation has ever granted the church more freedom to accomplish her mission than we have been given, and it did come at great price. But we also must remember at the end of the story, America does not prevail. No nation prevails. I have believed for years the greatest most meaningful way that we can show appreciation for those who have sacrificed for us is to not waste this freedom on things that don't matter. We have been given unimaginable freedom to accomplish our mission and be a light in a very dark world. Let's not waste the freedoms we've been given. Will it be easy? No. Will there be a price to pay? Absolutely. Will it be worth it? It absolutely will be. So once again, we invite you to join us as we come together and we dare to be the church.

*Our Father, we're thankful this morning for really unprecedented freedom that we have had as Americans. That we have had as American Christians to accomplish the mission. Lord, we remember this weekend many that sacrificed for this freedom. May we never take it for granted. May we never waste it. May we be about the things that ultimately will matter. This we pray Lord, in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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