**Acts 12:1-25 Mission Unstoppable!**

**Introduction** – Today’s chapter serves as a transition between the first 11 chapters which described the spread of the word of God from Jerusalem throughout Judea, Galilee, Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, to the next major advance outward of the gospel beginning in Chapter 13 with Paul’s first missionary journey. God has orchestrated a major paradigm shift for the apostle Peter and the Jerusalem church through the conversion of the first Gentiles in Caesarea, then on to Antioch to the Gentile Greeks where great numbers of people believed. Before Luke begins the focus on Paul and the Gentile mission, he looks back on the Jerusalem church reaffirming important themes so far of persecution, prayer, divine deliverance and the gospel advance.

We continue to see God’s sovereignty, His unstoppable mission, even as the first apostle is martyred and Peter though rescued is forced into hiding. The Jerusalem church swings from the agony of James’ martyrdom to the ecstasy of Peter’s miraculous rescue as they prayed fervently, and then witnesses God’s judgment against the evil King who had launched this public assault on the church. Evil cannot stop the advance of Christ’s kingdom. It is foolish to oppose the King of Kings!

There are many amazing and dramatic stories throughout the book of Acts, but this one is particularly striking. John Polhill in his book *Exalting Jesus in Acts* calls it “*one of the most delightful and engaging narratives in all of Acts*”. We can so relate to Peter’s cluelessness as he’s being nudged to wake up and being rescued seemingly in spite of himself, to the overexcited servant girl’s amusing failure to let Peter in the door, to the initial skepticism of the praying church, trying to rationalize away the miracle, then their astonishment, joy and awe of God’s mercy and power in answer to their prayers.

*We can relate to this story. All Christians will face conflict if seeking to advance the gospel, but we face it with unshakable assurance that Christ will win!* Polhill. 169 *Exalting Jesus in Acts*

**Outline:**

I**. Evil Attacks** (Herod – Give it your Best Shot!) (1-4) **Opposition is Inevitable**

**God’s Ways are Inscrutable**

II. **The Church Prays** (Help!) (5) **Prayer is Powerful**

III. **God’s Sovereign Answer** (It’s All God!) (6-19)

A. **Rescue** –

1. **Timing** (Just in a nick of time)

2. **Peter’s part** (Pinch me I’m dreaming) **God’s Peace is Phenomenal**

B**. Church’s Response**

1. **Overjoyed** (Woot!) **God’s Grace is Unimaginable**

2. **Astonished** (IDBY or No way!)

**C. Soldiers’/Herod’s Response**

IV**. God has the Final Word** (20-25)

A. **Divine Judgement** (Idolatry/Obituary) **God’s Power is Immeasurable**

B. **Word of God Advances** (You Go God!) **God’s Mission is Unstoppable**

TWO KEY VERSES :

**Acts 12:5**

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

**Acts 12:24**

**But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.**

**I. Evil Attacks** (Herod – Give it your Best Shot!) (1-4) **Opposition is Inevitable**

***1 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. 2He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. 3When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. 4After 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.***

The word of God was spreading from 3.000 converted on Pentecost and continued daily growth in Jerusalem, to the Samaritans, the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul’s conversion, the Gentile centurion Cornelius, to the mixed crowd in Antioch. Right before Luke goes on to describe the first missionary journey, he has to tell us about a serious setback in the church with the apostle James’ martyrdom and Peter’s imprisonment by the tyrant Herod Agrippa I. Luke contrasts the destructive power of Herod and the saving power of God.

The Herodian dynasty was notorious for attacking the people of God. Herod Agrippa I of Acts 12 was the grandson of Herod the Great who tried to kill the baby Jesus after the Magi’s visit through the slaughter of Hebrew baby boys. His uncle, Herod Antipas, beheaded John the Baptist, and Jesus appeared before him during his arrest and trial. His son Herod Aggrippa II was relatively less evil and would later spare Paul’s life. The Herod of today’s passage was a political chameleon and a tyrant. He was responsible to Rome for preserving peace in Palestine. He grew up among Roman aristocracy in Rome, and his many connections there helped him extend his rule. He also ingratiated himself with the Jews, attempting to observe the law to impress the Jews, who in fact detested his Edomite heritage and Roman connections. He was a people pleaser, a glory seeker, and a Christ hater. He went after the leaders of the church in order to destroy the morale of the church. He started with the apostle James one of the innermost circle of Jesus. He saw that the Jews were pleased with his killing James, so he arrested Peter. He may have waited to go after Peter until he saw the crowds’ reaction to his killing James.

