

# Acts 12:1-25

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please turn to Acts chapter 12. This is a passage for everyone who is feeling weak and powerless and overwhelmed.

! Anyone like that here?! And the Bible allows us into the mind of God so that we can see ourselves and we can see one another and we can see the world as God sees it.

It's wonderful. Amidst lots we don't understand, it's still wonderful. And as we go through the book of Acts, what is wonderful is to see that our brothers and sisters in the early church, they are struggling and weak and powerless and overwhelmed.

They are suffering with great uncertainty and yet they are trusting God and seeing the hand of God. If you look at chapter 12, we are just going to go through it and then I want to draw two big applications at the end.

If you looked at the first 22 verses of Acts chapter 12, you would think there is absolutely no hope for this new movement. That the Christian church would be extinct before too long, that they are weak, they are powerless, they are ineffective.

[ 1 : 28 ] And that they are in danger of being totally overwhelmed by their enemies. But in verse 24, the writer, Dr. Luke, he steps up to 50,000 feet and he summarises what is really going on.

Verse 24, the word of God grew and multiplied. It's the third time Dr. Luke has used that phrase. He's got up to 50,000 feet and he's given you a summary of what's really going on. Just keep a finger in chapter 12 and turn back to chapter 6. Some of the words change and some of the tenses change.

But we read in Acts chapter 6 and verse 7 that the word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

And a great many of the priests became obedient to faith. And the second time he does it is in chapter 9 and in verse 31. Chapter 9 verse 31.

[ 2 : 27 ] So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

And then we come to the third summary in chapter 12 and verse 24. Since the Holy Spirit came upon the church there, there's been growth and expansion. 3,000 people on the first day.

5,000 people a couple of chapters later in chapter 5. And then the gospel goes outside of Israel. Outside of Judaism. Cornelius, the Gentile.

And to Antioch, this global city. To the Greeks. Chapter 13, Paul is going to begin his first journey. Missionary journey around the world. But before we get there in chapter 12, Luke shows us that the Christian gospel and the Christian leader faces bitter, violent, vicious opposition.

Precisely because of the word of God. Let me remind you of the first five verses. About that time, Herod, King Agrippa, laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.

[ 3 : 36 ] He killed James, who was the brother of John, with a sword. And when he saw that that actually pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. He doesn't want to be distasteful, so he waits until after the unleavened bread.

This was during the days of unleavened bread. And when he'd seized Peter, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him. Intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.

So Peter was kept in prison. That earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. We need to be really clear that the chapter begins, doesn't it, with the senseless, grisly murder of the Apostle James.

And the Apostle Peter is arrested. And the full expectation is that he'll be dragged out of prison tomorrow and he'll receive the same treatment as James did.

Herod has all the cards. A Herod has all the power. He's got the backing of Rome. And as you move through chapter 12, his power only seems to grow.

[ 4 : 43 ] Until you get to the coast. And he arrives at Caesarea. And there he's proclaimed at the end of the chapter as a god. But he comes to a very sticky end.

I was really disappointed I didn't hear anybody laugh when we read verse 23. Luke provides some really helpful detail there, which we'll come to in just a moment. But I want you to see that Luke begins the chapter with Herod in power.

Dealing death to the church. And the chapter ends with Herod having lost power and having been dealt death. And I think the question it forces upon us is this.

Who is God? Who really is God? Where is the real power? Is it Herod? Or is it the invisible, risen Jesus Christ?

So when you start in verse 6, Peter looks like a dead man. He's in a maximum security wing. He's got four squads of guards.

[ 5 : 51 ] Two guards are shackled to him on either side. And two more are outside the door. In the morning, there's going to be a mock trial. And then he's going to be put to death by some awful means.

And yet somehow in verse 6, He sleeps. I'm not sure what to make of that. I'm a few blocks away. What's the response of the church? Can you see that? What is the church doing? I mean, what do you do when one of your leaders, one of the apostles, has been dragged off and brutally murdered? It looks hopeless for Peter.

Hopeless for the church. It's got no political clout. It's Herod Agrippa we're talking about. You can go to the British Museum and find out about Herod Agrippa.

Do you know that Herod Agrippa was a close personal friend of Caligula? And when Caligula died, Herod ensured that Claudius became emperor. And so what can they do?

[ 6 : 49 ] This really influential man. Verse 5. They make earnest prayer to God. Earnest prayer. There's nothing cool about their praying.

