

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Herod

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Acts 12:18-24

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 12.

We are picking up the same story that we were making our way through last Sunday. In case you weren't here, let me quickly bring you up to speed. The apostles James and Peter were arrested by Herod. The church immediately turned to the Lord in prayer. One of the apostles – James – was beheaded, but the other apostle – Peter – was miraculously delivered from prison by an angel! Last Sunday, we focused in on the prayer meeting. This morning, we turn to one final detail in the story.

Look with me now to Acts 12. We will be reading verses 18-24. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

²⁰ Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. ²¹ On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. ²² And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" ²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

²⁴ But the word of God increased and multiplied. (Acts 12:18-24 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This concludes the story of Herod's persecution of the church, and, in this conclusion, I want to help you to see both a warning, and a comfort.

First, by way of warning, I want to draw your attention to the villain of this story: Herod.

The Warning: Herod Considered

The Herod that we meet in this passage is Herod Agrippa I. His grandfather – Herod the Great – was the evil king from the Christmas story. He was the one who – upon hearing from the wisemen that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem – called for the murder of every boy under the age of two. That was grandpa.

And his uncle, Herod Antipas, wasn't much better. He was the one who stole his own brother's wife and then imprisoned John the Baptist for telling him that adultery is sin. He was the one who had John the Baptist beheaded upon the request of one of his favourite dancers.

This Herodian dynasty was a *moral disaster*! And Herod Agrippa I was an apple that did not fall far from the tree. He was a bad guy from a bad family who did bad things. He was *one of those*.

But I want to dive a bit deeper than that. What do we know about this tyrant? First:

1. He was a duplicitous man

Herod was a man with two faces. He was a religious Jew, but he was also a worldly pagan. He was equally at home in either setting. I will be quoting this morning from a Jewish historian named Josephus because he gives us a further glimpse into the life of Herod. Josephus said of him:

He loved to live continually at Jerusalem, and was exactly careful in the observance of the laws of his country. He therefore kept himself entirely pure, nor did any day pass over his head without its appointed sacrifice.¹

When Herod was in Jerusalem, he was as religious as a man could be!

But he was also just as comfortable in the Roman world. His palace was in Caesarea – the Roman capital of Judea – where he enjoyed an indulgent life, filled with treasures and pleasures.

At home in the world. At home in the church. Happy to worship. Happy to sin. Herod had learned how to play the parts. He had learned how to wear the mask. He was a duplicitous man.

Next, we see that:

2. He was a political man

Through childhood friendships, Herod had brokered powerful relationships with the Roman leaders in Palestine. He reigned over an extensive kingdom, and he knew how to play the political game. In fact, he was playing the political game when he arrested Peter. Look back at the opening verses of chapter 12. There, we read:

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ² He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³ and **when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.** (Acts 12:1-3a ESV)

Why did Herod arrest Peter? For votes! He realized that he could curry the favour of the culture by cutting the heads off of the Christians! So, he did!

He didn't see himself as an *opponent* of the gospel. He didn't care about the gospel at all! He cared about POWER! He cared about POSITION! Everything else in life was a means to an end.

He was a duplicitous man. He was a political man. And we discover:

¹ Josephus as quoted by G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 295.

3. He was a foolish man

I'm drawing this observation from verses 18-19. There, we read:

Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there. (Acts 12:18-19 ESV)

If you remember, Herod had assigned sixteen soldiers to guard Peter. The beheading of Peter would win him the affection of the city, and he wasn't about to lose his prize.

But then, the unthinkable happened! With the help of an angel, Peter was rescued!

Now, the detail about the killing of the guards might lead you to believe that Herod had acted in rage, but it was simply the law of the land. Whenever a guard lost a prisoner, that guard was to receive whatever penalty the prisoner was supposed to serve.² That was the rule.

So, we don't see rage in this passage. But I would argue that we do see indifference. This miraculous event should have stirred up some questions in Herod's heart. A man doesn't simply walk out of a prison cell past 16 guards. Chains don't unshackle themselves and prison doors don't simply swing open. There was more than enough evidence here for Herod to at least pause and ask some questions.

But he didn't. He simply killed the guards and then rushed back into the affairs of life. In spite of the fact that he had been given a front row seat to a MIRACLE – the Jesus followers and the message that they proclaimed simply did not pique Herod's interest.

Because Herod was a fool.

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." (Psalm 53:1a ESV)

² Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 411.

