



GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI ♦ DEO ♦ GLORIA

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

The Death of King Herod Agrippa I

Acts 12:19-24

September 9, 2007

- I. **The People of Phoenicia Appeal to Herod**
- II. **Herod Exalts Himself**
- III. **The Lord Strikes Herod**
- IV. **The Word of God Spreads**

- ❑ The Bible is a book filled with conflicts. From the opening chapters of Genesis through the closing pages of Revelation, the Scriptures are filled with conflict of both small and grand scale. Throughout the Scriptures, enemies of God wage war against the covenant people of God, and ultimately, against God Himself. However, in the midst of all the conflicts recorded in the pages of the Bible, one thing is clear: God is always victorious. Even when it seems that the enemies of the cross have the ‘upper hand’ and experience [what appears to be] momentary victories, the Word of God declares, unequivocally, that God is on His throne and is working all things in accordance with His sovereign plan. Regardless of our temporal and limited perspective, we, the people of God, take the greatest hope in knowing that God is always in control and victory is always His.
- ❑ In the New Testament, one of the families which stood against God and His people was the family of the Herods. From the time of the birth of Jesus, through the spreading of the Gospel through the apostles, this family did everything in its power to prevent God’s plan from coming to fruition. However, in spite of the work of these men, the Gospel continued to spread in accordance with God’s foreordained plan. Further, because of the efforts of these powerful men, their complete and utter failure in thwarting the plans of God only served to underscore the sovereign power of God over His creation!
- ❑ James Montgomery Boice describes the five Herods who ruled in Judea during the first century:
 1. **Herod the Great** (reigned from 34 to 4 B.C.). The first and most prominent king in this dynasty was Herod the Great, the ruler who controlled Palestine at the time of the birth

of Jesus Christ. He was a ruthless man. He exterminated all potential rivals to his throne, including at least one wife and several sons. We know him best as the king who ordered the murder of the babies of Bethlehem, thinking that if he killed all who were under two years of age, he would inevitably kill the pretender, that 'king of the Jews' who had been sought by the wise men (Matthew 2:2).

2. **Herod Archelaus** (reigned from 4 B.C. to A.D. 6). Herod the Great was succeeded by his son, Archelaus, the worst of his descendants. Archelaus was so bad that the Jews complained to the emperor about him, and he was removed from office in A.D. 6. He is mentioned only once in the New Testament (Matthew 2:22).
3. **Herod Antipas** (reigned in Galilee from A.D. 6 to 39). After the removal of Archelaus, Judea was governed for a time by Roman procurators. But the line of Herod the Great continued through another of his sons who reigned in Galilee until his banishment to Gaul in A.D. 39. His name was Herod Antipas, and he is the Herod who killed John the Baptist. He emerged in a cameo role at the trial of Jesus Christ.
4. **Herod Agrippa I** (reigned as tetrarch of Trachonitis from A.D. 39 and then as king of Judea from A.D. 41-44). He was the son of Aristobulus, Herod the Great's son by his second wife, Mariamne. This is our Herod, the one who appears in Acts 12.
5. **Herod Agrippa II** (reigned over various territories from A.D. 50 to 100). This Herod was a son of Herod Agrippa I, but he was only seventeen at the time of his father's death, and the emperor Claudius was persuaded not to give him his father's kingdom owing to his youth. In time, however, Agrippa II was given other territories. This was the Herod before whom the apostle Paul appeared and made a defense some years later, a story recounted in Acts 25 and 26.

I. The People of Phoenicia Appeal to Herod

- ❑ Luke writes, in **Verse 19**, that Herod, after having the soldiers who had guarded Peter executed, 'went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.'
- ❑ During the first century, Caesarea had served as the seat of the government of Judea under the Romans. Although it was, at least politically, part of Judaea, since Herod the Great it had been a predominantly Gentile city.
- ❑ Then, in **Verse 20**, Luke writes that Herod 'was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon...'
 - Tyre and Sidon were cities of the Phoenician [western] seaboard.
 - The reader is not informed as to the basis for Herod's anger towards the people of Tyre and Sidon.

- ❑ Luke continues, ‘and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king’s chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king’s country.’
 - Tyre and Sidon depended upon Galilee for its food supply. However, this was nothing new, for this had been the case during Old Testament times (Ezekiel 27:17), and as early as a thousand years prior, during the time of Solomon (1 Kings 5:9-13).
 - Also, Ezra 3:7 states, ‘Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia.’