Nothing mechanical. Nothing casual about their prayers. And the word means intense and constant. I think it's the same word used of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Prayer is not their last resort. It's their first resort. And what prayer says is this. We do not recognize Herod to be the ultimate authority.

We are going to take this case, Herod, to a higher court. What do we do for our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted in Korea or Sudan or Nigeria?

Well, the first thing we do is prayer, isn't it? What do we do when the government brings in rules which we think are against the word of God? What do we do? First of all, we pray because we recognize as Christians there is a higher authority.

[ 8 : 00 ] In the middle of the night, verse 7, God gives them more than they were asking for. An angel of the Lord appears in the cell. I want to just point out to you there's nothing cuddly about this angel.

There's nothing soft and sentimental about him. In fact, in verse 7, the word literally is he whacks Peter on the side. He's obviously a heavy sleeper, Peter. It's a forceful blow.

It's a whack on his side and he orders him to get up. He has more effect than I do on my children in the morning. The chains fall off.

He orders him to put his shoes on. Peter is obviously groggy, isn't he? The angel has to tell him, put your clothes on. And he orders him to follow him. He turns around the angel.

He marches off like a sergeant major. Peter is in a deep sleep. He's a bit fuzzy in his head. He walks out of the cell. The chains have fallen off. The door opens before him and Peter walks past the second set of guards.

[ 9 : 02 ] And then the lock up. And those guards. And the great big gates that open out into the city. They open before the angel. And as Peter gets into the street, the angel disappears.

It says, doesn't it, he came to himself. You can imagine it. He realizes it is real because he's got a pain in his side from the whack. And we read in verse 11.

When Peter came to himself. That's a lovely little description. I'm sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod. And from all the Jewish people. What they were expecting. Now why does God do it this way?

Why does God wait until the very last minute to rescue Peter? When you watch God in the Bible. And particularly here in the book of Acts. Everything that God does is to encourage the faith of his people.

And to demonstrate that he is God. That is the way God works with us. So for many of you, isn't it, he takes us out of our comfort zone.

[10:11] He takes us way past where we feel it's even fair to take us. He takes us beyond our resources. Beyond our abilities. So, we might learn to trust him.

And I take it that's why the angel burst through the doors. If you've sent an angel, it would have been easy, wouldn't it, for God to just have picked up Peter and transported him to the upper room. But the angel is showing Peter, isn't he, that every single obstacle, every gate, every power that humanity can try to hold you with, falls in the face of God.

And Peter comes to his senses and he runs off to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. It's some house, it's a big house. There's an outer courtyard with an outer gate.

It's likely the place where Jesus celebrated the Last Supper. It's likely the place that the apostles were praying when the Holy Spirit fell upon them. John Mark's mum, the Mark who wrote the Gospel, is about to join Paul on his first missionary journey.

[11:21] And there's this lovely scene, isn't there, in verse 13, where Peter knocks on the gate. And young Rhoda, literally rosebush, young Rhoda comes running down the stairs.

She doesn't open the gate immediately because it's dangerous. Who's there? Peter. Peter? She recognises the voice and in her excitement she runs back up the stairs to where the church is praying.

And she says, Peter is here. Peter is here. She leaves Peter standing at the gate outside on the run. It's the middle of the night. And I'm guessing the church has been praying a very long time. And they're probably feeling that their praying is entirely futile. They say, we pray and we pray and we pray and nothing has changed.

I mean, didn't we pray for James when he was arrested and look how he ended up. And this isn't in the text, alright.

[12:28] But I'm guessing that as Christians they had a bit of a discussion about what to pray for. I suspect in that room there were people praying for different things.

There were some who were no longer praying for Peter's rescue. They were praying, Lord, when Peter gets executed, may he be brave and bold and speak the word with courage.

Did you often find that when you're with groups of Christians? Do we pray that God would act dramatically? Maybe we're a bit nervous of that. Or do we pray that we would accept whatever comes from God's hands?

And I think that's probably why when Rhoda breaks into the room with her news, they say, You're a maniac. You're nuts. But we know, don't we, and when God's people pray, he is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine.

And when we pray, God gives us more than what we were praying for. The angel of the Lord makes one more appearance in the chapter from verse 20 onwards. This time it's on the coast up in Caesarea. And King Herod Agrippa is furious with this town of Tyre and Sidon.

[13:50] He's fed up of them. These cities are in his territory, but in a way they're kind of outside of his territory. They're wealthy cities and they're certainly not being compliant.

They're not doing what Herod Agrippa wants, but they have a weakness. They depend on Herod's territory for food. And so Herod arranges a kind of gastronomic siege.

