

“The Surprising Success of the Gospel”

Acts 12:1-25

July 27, 2008

Rev. Curtis J. Young

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Before I read our verses, I want to point out something interesting about our passage. Look together at the last verse of chapter 11 and the last verse of chapter 12. Chapter 11 ends with Paul and Barnabas taking a special offering from the church in Antioch to the church in Jerusalem: “This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Chapter 12 ends: “When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from<sup>[a]</sup> Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.”

These two verses could easily be spliced together, and no one would be the wiser. No one would miss chapter 12. It says nothing about what happened to Paul and Barnabas at Jerusalem. It is a parenthesis.

We have studied Luke long enough together to know that he was intentional about what he wrote. Everything serves his main purpose using history to defend the Christian faith and church.

So, why did he write chapter 12? What is its point? As I read it, notice how full of ironies it is – how many things happen contrary to what you would expect. Acts 12:1-25:

1It 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 pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast 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.

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

6The 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. 7Suddenly 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.

8Then 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. 9Peter 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. 10They 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.

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11Then 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."

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 girl 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 brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

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.

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. 20He 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.

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.

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

25When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from <sup>[at]</sup> Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

Did you pick up the ironies in this passage?

-- The imprisoned apostle who almost slept through a miraculous rescue. The angel had to poke him to get moving. (7)

--The servant girl who was so excited at the sound of Peter's voice that she forgot to let him in.

--The church committed to all night prayer meetings that refused to believe when God answered their prayer.

--The tyrant who was consumed with worms as he accepted adoration as an immortal.

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What’s the point of such irony? That there is a deeper message. That there is a more profound reality that the reality we know shaping the reality we see. Irony in any story is a sign that there is more happening than meets the eye, and it purposeful and meaningful. Things that seem unrelated are deeply connected.

If that is the point of irony, then Acts 12 underscores it again and again and again and again, just as Luke is about to write of the launch of the Gospel in missions throughout the world. You see this in Luke’s use of a little term translated, “but.”

What took place involved prayer and God’s willingness to answer prayer. In verse 5, we read, “So Peter was kept in prison, *but* the church was earnestly praying to God for him.”

In verses 15-16, the praying believers accused poor Rhoda of being out of her mind when she told them their prayers were answered, that Peter was at the door. When she insisted he was there, they made up their own explanation. It must be Peter’s angel. Then we read, “*But* Peter kept on knocking.” Finally they opened the door and saw it was true.

God’s unseen hand was at work, responsive to the pleas of church, but not dependent them, or on the purity of the church’s faith.

In verse 23-24, we read of Herod, “And he was eaten by worms and died, *But* the word of God to continued to increase and spread.”

John Stott has put a very sharp point on this story. He writes, “The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God triumphing.” Such is the power of God to overthrow the plans of hostile men, to act independent of our unbelief, and accomplish his will.

This is as true on the level of your life and our church, as it is on the level of world leaders and nations.

The Gospel of Christ triumphs, because God sees to it. The seed of the woman go seeking to obey the word of God and bring others to faith. The seed of the serpent seek to destroy the Word of God and those who carry it in their hearts.

To us life feels like a battle whose outcome is in doubt. We are in a struggle. When our text says that the church was praying earnestly, the verb is the term for our word agony. The church was agonizing in prayer.

This is the term used to describe Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemene. Was he struggling, in agony? Of course! He sweat drops of blood. Was the outcome of God’s purpose ever in doubt? Never! When Jesus prayed, “Not my will, but yours be done”, he was yielding himself to a sure outcome.

Jesus’ struggle, the church’s struggle in Acts, and your own struggles are very real and similar in many ways. But they are not an uncertain contest. They are the context through which God is bringing his good plan and purposes to pass. That, because of us or in spite of us, through us or around us.

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The struggles you and I face, the spiritual antagonism we know, both inward and outward, are not a contest but the context in which God is working out his plan and purposes for his glory.

Not a contest. A contest means what's happening is about me versus the other guy. The other guy can be the antagonist in my home, my school, my world, or a demon. The truth is, what is happening is about the Lord, without a doubt, bringing his plan and purposes to pass.

