

God's Enemies Act as If They Are in Control

Acts 12:1-11

January 22, 2017

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Pharaoh thought he was in control of God's people, Israel, but he learned through the ten plagues, the drowning of his army in the Red Sea, and the complete devastation of Egypt that being God's enemy brings destruction. Goliath thought he was in control of David, but he learned through the stone of David that struck him in the forehead that being God's enemy brings humiliation and death. There is no lack of examples in Scripture that teach us time and time again what happens when people make themselves the enemy of God as King Herod does here in Acts 12.

Dear ones, God is sovereign and there is no way to oppose Him and yet to win—there is no way to resist Him and yet to overcome Him. He is Almighty God. We are His creation.

Even we who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ must daily seek His grace to know and to understand how we oppose Him by our self-centeredness, by our self-righteousness, by our stubbornness, and by our inclination to follow the multitudes in this world to do evil rather than standing without compromise upon the promises of Jesus Christ and the commandments of our God who cannot lie. We succumb to the temptations of the enemy when doubts arise from family and friends, or arise from our own hearts in wanting to be free of the boundaries He has set for us in His Holy Word, and we ask, "Hath God really said?"

Hath God really said that we are to keep the entire Sabbath Day holy (the Lord's Day)? Hath God really said that we are to honor those who have lawful authority over us (parents, husbands, minister, elders)? **Hath God really said** that we are not to covet and complain about what our neighbor has? **Hath God really said** that we are not to place any wicked thing before our eyes? **Hath God really said** that we cannot lie, even a "white" lie? **Hath God really said** that we should not fear what man can do unto us and that He will supply all our needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus? And so it goes that we as Christians are daily tempted to oppose our gracious Heavenly Father by questioning, doubting, and resisting His good promises and His good commandments. Dear ones, the way of the cross is the way to God's blessing in your life, not the way of our own enthronement. God's blessing comes in offering ourselves a living sacrifice, not in exalting ourselves. God's blessing comes in humility before our glorious God, not in pride, thinking of ourselves wiser than God and better than others.

The Holy Spirit brings before our attention today a king who believed he was in control of God's people, but learned to his shame and destruction that such was not the case. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) Herod Murders the Apostle James, But God Overrules It (Acts 12:1-2); (2) Herod Imprisons the Apostle Peter, But God Overrules It (Acts 12:3-11).

I. Herod Murders the Apostle James, But God Overrules It (Acts 12:1-2).

A. We saw in Acts 11 that an international church was established in Antioch—one which was connected to the Church of Jerusalem (rather than independent from the Church in Jerusalem) and which will become the operating base in reaching Gentiles even as far as Europe with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was also there in Antioch that believers in Jesus Christ first bore the name "Christian" as a badge of honor rather than as badge of shame. Then we saw that Barnabas and Saul were sent by the Church in Antioch to take financial aid to help those in Judea who were about to suffer greatly due to a famine and food shortage that

would hit there particularly hard (Acts 11:27-30)—showing the ecclesiastical and presbyterial connection between these churches—the officers of one church serve and minister in the other church.

B. Thus, when we read in Acts 12:1, “Now about that time”, we should understand that about the time that Barnabas and Saul were taking the love gifts from Antioch to Jerusalem, a persecution against the church arose once again—this time by the political ruler (Herod) rather than by the religious rulers among the Jews (Acts 12:1).

1. The two great sources of persecution that Satan inspires to persecute the faithful Church of Jesus Christ are the civil beast and the ecclesiastical beast (Revelation 13:1-10—the beast from the sea; Revelation 13:11-18—the beast from the earth). Our testimony as faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ continues to expose the sin, error, and corruption of both the state and the church, and the need for faith in Christ and repentance by both. We pray for reformation in both church and state. Although it would appear that King Herod was leading the charge, nevertheless, he did so with the approval of those in the Jewish Sanhedrin.

2. The Herods in the Bible have quite the history of opposing Jesus Christ. This Herod mentioned here in Acts 12:1 (Herod Agrippa I) was the grandson of Herod the Great, who had slaughtered the infant boys in Bethlehem in hopes of killing the infant Jesus, who was born King of the Jews. This Herod of Acts 12:1 was the nephew of Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist, mocked Jesus at His trial, and took no action to prevent the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, a man he himself could find no fault with (Luke 23:14-15). Each of these Herods (three generations of them) opposed the Lord God and sought to establish their royal dominion over the Lord Jesus Christ and His people, but in each case they failed for lack of power to control Almighty God and His sovereign will. Man hates and opposes God and His will, but God’s unrepentant enemies will be crushed and their wicked plans will be turned against them (Psalm 33:10-11). God shows continually the foolishness of men and women who trust in their own wisdom in turning their wicked schemes against them (Haman’s plot to exterminate the Jews entirely was turned against him to his destruction, Esther 9:24-25).