Luke, who “carefully investigated” and wrote an “orderly account”, seems to be deliberately vague about the time in this particular passage when he writes in verse 1 “about this time”. I think in this instance, he is placing this story here with more concern for describing God’s world mission plan and the spread of the word of the Lord rather than emphasizing the exact chronology of the specific events. Theologians have picked apart the chronology here, and I think they are missing the point.

What we do know about the timing is that it was around the time that the Antioch church prepared the relief offering, when the church was spreading to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, not just to Hellenistic Jews but also Gentile Greeks with Barnabus and Saul encouraging the church in Antioch..

King Herod arrested, literally in Greek “laid hands on”, violently arrested some who belonged to the church intending to harm them. Likely more people than James were arrested. This James is the apostle, brother of John, the sons of Zebedee, sons of Thunder who were the third and fourth disciples Jesus called, and whose mother had petitioned Jesus for her sons to sit beside him on the throne. Jesus in response had prophesied that they would indeed drink from his cup of suffering, as James was later martyred and John exiled. King Herod had James put to death with the sword which many believe was beheading. His killing James with the sword portrayed the followers of Jesus as a political threat, not religious. However, he was seeking to please the Jewish leaders, and the Jewish people in general who were no longer sympathetic to the apostles.

Seeing the Jews’ favorable reaction to James’ death, Herod “seized” Peter, again suggesting violence, planning a public trial and execution to impress the Jews even further. However, he had to wait for the Feast of the Unleavened Bread to end in order to show respect for Jewish law which forbade a trial during the Feast. Passover was the first day, a 24 hour period during which the Passover meal was shared, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread was 7 days after that. Again, God’s sovereign plan is highlighted poignantly here with the juxtaposition of the Passover lamb sacrifice, whom the Christians knew pointed to Jesus’ crucifixion, the Exodus from Egypt, God’s rescuing his people from evil, murderous tyrants, and James’ martyrdom and Peter’s rescue. Peter may have been waiting in prison for up to 6 days. He knew that the next morning was the end of the Feast and Herod would be free to proceed with his plan to execute him.

Peter is in a maximum security imprisonment with four squads of four soldiers each – working shifts. Normally, a prisoner would be shackled on his wrist to one guard to watch him. Herod had increased the security exponentially. He had a soldier on either side, even while he slept; had two chains around him, rather than one; the other two soldiers were sentries, able to look in opposite directions at once. With four different shifts of guards, they would be alert and awake. Also, if one of the guards had been compromised, infiltrated by Christians, the other guards would prevent that guard from rescuing Peter.

Peter’s two previous imprisonments had been by the Sanhedrin. The first time he and John were released and told not to talk about Jesus, the second time, an angel of the Lord had opened the doors of the jail and set them free. Herod would have heard about the escape and the church certainly remembered it. Herod with the power of the Roman government and the backing of the Jewish leaders and people, used his authority to increase the watch to maximum security. Escape would be impossible. Luke provides these details about how securely Peter was guarded to increase the wonder of his deliverance.

**Opposition is inevitable** – from Pharaoh through the Herodian dynasty, God’s people have always faced persecution. We should not be surprised when we face opposition while living on mission. Rather, we should be surprised if we aren’t facing it. We don’t engage in this war as victims but as victors. Our King rules and reigns and promised us *You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world.”* Jn 16:33 We know the story of all stories, and we have already read the end of the story – God wins! Christ crushed the head of the serpent at the cross, triumphing over sin and death, rose from the grave and ascended into heaven where he now rules and reigns over all, interceding for His people, and He will return to judge the living and the dead. Those who are in Christ will rise and live with Him eternally on the new heaven and new earth.

In light of this bigger story, we can live out each of our little stories here on earth with faith, confidence and hope, knowing that the King of kings will always win and is always in control! He uses tragic loss of martyrdom and miraculous deliverance from a doomed imprisonment to advance the gospel. He was in charge when James died and when Peter was rescued, both for His sovereign purposes. Without explanation, one apostle is executed but another is rescued, teaching us to live with the mystery of God’s providence and to rely on the mercy and continuing care of God in each situation we face.