Cuts off the food. He's going to bring them to their knees. And everything falls into Herod's hands. There are a couple of bad harvests.

And the leaders of Tyre and Sidon, they humble themselves and they come to Herod begging. And King Herod is the kind of man who rubs their nose in it.

Herod is one of those people who is absolutely unbearable. You know those kind of people who everything falls into place for them effortlessly. His ruthless cruelty to Christians only seemed to make him more popular.

[14:57] And even the crops and the weathers seemed to side with him. It must have been very, very difficult for the Christians back in Jerusalem. Who are already fearful for their safety.

It just seemed that Herod, this tyrant, his power is growing and growing and growing. And what on earth is God doing? That God allowed Herod to raise up more prominently.

But he did it so that he re-brought down more clearly. If you go to Israel today, you can go to Caesarea. And you can walk into the amphitheater where this scene happened. Herod gathered all the leaders of the people of Tyre and Sidon. All the leaders there so that they would worship him. The Roman historian Josephus tells us that Herod Agrippa had a special robe made for himself for the occasion.

And the robe was made of silver. And so he stood in a particular position. So that the sun, when it came up in the morning, the sun would shine off his silver garment and dazzle the crowd.

[16:08] Isn't that great? He harangues the crowd with his speech. He revels in his victory. And then we read verse 22. The people were shouting, the voice of a God and not a man.

The voice of a God and not a man. Verse 23. Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down. Because he did not give God glory.

And he was eaten by worms. And breathed his last. You might be interested to know that there are very long books written on intestinal worms of the near ancient east.

That seem to afflict Herod. Josephus tells us that it took Herod a couple of days to die actually. And I can provide you with those titles if you're interested. What's important.

What's important for us is that Luke tells us it was an angel of the Lord that struck Herod. Smote him down. It's really interesting.

[17:14] It's the same word. And the same word that struck Peter to wake him up. And delivers Peter for life is the same striking that strikes King Agrippa.

And judges him for death. And so the question is who is God? Herod thinks he is. He's got the power. He's got Rome behind him. And everything runs his way.

But by the end of the chapter. He is brought down. Literally being eaten alive. In a very un-God like manner. Why? Because he did not give glory to God.

All who exalt themselves. Jesus says. Will be humbled. All who humble themselves will be exalted. It's a great chapter. I want to conclude with two things.

That Luke points us towards. Two things that have to do with. Really the church's relationship. To the culture we live in.

[18:22] And the community we're in. So two questions. First question. Whose opinion matters? It's a really interesting relationship.

In the book of Acts. Between the church. And the surrounding community and culture. And when the church begins. And they enjoy the approval.

And the goodwill of all. And the Christian witness is admired. The miracle in the temple in chapter 3. It gets a terrific response. People are glad these people are around. Even after Ananias and Sapphira. People hold the church and Christians in high esteem.

They're valued, respected members of society. But that gradually changes. With the martyrdom of Stephen in chapter 7.

[19:25] The tide begins to turn the other way. And instead of having the admiration of the crowds. The community turns against the Christians. And the church becomes the target of persecution.

What changed? Did Christians drop the ball? Did they suddenly become nasty and unattractive? Did the preaching change? No. As you look through the chapters. And they continue to live godly, generous lives.

What had happened was that those outside the church. Began to understand the message. And from now on. From Acts chapter 7.

Until the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel goes forward. And the church goes forward. In the face of deep opposition. When you think.

[20:26] Throughout history. The church and the culture. Track closely with each other. For a while. The church enjoys peace. And popularity. For a time.

By far the majority of the times. The paths diverge. And Christianity is misunderstood. And it is disliked. And sometimes it's persecuted.

And I need to say to you this morning. It is not always possible. To hold the goodwill. And the approval. Of the surrounding community. And the culture. And be faithful to God.

Because God is God. The goodwill. And the approval of the community. Is not actually in our hands. To control. It's not as if.

We were really nice. Somehow. That. The community will love us. Think about what happened to the Lord Jesus. How did Jesus finish up?

[ 21 : 31 ] Jesus. Was rejected. And killed. And so it will be for us. We might not like this. But the normal.

Operating mode. For the church of Jesus Christ. Is in the midst of disapproval. And opposition from the community. It's not as if the community.

Is as wicked as it could be. Or they hate Jesus. Or hate Christians necessarily. Look at Herod. Herod didn't hate Christianity. Herod's a pragmatist.

Look at verse 3. Herod read the current moods. Of the society brilliantly. He played the crowd. Do you see that in verse 3? Herod had his focus groups working.