He had more than enough evidence to lead him to seek the Lord. But he chose to ignore the evidence. And, in this way, his story is almost an object lesson of Romans 1:18 where we read:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness **suppress the truth**. (Romans 1:18 ESV)

Herod didn't see, because Herod didn't want to see. And he didn't want to see because:

4. He was a self-exalting man

We see this in verses 21-22:

On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. ²² And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" (Acts 12:21-22 ESV)

Josephus describes this same event. He tells us that Herod was dressed that day in an elegant, silver robe:

...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.³

Herod had turned himself into a spectacle – flaunting his wealth and his power in search of praise and approval from the crowd. And he received the approval he was after.

"The voice of a god, and not of a man!" They shouted.

What must that have felt like? In a very real sense, in that moment, Herod had arrived. All of his duplicity and politicking – his life-long pursuit of power was being realized! "You are no man!" they shouted. "You are a god!"

³ Josephus as quoted by Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 529.

Herod was a practicing Jew – at least, one side of him was – and he knew that the crowds spoke blasphemy. But in this moment, he didn't care. He suppressed that truth just like he had suppressed the evidence of the empty cell.

Clothed in his silver robe, seated on his throne, he received their praise and listened as the crowd affirmed what he already believed: *I AM a god!*

But this moment was short lived because, immediately, Herod was reminded that:

5. He was just a man

He was not a god. None of us are. He was just a man. The story ends:

And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!”²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. (Acts 12:22-23 ESV)

Josephus records this same event with further detail. He tells us that Herod collapsed in agony, and that he suffered for five days until he finally succumbed to his illness. Commentators speculate that he probably died from appendicitis which led to an infestation of round worms.

Nothing humbles a man the way that sickness does. All of Herod's wealth – all of his approval ratings – all of his political alliances – could not cure his tummy ache. He was helpless. He was dying. Because – like every fool who had been born before him and every fool who has been born since – Herod was not a god. He was just a man.

According to Josephus, Herod came to his senses on his death bed. He is recorded as saying:

I, a god in your eyes, am now bidden to lay down my life, for fate brings immediate refutation of the lying words lately addressed to me. I, who was called immortal by you, am now under sentence of death.⁴

⁴ Josephus as quoted by Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 413.

So ended Herod Agrippa I. A bad guy from a bad family who did bad things. *One of those.*

But before we move on, I feel led to make one last observation.

6. He was just a man like us

As Christians, we know that our history is not the conflict between good guys and bad guys. It's just not that simple. God's word doesn't tell us that *some of those bad guys sinned and fell short of the glory of God*. No! It says:

for **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23 ESV)

The frightening reality is: We're all capable of being the bad guys. If you were able to consider Herod's sin without recognizing any of your own sinful inclinations, then I would suggest that you're not dealing with yourself honestly. The same sin that ruined Herod is lurking in the dark recesses of each of our hearts. The puritan John Owen warns:

It is to be feared that very many have little knowledge of the main enemy that they carry about with them in their bosoms.⁵

It is a scary thing that so many of us are oblivious to the sin that lurks in our hearts. This passage – this story of Herod – serves as a warning about the consequence of sin.

This passage warns against our duplicity. Another word for duplicity is hypocrisy. In this gathering, we are singing songs of praise, and praying, and reading the Scriptures, and building each other up in the faith. But how many men and women in this room right now will put on an entirely different persona when they walk back into school, or family, or work tomorrow? Listen: If your co-worker or your classmate *could never believe* that this Sunday-morning-version-of-you exists, then you might have more in common with Herod than you realize.

⁵ John Owen, Kelly M. Kapic, and Justin Taylor eds., *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 76.

This passage warns against our politicking. Perhaps, we could better frame that in our context as people pleasing. Herod was ready to sentence Peter to death in order to win the crowd. He was willing to sin so as to win the approval of the world. Like that flag you put on your desk so that you won't fall down the corporate ladder. Like those numbers that you fudged because your boss said that it wasn't a big deal. If you're willing to compromise with sin to further your own agenda, then you might have more in common with Herod than you realize.

This passage warns against our foolishness – our propensity to hide and distort the evidence that is right in front of our faces. Like when God brings conviction into our lives, but we ignore it. Like when He speaks clearly in His word, but we choose to trust our own wisdom. If you're able to suppress that which is clear so that you can continue going your own way, you might have more in common with Herod than you realize.

This passage warns against our self-exaltation. "I would NEVER do what Herod did!" we declare in defiance as we upload the latest, filtered pictures of ourselves. Later we'll check in to see how many "likes" and comments we've accumulated. In a moment, we'll climb into our expensive chariots and return to our enormous palaces, and we'll convince ourselves that we didn't buy these things to glorify ourselves and impress our peers.