We say that **God’s sovereignty is inscrutable** –  impenetrable, undiscoverable, incomprehensible, unsearchable, mysterious. We cannot ultimately comprehend the works and ways of God. We recall Paul’s breaking forth into the doxology of Rom 11:33-36 after his agonizing and in depth account of Israel’s unbelief and Gentiles being grafted in, and God’s sovereign will in his salvation story.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
    How unsearchable his judgments,  
    and his paths beyond tracing out!  
**34**“Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
    Or who has been his counselor?”   
**35**“Who has ever given to God,  
    that God should repay them?”   
**36**For from him and through him and for him are all things.  
    To him be the glory forever! Amen.

God calls us to trust him even when life hurts…His ways are wise, good and just. He doesn’t promise to explain everything, but he does promise he will raise us from the dead and we will dwell with him in the new heaven and new earth where sin and suffering can’t touch us. Through Christ, God has entered into our suffering…Glory is coming. Soon all suffering will end.

**Opposition is inevitable! God’s sovereignty is inscrutable!**

II. **The Church Prays** (Help!) (5, 12b) **Prayer is Powerful**

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

*12b the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.*

The seemingly powerless church, under attack, had only spiritual weapons against the power of the state, the sword and even the Jewish people.

***Ektenos*** – earnestly, unremittingly, fervently (same word used to describe Jesus’ praying in Garden of Gethsemane); literally, **at full stretch.**

God had saved Peter and John before, but this time after James was arrested, he was violently martyred. They did not presume that God would release Peter but also had faith that God could release him and cried out to God to deliver him. They remembered how Abraham had advocated for his nephew Lot and his family and God had yielded…how Moses interceded for the Israelites when God was ready to wipe them out, and God relented…how David fasted, mourned and prayed for his baby not to die, but when the baby died as a consequence of David’s great sin, David accepted God’s righteous judgment and worshiped him. They remembered Job’s great loss and suffering and his refusal to curse God and die. They knew that Jesus himself had prayed for God to take the cup of wrath from him, but then prayed for God’s will to be done – and In Jesus’ great agony and death, God defeated Satan and death. Many of the gathered believers had witnessed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in answer to their obedient waiting and prayer after Jesus’ ascension. Despite the desperate situation, I suspect that this prayer gathering was full of faith, hope, determination and zeal.

They may have recalled Psalm 73 as they saw Herod killing their leaders, how the arrogant and wicked prospered, “Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence” and perhaps prayed like Asaph

“When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed completely swept away by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies…”

That is the tension in which we must live and stand in faith and prayer. We pray fervently, earnestly, in faith. We must know the whole counsel of Scripture – not just our favorite inspiring and reassuring proof texts and triumphant stories. The early Jerusalem church was indeed standing in this tension.

So we have this church, with only spiritual weapons, gathering to pray despite risk, who cry out in the midst of their grief and sorrow over James, their fear and concern for Peter and for themselves, to their compassionate, omnipotent, Sovereign God in contrast with the proud, entitled and seemingly powerful King Herod, backed with Roman authority, but as we shall see in reality he is the one who is ultimately powerless.

What seemingly powerful people, governments, institutions, sickness, threats or situations do we face today? Our small, powerless church body faces a green card impasse, a cardiac arrest, language and cultural obstacles, financial, occupational, cultural, language, interpersonal, educational, career, and health issues, as well as many more challenges. We have the daunting mission to be fishers of young men and women on St. Louis campuses, amidst an increasingly secular and self-centered society, driven by lust for power, prestige, wealth, pleasure and too often hostile to Jesus Christ and his followers. Yet we gather each Sunday to pray, to praise and worship God, to study His Word, taking up the sword of the Spirit. Daily we pray earnestly for one another, for God’s kingdom to come and His will to be done in us, our lives, this church, these college campuses and students, this city, state and country and the world. We are neither defeatists, accepting defeat even as we pray, nor are we triumphalists denying painful realities, especially the reality of our own mortality, sin, weakness and little faith. Rather, we proclaim Christ Jesus, we boast in Him, and in Him alone. We come to God in prayer boldly, confident in Him and not in ourselves. We enter God’s presence through the blood of Jesus Christ, standing firm in faith in His righteousness, not our own. Like the apostle Paul, we are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed – by God’s grace, walking in the Spirit, in Christ’s name we do not lose heart.

