

## Gospel Triumph: Authentic Power – Acts 12:1-25

I've consistently found in my life that I have a deep desire to control things, most often to make sure that I stay comfortable. I don't like it when things go the opposite of how I want them to go. I think many of you would probably attest to this desire in your heart that can often turn negative and become an idol for you.

Up until recently I just chalked this desire for control up to personality and wiring, but then I read something recently that made me think that maybe our culture and time period has trained me to long for control. Listen to this: *"The driving cultural force of that form of life we call 'modern' is the idea, the hope and desire, that we can make the world controllable."* – Hartmut Rosa

This shows itself in science, technology, healthcare, physical fitness, and a host of other areas where we want to control every aspect of life. The author of this quote says that the problem with the "modern" desire to control everything, is that it creates anxiety, despair, frustration, and people hungry for power because ultimately, we can't control all of it. The world is fundamentally outside of human control and power, and this is the overwhelming testimony of Scripture.

The challenge for us "modern" people is to see the world through a scriptural lens and not through the culturally forced lens of power and control. We need to look beyond the ways in which the material world appears controlled and see the genuine power of God at work. This will bring peace and rest as we are able to trust God with our lives even when things are out of our hands. Our text for this morning will help us with this.

We will be in Acts 12, and we'll cover the entire chapter. Here's what we will see. **4 Truths to Orient Our Trust to God's Power Over Earthly Power.**

### **1. Earthly Power Appears Primary (vv. 1-5)**

As we open to Acts 12, I want to make sure you remember where we are in the book because Acts 12 closes one section of the book and chapter 13 begins another major section. When we first started our study in Acts, I told you the book divides very nicely into three parts which are set out by Jesus's words in Acts 1:8.

Here's the outline of the book. Jerusalem (chs. 1-7) Judea & Samaria (chs. 8-12) To the Ends of the Earth (chs. 13-28).

Beginning in chapter 13 the focus will be on Paul and God's mission to the Gentiles to the ends of the earth. Luke brings the majority Jewish section of the book to a close here with a major conflict with Herod, the Roman ruler over Israel at the time. The point of this chapter is to show God and the gospel's power over even political authority as the mission continues to move forward. Look with me at verse 1.

Who is Herod? This is not the same Herod that was ruling when Jesus was born and tried to kill the babies. That was Herod the Great, who upgraded the Temple in Jerusalem. This is his grandson, Herod Agrippa 1. He grew up in Rome and was friends with two Roman Emperor's, Caligula and Claudius. He was called King because he reported directly to the emperor because Judea was a "hotspot" in the Empire. More stable areas were under the Roman Senate's jurisdiction.

This is the first time in Acts we've seen Christians directly persecuted by political authority. Up until now it's been religious authorities. Herod gets aggressive with the church and targets its leaders. Look at verses 2-3. James was John's brother and a member of the inner circle of Jesus with Peter and John. Notice it says that Herod killed James with the sword. This most likely indicates that he viewed James and the Christians as a political threat and so he's wielding his political power. This action also pleases the Jews, another political motivation for Herod.

He's the first Apostle martyred, and Herod is clearly planning to kill Peter. Look at verse 4. The soldiers would have rotated with 4 on duty during each watch to make sure he didn't get away. After Passover Herod will bring him out and execute him before the people to please them and further solidify his political position and power. He was kept in prison for several days at least, look at the beginning of verse 5. But notice the contrast given at the end of verse 5.

Luke, the author, is framing this up as a contest between Herod's political power and the prayers of God's people. This is why our first truth is that earthly power appears primary. It's very easy for us to live as if the power we can see is the most

important power in our lives. This is especially true of political power. We live in a time when politics has taken on a larger and larger role in our lives and in the country. I believe this is a direct result of the movement away from transcendence and to secular materialism. In other words, if there's no God governing, then we must seize political power to make sure we don't end up on the wrong side. Politics fills the void left by God's absence from our daily lives.

As Christians we can get pulled into this political game very quickly and start to live and act as if politics is the most important thing going. We forget where genuine power lies and invest earthly institutions and leaders with divine importance. There's a name for that and it's idolatry. We need to remember the scriptural lens which is our second truth.

## **2. Spiritual Power Attends Prayer (vv. 6-17)**

Verse 5 sets the stage for the story of Peter's rescue and the story of Peter's rescue is one of spiritual power over earthly power, even the power of a ruthless maniac like Herod. Peter probably has a reputation of getting out of prison because of 5:17-21. So, Herod tries to use all his power to keep him there. Look at verse 6. It's the night before Peter's execution and he's bound with chains and sleeping between two soldiers with guards posted at the door. Clearly Peter has a deep level of trust in God because you know I wouldn't be sleeping.