3. Herod “stretched forth his hand to vex” certain ones in the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:1). “To vex” means to do evil (Acts 7:19—the same word is used of the evil done to Israel in killing their male children). This was apparently not a general persecution of the church, but certain leaders were targeted in order to silence and intimidate the rest. “If Herod could capture and murder even the apostles (who were particularly endowed by God with miraculous gifts), how much more he could murder and destroy the rest of us.”

C. Herod first arrests and then murders by the sword (beheading) James the brother of John. This is James the son of Zebedee—one of the inner three of Christ’s apostles—Peter, James, and John. James becomes the first apostolic martyr recorded. Jesus had prophesied that James and John who wanted to be seated on Christ’s right hand in the kingdom would be baptized with suffering (and in the case of James with martyrdom, Matthew 20:22-23).

1. What is especially telling about the arrest and murder of James is that just as the church prayed for Peter (Acts 12:5), the church no doubt had likewise fervently prayed for James. However, the Lord did not deliver James from death, but he glorified the Lord through suffering and death. I submit it was not because Peter had more faith than James or because their prayers were more faithful in the case of Peter.

2. Dear ones, it was not God’s will that James be rescued from the sword, but it was God’s will that Peter be rescued, as we shall see. It was God’s will to raise Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:36ff), but it was not God’s will to raise James from the dead. It was God’s will to heal many various illnesses, but it wasn’t God’s will to heal Paul (2 Corinthians 12:8-9), to heal Trophimus (2 Timothy 4:20), or to heal Timothy (1 Timothy 5:23).

3. Did the Lord Jesus love Peter more than James? Of course not! The Lord had a divine purpose for each of their lives. It was not Herod that controlled James or Peter, but rather it was God who controlled James, Peter, and Herod. The divine purpose for each one would be fully realized in God's sovereign plan. If Herod's plan was to send the church running in fear away from Jesus Christ, he failed miserably; for as we shall see, this persecution sent the church to Jesus Christ to call upon Him, to fall upon Him, to seek His face (2 Corinthians 4:8-10). Moreover, this plan of Herod's failed in that it sent James into the very presence of Jesus Christ, far away from all temptation, sin, suffering here upon the earth (2 Corinthians 5:8).

4. Compare not yourself to others—either thinking God loves you more than other Christians because you do not have their suffering, nor thinking God loves you less than other Christians because you have more suffering than other Christians. There is no good that will come from such comparisons. If you have less suffering, be not proud but humbled and pray for others who are suffering. If you have more suffering, fall not into despair but look in hope to Jesus, who likewise suffered as did other great men and women of God.

5. Consider that God promises suffering to all who trust Him and love Him and without suffering for Christ there is no reigning with Christ (2 Timothy 2:12). The question is not whether all Christians will suffer. The question is how will you suffer as a Christian?—in anger, in bitterness, and in doubt, or in joy, in thanksgiving, and in hope. Even when we are chastened by the Lord for our sin, it is proof that we are the beloved children of God (Hebrews 12:6).

II. Herod Imprisons the Apostle Peter, but God Overrides it (Acts 12:3-11).

A. We first see here the motivation of Herod in the murder of James and in the arrest (with a view to the murder) of Peter: the approval of man—particularly of the Jews or Jewish leaders of the Sanhedrin (Acts 12:3). He wanted the support of the religious ruling class behind him—he was looking after his throne and future promotion. He was not seeking justice in applying the Law of God, but was rather courting the favor men to maintain his throne. Peter's arrest occurs during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover—not "Easter" in Acts 12:5), a time in which many Jews from various parts of the Roman Empire would be present. The timing of Peter's arrest was orchestrated to gain the greatest appeal from the Jews against those blasphemous Christians, who believed Jesus when He called Himself "the Son of God" (John 10:36).

B. Now here we see as it were the challenge of Herod against the Lord Jesus to show himself mightier than Jesus and to show that no one could deliver Peter from his hand, not even their "Son of God". For Herod not doubt knew that Peter and the apostles had earlier been cast into prison by the Jewish Sanhedrin and had escaped by an angel of the Lord who led them out of that secure prison (Acts 4:18-23). So Herod's challenge to the Lord Jesus is in effect, "Now see if your Son of God will deliver you" (much like the challenge from King Nebuchadnezzar against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego and the fiery furnace—"who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands" Daniel 5:15). Note the precautions taken to keep Peter in prison.

1. Peter was placed in a fortress prison with locked doors to his prison cell and with a large locked gate to the prison itself (Acts 12:5, 10). How would Peter be able to get from inside the cell and from inside the prison to the outside without the keys?