**Prayer is powerful!** Prayer is effective. Prayer is always the first and best response. There may be times when resistance and protest are appropriate, but prayer is always the first and best response. Prayer is the church’s weapon. Prayer is “an act of defiance to opposition”, “holy defiance”. Prayer isn’t retreat. Piper calls prayer a “wartime walkie-talkie”. We read repeatedly in Acts that intercessory prayer is closely linked to the progress of the gospel and protection of gospel messengers.

How do we regard prayer? Is it our initial response to conflict? Not too long ago I picked up yet another book about prayer, knowing that I need to grow in prayer. The first thing I remember reading convicted me immediately. The author said that Christians talk about prayer frequently, but rarely actually do it. We can learn from the church in Jerusalem by praying fervently, through the night when necessary, in unity with our brothers and sisters, praying for our leaders and one another. God has been working in UBF St. Louis through serious challenges increasing our faith and prayer. Let us continue to wield this powerful weapon! When we pray, let us come before the throne of God wearing the breastplate of Christ’s righteousness (there is now no condemnation in Christ, the helmet of our assurance of salvation, the belt of truth as we stand firm in the truth of who God is and who we are in Christ, taking up the shield of faith deflecting Satan’s fiery darts of unbelief, fear and condemnation, and thrusting the sword of the Spirit into the belly of the Beast as our prayer is inspired by and infused with the Word of God, and with beautiful feet standing on holy ground, ready to bring good news and proclaim the gospel of peace.

**Prayer is powerful!**

III. **God’s Sovereign Answer**  (It’s All God!) (6-19)

A. **Rescue** – (You go God!) (6-11, 18-19))

1. **Timing** (In a nick of time)

2. **Peter’s part** (Pinch me I’m dreaming) **God’s Peace is Phenomenal**

**3. God’s part**

B**. Church’s Response** (12-17)

1. **Overjoyed** (Woot!) **God’s Grace is Unimaginable**

2. **Astonished** (IDBY or No way!)

C. **The Soldiers’ and** **Herod’s Response (18-19)**

**1. No Small Commotion (confuddled)**

**2. Unbelief/Rage (snapped)**

We have seen Herod’s show of force, and the shaken church’s faithful response to pray. Now, we see God’s quick and mighty answer – first to the believers’ fervent prayer and Peter’s obedience and faith, and next to Herod’s sinful arrogance and blasphemy.

***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.****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.*

***8****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.****9****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.****10****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.*

***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.”*

The timing : It is the night before Herod is to bring Peter to a public trial with intent to kill him – in other words, at the last possible minute and very likely Peter’s last night to be alive. God allows Herod to implement his best defense. There is no possibility of Peter’s escape or rescue by human means. The timing at the very last minute intensifies the magnitude of God’s rescue.

Peter’s part : Although Peter has been seized, arrested, beaten, and threatened with death previously, this time is different. It’s King Herod, not the Sanhedrin. The apostle James was just martyred. Peter is grief stricken and knows he will likely be the next martyr. Think back to the night of Jesus’ arrest, at Peter’s cowardice and denial of Jesus. What a contrast! He has continued since the day of Pentecost to proclaim Jesus Christ boldly in the power of the Holy Spirit despite arrests and threats. We know from his letters that he also has strong pastoral concerns for the church – surely on this night, even if he was at peace with his own impending death, he must have had concern for the young church - their grief and fear with this violent attack on their leaders, that their faith would be strong, for protection from false teachers and deception, for the ongoing mission of the church to all nations. One would expect at least some trouble sleeping the night before one’s likely death by sword and the possibility of leaving one’s flock unattended. But no, what does he do? He sleeps soundly – he fell “fast asleep”, he “was sleeping” – emphasizing a continuous state of sleep, not restless sleep. No sign of anxiety or alarm. He was in such a peaceful sleep that even the bright light from the angel of the Lord shining in his face did not wake him. The angel had to strike him on the side to wake him up. He was completely peaceful. As he would later write “*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you*.” 1 Peter 5:7. Peter must have done this, casting all his cares on Jesus and trusting in Jesus’ care for himself, as he was going to sleep that night. Like trusting children being tucked in by their father, we need to go to sleep at night trusting God. Trusting that God our Father is sovereign over all things. He breaks chains. He frees prisoners. He humiliates bullies. Like Peter, we can rest in His peace.