He discovered. That if he was to violently persecute the Christians. It would increase his popularity. His motive in persecution. Was to gratify the people. He wasn't driven by hatred.

[ 22 : 29 ] Or a religious zeal. His motivation is a private one. His cruelty is the direct. The result. Of the unpopularity of Christians. And his own personal desire.

For popular approval. And that's why he's trying to wound the church. That's why he's trying to silence the church. It's all to make him popular. That's why there's nothing kind of monochrome. About persecution and suffering. Often it just comes from. The individual character involved. So think of Nero. In AD 64. In the famous fire of Rome.

He burns Jerusalem. He burns the city. And the people hate him for it. So he tries to find a scapegoat.

And he looks at this new minority of Christians. And he blames them. Put several thousands to death. And so if God is God. It is not the opinion of Herod that matters.

[ 23 : 30 ] And it's not the opinion of our community that matters. But God's alone. Second and the final point as I finish. It's this. Who's under threat? You can read Acts chapter 12 at one level.

And you can say. Well the church is under great threat. Isn't it? And they've got nothing to offer. Against this violent opposition. Except the weak word of God.

And the powerlessness of their prayers. And the church seems. Doesn't it? Weak. And foolish. And unimpressive. Same today.

Herod holds all the cards. And even though Herod had all those resources at his fingertips. The chapter finishes at this point. With the word of God growing.

And multiplying. The Bible's view is that the word of God is a living, breathing reality. That can progress.

[ 24 : 33 ] And can multiply. And grow. In times of prosperity. And in times of persecution. It really makes no difference. To the growth of the word.

What is really happening when James has his head chopped off. Or when Peter is arrested. Is that the word of God is growing and progressing. What is really happening when the angel rescues Peter.

And when the church is praying. It's that the word of God is growing and progressing. What is really happening. What is really happening in the politics of Herod Agrippa I.

And his death. Well it's that the word of God is growing and progressing. Well I think that's really encouraging to me. And it should be really encouraging to you. Because it's not the church that's under threat.

It's the community. It's the powers that be. So let me say this. When Christians pray.

[ 25 : 38 ] And proclaim the word of God. It is. An enormously dangerous thing to the status quo. God who acts in answer to our prayers.

The word of God that is spoken. Sometimes people picture the book of Acts. As a kind of tug of war. With God on one side.

And those who oppose it on the other side. But the problem with the tug of war illustration. Is God is not like a big strong man. On the other side of the rope. Is like a kind of NASA rocket.

Pulling off. Taking off in the other direction. And Herod does not lay siege to the gospel. It is Herod who is under siege from the gospel.

And that's exactly what Jesus meant isn't it? When he said to Peter. You are Peter. And on this rock. I will build my church. And the gates of hell. The powers of death. Will not prevail against it.

[ 26 : 47 ] It's the powers of death. That are under siege from the church. One last reference. You might be a little bit nervous.

What does he mean by this kind of a threat to the community? It doesn't sound particularly attractive. Does it? What does he mean by that? So one cross reference. Come with me to 2

Corinthians chapter 10. I haven't got a church Bible.

So someone shout out a page number. 2 Corinthians chapter 10. 9, 6, 8. Page 9, 6, 8. 2

Corinthians chapter 10. Here's the last cross reference.

And look at verse 3. 2 Corinthians chapter 10 and verse 3. Page 9, 6, 8.

For that we walk in the flesh. He's speaking of the church in Corinth. We are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh.

[ 27 : 48 ] But of divine power. Of God's power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments. And every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God.

And take every thought captive to obey Christ. And so our weapons as a church, what are they? Love. Faith.

Hope in Jesus Christ. What are our weapons? Our weapons are prayer. And the word of God.

Holding one another to obedience to Christ.

And Paul says, these are so powerful they destroy strongholds. It's the picture of a siege, isn't it?

There's a stronghold. And it is destroyed by love, faith, hope, prayer, the word of God.

And the love of Jesus Christ crucified. And it enters the city and it takes every thought captive. That we may serve him. And so as I finish, I want to say this very, very clearly.

[ 28 : 55 ] It's really important that we understand this. The church must not. The church must never have a siege mentality. And so the gospel is under threat.

The gospel is not under threat any more than the risen Jesus Christ can be under threat. God is still God. And I think the way that we demonstrate that is for us to pray and to proclaim and move forward with the good news of the Lord Jesus.

With love, faith, faith, and hope. Trusting that it is God who will grow and multiply his work. Let's pray.