2. Peter was chained to two Roman guards (either around his wrists or his ankles). Then guarding the door to his cell were two more Roman guards (four quaternions, i.e. sixteen guards—four guards rotating every three hours; and then the same sixteen guards started over again).

3. Here was Herod's challenge to the glorious Son of God seated at God's right hand—"You cannot rescue Peter. I am in control here. I will slay Peter just like I slew James, and no Son of God is going to save him from my sword."

C. Herod was challenging the Lord Jesus, while the church was earnestly praying on Peter's behalf (Acts 12:5—"BUT prayer was made without ceasing"—literally "intensely"). That is how we ought to pray dear ones—with intensity, with urgency.

1. The battle you see here between Herod and the church is the battle which you ought to see every day as the enemy of your soul seeks to enslave, to chain, and to destroy the work of God in the lives of people, in the family, in the church, and in this nation.

2. Do you approach the Lord in prayer as if it is no big deal whether He hears and answers your prayer (Jeremiah 29:13; James 5:16)? Does your belief in the sovereignty of God lead you to apathy and indifference in prayer (God's going to do what He's going to do)? What God does is His business, but your business is to fervently call upon Him to glorify Himself and to show forth His grace in your life, in your family, in this church, and in this nation.

D. Let us marvel and revel in the power of our Savior to save Peter (and all who trust alone in Christ alone for their eternal salvation).

1. Herod was planning to bring Peter forth to murder him at any moment (Acts 12:6). It was Herod's intention to murder Peter, but Herod's purpose must bow before God's purpose which was to deliver Peter from the mouth of death.

2. But notice what Peter was doing in that prison cell—he was sleeping so soundly that the light that shone into his prison cell did not wake him, nor did he awaken when the angel gave him a sharp blow to his side—the angel had to raise him up from the floor. Now that is a rest of peace and repose in the Lord (much like the Lord Jesus slept in the boat through the fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee). How will you sleep and rest as you face your death—with panic, fear, and restlessness, or with trust, hope, and peace of mind (Philippians 1:21)?

3. Here is a picture of spiritual salvation. The Lord brings light to your darkened understanding. The Lord smites your conscience so that you feel the pain of having offended Him by your transgression of His Law. The Lord gives you new life to trust Him as your Savior from sin. The Lord then sets you free from the chains of the guilt and penalty of sin and from the power of sin that has shackled you. The Lord finally gives you the grace of sanctification to put on the new man, to repent, and to follow Him in loving obedience.

4. What a glorious and miraculous salvation for Peter, but your salvation from sin is no less glorious and miraculous—and it is entirely of His power and grace. Just as Peter could not have boasted in his salvation from that prison and those chains and those guards, you cannot boast in your salvation from sin and salvation unto eternal life.

5. There was no miraculous awakening for these guards, but rather a sleep of death that overcame them—for when Herod saw that Peter was escaped, they were put to death. Just as Jesus could not be kept in that sealed tomb of death, but came forth in spite of the seal, in spite of the huge rock that was rolled over the entrance, and in spite of the Roman guards around it; so likewise Peter could not be kept in that sealed prison, in spite of the bars, in spite of the chains, and in spite of the guards. Herod did not control Peter, God controlled Peter and Herod.

6. It is interesting that as all of this happened, it was so amazing and so overwhelming that Peter wasn't sure that it wasn't a vision until he was outside the prison and the angel had vanished. Dear ones, we are reminded in Scripture that angels are real and not fairy tales and that they are sent to minister to you who are the heirs of salvation (Hebrews 1:14). How often has one of God's angels preserved you, protected you, and provided for you? No doubt, many times!

Dear ones, you can't put God into a box as if you could control Him and tell Him that He can only work in your life in the way you want Him to work (as if He can only bring to you that which is pleasing to you, but cannot

bring pain, heartache, suffering, tribulation). God gave James over to Herod to be slain and to enter into eternal glory, but He gave Peter over to Herod to be miraculously delivered in order to live and declare the glory of God. God has delivered you for the same reason. Dear ones, pray daily and throughout the day to be used by the Lord to show others that the fear of death has been swallowed up in the resurrection of Christ.

Dear friends, there is only one of two sides that you can be on: you can either be a Herod—an enemy of God; or you can be a Peter—a friend of God. You may think, “I am somewhere in the middle.” But there is no middle ground. You are either for Christ and trust in Him and live for Him, or you are against Christ and trust in your own goodness to save you. You either believe Jesus Christ is the Lord of your life, or you believe by your own actions that you are the Lord of your life. As we shall see in the verses that follow in Acts 12, Herod was not the lord of his own life—he was not in control—he could not save himself. Rather Almighty God was the sovereign Lord who controlled all—He brought Herod to an untimely death. Will you follow the example of Peter in trusting Christ to save you, or will you follow the example of Herod in standing against Christ and suffering the holy judgment of the everlasting and righteous God?

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