**God’s peace is phenomenal!**

The rescue (God’s part): Luke leaves no doubt that this rescue is entirely supernatural. No human being has anything to do with it – either by making a mistake or by heroic or clever measures. The angel of the Lord appears with a light shining in the dark cell. He has to awaken Peter by ‘striking him’, sounds like more than a gentle nudge, and tells him to get up quickly. Peter hasn’t done anything so far and the chains just fall off his wrists. The next part is almost comical – it’s as if Peter is a small child as the angel gives him step by step instructions that one would assume Peter would have done on his own, but apparently wasn’t doing – put on your clothes, put on your sandals, wrap your cloak around you, follow me…” The next part explains why the angel had to do this – Peter was confused, dazed, not in touch with reality. He was not fully tracking, but they had to move quickly to get by all the guards and through the iron gate, which opened for them “by itself” - God opened the huge iron gate. So Peter was dazed and confused all the way from the cell, out of the prison, through the iron gate to the city, and to the end of one street. It wasn’t until the angel left him suddenly that Peter “came to his senses”, “came to himself”, got in touch with reality, realized he was not having a vision, it was really happening.

If the reader hasn’t gotten this point yet, Peter’s statement later to the church reiterates that God alone is the rescuer – *“Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me…”* This apparently ‘dawned’ on him, a gradual awakening. He makes his way to the home where he knows believers will be gathered and praying for his release.

***12When 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. 13Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. 14When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”***

***15“You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”***

***16But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.***

As we read about the early Jerusalem church gathered in the middle of the night praying fervently and their reaction when Peter shows up, we realize we are not that different from them.

If the Oscars were being awarded for the best supporting actress, I think Rhoda would definitely win. Naturally, as the servant she is the one to answer the door and may have been on guard duty. Peter knocks outside the gate that leads into the courtyard. Perhaps she and the others feared that the authorities had arrived to arrest them. When Peter announced himself, her reaction was not just that of a servant – she was “so overjoyed” that she neglected to open the door and let him in! Even though this is comical, and though Peter remained outside exposed which was dangerous, this is a beautiful moment. To me, this indicates that Peter, despite his prominent role as the lead apostle, was beloved by this humble servant Rhoda. He was her brother in Christ. She was his sister. They were family, even as Jesus had taught them. Peter had learned from Jesus’ example to humble himself, to serve and not to seek to be served. In her joy Rhoda’s first instinct was to hurry to share this astonishing news with her fellow believers. Sadly, despite their fervent prayers for Peter’s release and God’s astonishing answer to their prayer, they accused her of being out of her mind! What a contrast between Rhoda’s immediate faith and joy, and the others’ initial skepticism. They eventually allowed that it might be Peter’s angel as she persisted with her story. Do we find ourselves doubting God’s answers to prayer, rationalizing them away as coincidence? May we grow in our faith, trusting God no matter what, rather than doing mental/emotional gymnastics to protect our hearts from pain or disappointment. May we know that even if our worst fears are realized, God is good. God is with us. God loves us. May we have the simple faith of a child or a humble servant girl expecting our loving Father to hear us and answer us.

Peter tells them about God’s dramatic rescue by the angel of the Lord and then instructs them to tell James, the brother of Jesus, who is a leader of the Jerusalem church and the author of the book of James, and the rest of the church in Jerusalem about Peter’s rescue. Peter demonstrated his concern for his flock and wanted to be sure that the leaders and other believers were informed, and that the church would be encouraged and watched over in this difficult time. Then Peter went away into hiding. We are not told where. He realized that his time had not yet come to die, and God’s will was for him to continue to proclaim God’s Word and lead the church. A year or two later he was in Antioch and then back in Jerusalem for the meeting of the Council (chapter 15).

All the dramatic details which Luke includes in this story emphasize God’s action and Peter’s almost passive role, being kicked and prodded by the angel. Perhaps the most exertion from Peter was his persistent knocking. We think of the miraculous deliverance of God’s people from Egypt – God told Moses to “Stand still and see the Lord’s salvation that he will accomplish for you today.” Exodus 14:13, right before the Red Sea parted by God’s mighty hand. Peter was delivered by sheer grace. God broke the chains on his wrist, opened the prison doors and freed him from certain death. We, too, are saved by simply receiving God’s grace by faith. (Eph 2:8-9). He breaks our chains and frees us from slavery to sin and death. He opens wide our prison doors and makes the way for us into His Kingdom now and forever. God’s grace is so astonishing that even a fervently praying church has difficulty believing it.