But despite Herod's attempts to keep him, God's angel shows up and has no trouble breaking him out. Now, this rescue takes place during Passover, which first happened during Israel's exodus from Egypt. And the language Luke chooses to use and include here in verses 7-11 is language taken from Israel's deliverance from Egypt on the night of the first Passover. Listen to these verses and notice how the angel tells him to get dressed and Peter says that God rescued him from the hand of Herod. This is all Exodus and Passover language showing God's powerful deliverance of His people from a corrupt political ruler.

Once the angel leaves, Peter immediately knows where to go. Look at verse 12. John Mark will show up again in chapter 13 and beyond and he's the Mark who wrote the Gospel. His mother clearly had a big enough house to host a group for

prayer and the words of verse 5 are shown to be quite true. They were earnestly praying for Peter in the middle of the night. When Peter shows up a rather hilarious incident unfolds. Look at verses 13-17.

They were earnestly praying, but also maybe not fully expecting God to answer their prayers. How many times have you and I followed this pattern with our prayers? We pray and truly know that God can meet a need, but we also don't fully expect God to meet that need and we are surprised when he does.

But the point here is clear. Where is authentic power found? Not in political authority or earthly power. God rules and reigns and He attends to the prayers of His people. He often uses the prayers of His saints as a means to accomplish His purposes. So, let's pray and let's pray earnestly and then let's welcome God's answers with surprised joy the way Rhoda and the rest of those gathered do.

So far we've seen the contrast between earthly power and spiritual power. Now let's move back to earthly power again in verses 18-23.

### **3. Arrogant Power Incites Punishment (vv. 18-23)**

I feel a little bad for the soldiers guarding Peter. Look at verses 18-19. This was standard practice for this time. But notice that Herod leaves Judea and goes back to Caesarea. I told you when we talked about Cornelius that Caesarea was the Roman center of power in the region and perhaps Herod goes there to put some distance between what happened with Peter and himself. Regardless, he's the same arrogant, authoritative ruler. Look at verse 20.

This chapter began with Herod laying violent hands on the leadership of the church and now we find that he's angry with all the people in an entire region. The people of Tyre and Sidon approach Herod to ask for his help because they depend on him for food.

One author said that Herod sets himself up here as the divine provider. Look at verses 21-22. Let me read you a section from an ancient historian named Josephus who describes the scene here with Herod:

*“On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theater early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun’s rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good,) that he was a god.” – Josephus*

Whether or not the people thought he was truly divine, they at least know how to play to his ego and Herod was loving it. It’s truly arrogant for Herod to continue to act this way, especially after what had happened with Peter. One man had escaped him and the church had hardly been destroyed. This doesn’t cause a moment of reflection for him. Instead he continues to act out in arrogance. Until God puts a stop to it. Look at verse 23.

What’s the issue here? He did not recognize that he was in his position because of God. He did not understand God’s ultimate sovereignty and power. He did not praise God because of God’s gifts. Instead, he took that glory for himself. God will not have this and he will bring judgment either in this life or the next. Listen to Isaiah 42:8 and 48:11. And God has decided to glorify Himself through His Word.

#### **4. Scriptural Power Increases Progress (vv. 24-25)**

Look at verses 24-25. God’s Word multiples and increases and we get a glimpse at the future movement of God’s Word and the Gospel to Antioch as Barnabas and Saul return there.

Listen to some verses at key junctures so far in Acts. Acts 2:47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 9:42; 12:24.

Earthly power can try to stop God’s Word, but over and over again we see the gospel and prayer moving things forward. As we conclude this section let’s be reminded of these basic realities in the life of our church as well. The Gospel and prayer are truly the means of God’s power at work in the world. Let’s pray.

### Sermon Reflection Questions – 3/23/25

- Do you see the desire for control at work in your life? How so?
- Do you agree that our “modern” age is characterized by the hope that we can make the world controllable? Why or why not?
- Why would the desire for control create anxiety and frustration?
- What are the major movements in the book of Acts and how does chapter 12 fit into them?
- Do you think politics has become more or less important over the last ten or so years in our culture? Explain your answer.
- When can you tell if politics has become too important in your life?
- Beside politics, what other aspects of earthly life can we look to for power, security and rest?
- Do you think the group praying for Peter at John Mark’s mother’s house should be criticized for not expecting Peter to show up? Why or why not?
- How can we as a church be more involved in God’s Work in the world through prayer?

- How did Herod fail to give glory to God?
- In what ways are you tempted to fail to give glory to God in your life?
- Why does God not share His glory with anyone else?