He calls us to faithfulness. He calls us to pray. He calls us to witness. He calls us to the struggle that following Christ daily entails for you and me every day we live.

But he does not tell us how is going to answer our prayer. Or who he is going to rescue, or who he is going to allow to perish. Only the Lord knows and he isn't telling.

After Jesus pulled Peter aside to tell him he would be martyred in John 21, he saw John following them. So Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." (John 21:21-22)

If Jesus doesn't know the day or hour, when the Father will have him return, is it surprising if he hasn't told us the day or hour he will call us home?

In our passage, Luke offers no explanation for why James is martyred rather than Peter. To add to the mystery, from this point, Peter fades from Luke's account of the early church. He appears one more time, at the Jerusalem Council, his leadership eclipsed by James, our Lord's brother.

We don't know who is going to respond to the Gospel or how it is going to spread. God has not given us his blueprint for our own lives let alone someone else's.

What is clear is that God is at work. And his word will triumph. Our own lives are as much the context for that triumph as the world.

After being released from prison in Acts 4, Peter and the church had said of those opposed to Jesus: "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." 4:28

This is just as true of you and me. Whatever happens along the way to our own experience of the complete triumph of our Savior will be what God's power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

I love the way I Howard Marshall calls Luke's description of the triumph of the Gospel "thoroughly realistic." It does not mean that we will have it easy, or be free of suffering, or sudden grief.

But it does assure us the Lord's constant care for us, his delight in us in our trusting him, and that He does not waste our pain.

It also speaks of the vulnerability of our adversaries and the inevitability of their defeat. This is not something we like to talk about. We don't want to appear smug let alone hateful. Still, the sober truth is sin can so corrupt and distort people that they fancy themselves more righteous and more worthy of honor, than God himself. In this they prove to hate him.

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The Herod of chapter 12 was one of a dynasty of five Herods, all tyrants. Herod the Great sought to kill Jesus as an infant. Herod Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded and supported Jesus' crucifixion. Here we meet the murderous Herod Agrippa I.

A skeptic could read these verses about Herod's death and conclude Luke made this up. In fact he wrote as a physician. It is possible for intestinal worms to create an acute obstruction and death, or for a cyst caused by a tapeworm to rupture.

This is one of those remarkable passages in Acts that can be precisely dated. We know from other sources that Herod died early in 44 AD. If you compare Luke's account with what the Jewish historian Josephus wrote, you will see it was Luke who was understated. Look at verses 19 and following as I read Josephus.

“After the completion of his third year of his reign over the whole of Judea, Agrippa came to the city of Caesarea...Here he celebrated spectacles in honor of Caesar...On the second day of the spectacles, clad in a garment woven completely of silver so that its texture was indeed wondrous, he entered the theater at daybreak. There the silver, illumined by the touch of the first rays of the sun, was wondrously radiant and by its glitter inspired fear and awe in those who gazed intently upon it. Straightway his flatterers raised their voices from various directions – though hardly for his good – addressing him as a god. “May you be propitious to us,” they added, “and if we have hitherto feared you as a man, yet henceforth we agree that you are more than mortal in your being.” The king did not rebuke them nor did he reject their flattery as impious. But shortly thereafter he looked up and saw an owl perched on a rope over his head. At once, recognizing this as a harbinger of woes, he felt a stab of pain in his heart. He was also gripped in his stomach by an ache that he felt everywhere at once and that was intense from the start.

Herod was carried from the event and died five days later. The understanding ranged far wider than the church that this king accepted praise as a god, and the Lord struck him down.

Can you imagine the impact on the crowd watching the event unfold? “Herod's a god! Herod's immortal...uh, maybe not.”

Luke wrote these verses to give us all hope and courage in Christ, as well as perspective on our own lives and the unexpected setbacks and heartaches that come. Through many trials we must enter the Kingdom of God, Paul would later write. But enter we shall as part Jesus' own triumph. Until then, the Lord continues to build his church, and that means you, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it. And that means the gates of hell will not prevail against you.

Let's hold on to each other as the church held on to each other praying for Peter. Let's look forward to the kindnesses of God in each others' lives, grieve our losses, celebrate our rescues, and worship the God of all grace – who delivered James just as much as he delivered Peter!