**God’s grace is unimaginable!**

C. **The Soldiers’ and** **Herod’s Response (18-19a)**

**1. No Small Commotion (confuddled)**

**2. 2. Unbelief/Rage (snapped)**

***18In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. 19After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.***

The soldiers were confused and befuddled. They had no memory or awareness of how Peter escaped. There would have been no evidence of forced entry or exit. Perhaps the chains were still intact and the prison doors and iron gate were shut, or maybe the angel had left them open. They might have blamed and accused one another. Herod in his unbelief and rage ordered a futile search for Peter. When he couldn’t be found, then Herod questioned the guards further. The law required the guards to receive the punishment that their escaped prisoner would have received, so the 16 prison guards were executed. Despite everything pointing to a miraculous escape and rescue by God, Herod’s unbelief blinded him. He refused to see God’s hand at work.

IV**. God has the Final Word** (20-25)

A. **Divine Judgment**  **God’s Power is Immeasurable**

(Herod’s Idolatry and Obituary)

B. **The Word of God Advances** **God’s Mission is Unstoppable**

***Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. 20He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing 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.***

***21On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. 22They shouted, “This is the voice of a god, not of a man.” 23Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.***

King Herod remained a threat to the Jerusalem church. He became “furiously angry” with the people of Tyre and Sidon, the leading cities of Phoenicia, present day Lebanon. He went to his palace at the provincial capital, Caesarea where representatives of Tyre and Sidon were coming to make up with him, using a mediator whom they may have bribed to have an audience with the King. They were dependent upon Galilee for their food supply, primarily corn. Herod made a flashy entrance in the large coliseum, to speak publicly to the people of Caesarea as well as the representatives from Tyre and Sidon. He sat on his throne wearing royal robes which according to the historian Josephus were silver, dazzling bright. The people, likely attempting to flatter him, proclaimed that his voice was that of a god, not a man. Herod accepted their praises, enjoying being glorified. Remember, he had curried favor with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, even demonstrating to them that he followed Jewish laws. Herod knew the law, certainly the first commandment. So to the Jews he pretended to worship God, but here in Casesarea he accepted their worship to him as a god. Luke is very clear about what God thought of Herod 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.”* The account by Josephus gives graphic details of his death and confirms that Herod did not rebuke them nor reject their impious flattery and therefore God’s judgment fell on him. Josephus writes that a severe pain arose in his belly which became so violent that he was carried into his palace where five days later he died.

Luke links Herod’s death with his arrogance towards God and his fellow human beings. Divine retribution for his killing James and trying to kill Peter doesn’t come on him until he manifests his idolatrous self-glorification publicly. Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down. Those who oppose the Lord will lose. Not always immediately, but eventually. Warning – don’t be a self-exalter – you will lose and be humiliated. Self-exaltation fills the hearts of all kinds of people, not just leaders. In our fallen nature we want to be God. As Peter writes in his letter, perhaps recalling God’s opposition to King Herod *“God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.*” 1 Peter 5:5b-6

B. **The Word of God Advances** **God’s Mission is Unstoppable**

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

***25When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.***

In this brief progress report of verse 24, Luke shows a complete reversal of the church’s situation from the beginning of the chapter when Herod has beheaded James and imprisoned Peter to the end of the chapter when Herod is dead, Peter is free and the word of God is triumphing!

The King’s mission is unstoppable. Our King is triumphant. No one can overcome the King and nothing can separate us from his love – neither death nor life, angels nor demons, the present or the future, any powers, height or depth, nor anything else in all creation (earthquakes, the novel Corona virus, Isis, weapons of mass destruction – nothing, absolutely nothing can separate from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:31-39)

Verse 25 picks up with Barnabus and Saul finishing their mission delivering the relief to Jerusalem from the Antioch church, and they take John Mark back with them, setting the stage for the further advance of the gospel. This chapter’s narrative is a bridge between the famine relief story and a new section in which Antioch becomes the base for missionary outreach on a wide scale. It marks the end of the section of the narrative in which the Jerusalem church and Peter are central. Next, the focus will be on Paul and his ministry among the Gentiles. The Jerusalem church will reemerge in Acts 15 at the council.

**God’s Mission is Unstoppable!**