We might have more in common with Herod than we realize.

The sin of Herod is no different than the sin that we find when we look in the mirror. It is the sin of pride – the sin of cosmic treason – the sin of trying to dethrone God. This passage serves as a warning for future Herods. A warning for people like you and me. So, having received the warning, if the Spirit of God is applying conviction, then let me direct your attention back to the conclusion of this story.

Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. (Acts 12:23 ESV)

Receive the warning. Learn the lesson. Herod's agonizing death was simply a glimpse of the agony that awaits us if we persist in our sin. Jesus tells us that hell is a place:

'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' (Mark 9:48 ESV)

That is the price of sin. Hell.

And yet, while Herod's opportunity for repentance is over, yours is not! Your story doesn't have to end this way! You have an opportunity this morning. Repent Confess your sin to Him. He says:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 ESV)

Do you remember how the guards in this story had to suffer the penalty for the escaped prisoners? Well, that's exactly what Jesus has done for us! Except, unlike the guards, Jesus did it willingly! Through his perfect obedience, he unlocked the prison doors and purchased our freedom! Then, he went to the cross, and he died the death that we owed. His death was our ransom. That is the good news of the gospel. Do you believe it? Then look to him in faith this morning. The Bible tells us:

if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9 ESV)

We are not the good guys living in a world full of bad guys. That's not what the church is. No, we are bad guys who have been saved by grace and who are being transformed day by day to look more and more like Jesus!

Unfortunately, many will ignore this warning and despise the grace of God.

The rebellion will continue until the final judgement and, until that day, there will be seasons when it looks for all the world as if the church is losing. There have been and will be more Herods. Enemies of God will war against the church and oppose the spread of the gospel.

And that leads to our concluding point. Ultimately, while this passage presents us with a sobering warning, it ends with a glorious comfort. Here, we are powerfully reminded that:

The Comfort: God's Mission Has Never Been, Is Not Now, And Will Never Be In Jeopardy

This is not just A point from this passage. This is THE point.

Herod plotted, soldiers stood guard, and the mission of the church looked like it had been thwarted, but – look with me at verse 24:

²⁴ But the word of God increased and multiplied. (Acts 12:24 ESV)

This verse sums up all of chapter 12. In fact, you could argue that it summarizes all of chapters 1-12! In fact, you could argue that it summarizes all of human HISTORY!

The serpent deceived Adam and Eve and led them into sin. But the word of God increased and multiplied.

God's people were enslaved in Egypt. Then they were then surrounded by Assyria. Then they were taken into captivity in Babylon! But the word of God increased and multiplied.

Our Saviour was rejected, arrested and murdered. His disciples were scattered, and the mission appeared to have failed. But the word of God increased and multiplied.

Jesus rose from the dead! And he ascended to heaven! And he sent His Spirit to indwell His people! And now we face the same opposition. We are rejected. We are arrested. Some of us – like James – are murdered. But the mission of God is not threatened because the word of God continues to increase and multiply!

Brothers and sisters, the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is proclaimed in this book is POWERFUL! God declares:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but **it shall accomplish that which I purpose**,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11 ESV)

God's word will accomplish God's work! It WILL succeed! Do you believe that? His word will not be suppressed by any tyrant, nor will it be restrained by any prison cell! No, we declare with the prophet Isaiah:

The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isaiah 40:8 ESV)

Therefore, we should not be intimidated by the weapons that the enemy wields against us.
Because we have been entrusted with a weapon that is unstoppable!

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Hebrews 4:12 ESV)

This story is in the Bible because we are not always as brave as we ought to be. This story is in the Bible because there will always be Herods threatening the church and opposing God's mission. And this story is in the Bible to comfort us and embolden us with a reminder of how our story ultimately ends. The puritan Richard Sibbes once wrote:

Let us not look so much at who our enemies are as at who our judge and captain is, nor at what they threaten, but at what he promises. We have more for us than against us. What coward would not fight when he is sure of victory?⁶

God's mission has never been, is not now, and never will be in jeopardy.

So, brothers and sisters, preach the word! Disciple your children. Share the gospel with your neighbours. What the devil wants more than anything is for you to shut your Bible and close your mouth. Because he knows that – when the truth goes out – there is NOTHING that he can do to stop it.

He knows that. It's important that we know it too. No matter how dark it gets, and how bleak it seems, God's word will never fail, and His mission will never be in jeopardy. Let's pray.

⁶ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1630, 1998), 137.