- Clearly, Herod’s blockade of food supplies to Phoenicia had crippled them. Phoenicia was especially dependent on Galilean corn. Therefore, they appealed to Herod’s chamberlain, or his personal assistant, Blastus.
- Blastus would serve as an intermediary between the people of Phoenicia and the king.
- Apparently, Blastus had been given ‘financial consideration’, likely in the form of a bribe.
- It was in this historical context, in Caesarea, that Herod Agrippa I decided to ‘demonstrate his prowess...subjecting the ambassadors from the two cities to a spectacle.’

| |
|---------------------------------|
| II. Herod Exalts Himself |
|---------------------------------|

- ❑ Herod used this opportunity to display His authority and glory as king. Furthermore, it was his opportunity to seek the praise and flattery of his subjects, to include the Phoenicians who were seeking his assistance.
- ❑ Luke writes, in **Verse 21**, that ‘On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them.’
 - According to F.F. Bruce, ‘the ‘appointed day’ on which the Phoenicians were to be publicly reconciled with Agrippa is commonly held to have been a festival celebrated quinquennially [every five years] on March 5 in honor of the foundation of Caesarea [as well as Herod’s patron, the Emperor, Caesar Claudius]. (Another possibility is that it was held to celebrate the emperor’s birthday on August 1.)...The institution of the festival in 9 B.C. is recorded by Josephus.’
- ❑ Then, in **Verses 22-23**, Luke records that ‘the people kept crying out, ‘The voice of a god and not of a man!’ And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.’

- ❑ The ancient Jewish historian Josephus recorded the same account as Luke [*Antiquities* 19.343-50]:

‘After the completion of the 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, knowing that this was celebrated as a festival for his welfare. There came together for this occasion a large number of provincial officials and others of distinguished position. 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 theatre 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 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. At the same time he was seized with a severe pain in his bowels, which quickly increased in intensity...He was hastily carried into the palace, and...when he had suffered continuously for five days from the pain in his belly, he died, in the fifty-fourth year of his life and the seventh year of his kingship.’

- ❑ NOTE: Josephus had earlier recorded an account of Herod Agrippa I when he was a prisoner in Rome [*Antiquities* 18:195-201]. Several years earlier, by the order of the Emperor Tiberius, Herod Agrippa I had been thrown into prison. One day, he leaned against a tree and saw an owl. Another prisoner who was with Agrippa, a German, told him that the presence of the owl indicated that he would be released early from prison and would experience great fortune and luck. However, according to the fellow prisoner, if Herod saw the owl again, he would have only five days to live.

* * * * *

- ❑ F.F. Bruce writes, ‘The way in which the silver weaving reflected the rays of the rising sun has suggested to one or two students that Agrippa presented himself to the assembled crowd as a manifestation of divinity (more precisely of the sun-god), *theos epiphanies*, as Phoenician rulers had done in earlier days.’
- ❑ Yet, what is clear from both Luke and Josephus’ accounts is that Herod Agrippa I received the praise of the men and **did not give God the glory**.
- ❑ As a result, God strikes Herod...dead.

III. The Lord Strikes Herod

- ❑ Again, Luke writes, in **Verse 23**, ‘And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.’
- ❑ Herod’s death occurred anywhere from a few months to a full year from Peter’s escape from prison.

- ❑ “The chronological question turns on the particular occasion when Agrippa made his oration in Caesarea. If it was at the games held in Caesarea every five years, it would have been in March A.D. 44 when Agrippa was struck dead. Since the Passover came later than that in A.D. 44, Peter’s escape would have been Passover of A.D. 43. The occasion could have been the celebration of the emperor’s birthday in August. In that event Peter would have been arrested in the spring (Passover) of A.D. 44 with Herod dying the summer of the same year.”
John Polhill
- ❑ The same word used in **Verse 23** [translated, ‘eaten by worms’] is used of worm-eaten crops. Neither Luke nor Josephus explains *exactly* how Agrippa died. However, scholars throughout the centuries have suggested several medical possibilities, such as a ruptured appendix, acute intestinal obstruction, arsenic poisoning, or tapeworms.
- ❑ Furthermore, Jewish history records at least two other enemies of God who died of similar ‘worm-eating’ ailments: Antiochus Epiphanes IV [2 Macabees 9:5-12] and Herod the Great [Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.168-70].
- ❑ According to Dr. Jean Sloat Morton:

‘The phrase ‘eaten of worms,’ in Greek is *skolakobrotos*. The root word *skolax* means ‘a specific head structure of a tapeworm.’ Sin the work *scolex* (plural *scolices*) is applied to the head of tapeworms, Herod’s death was almost certainly due to the rupture of a cyst formed by a tapeworm. There are several kinds of tapeworms, but one of the most common ones found in sheep-growing countries is the dog tap, *Echinococcus granulosus*. The heaviest infections come from areas where sheep and cattle are raised. Sheep and cattle serve as intermediate hosts for the parasite. The dog eats the infected meat, then man gets the eggs from the dog, usual by fecal contamination of hair.

The disease is characterized by the formation of cysts, generally on the right lobe of the liver; these may extend down into the abdominal cavity. The rupture of such a cyst may release as many as two million scolices. The developing worms inside of the cysts are called scolices, because the anterior region constitutes the major part of development at this stage. When the cyst ruptures, the entrance of cellular debris along with the scolices may cause sudden death.

The use of the word *scolex* is not limited to this reference about Herod; the term also appears in Mark 9:44. A literal translation of the phrase in Mark 9:44 would read, ‘where their scolex dieth not.’ This usage is very interesting because the tapeworm keeps propagating itself. Each section of the worm is a self-contained unit which has both male and female parts. The posterior part matures and forms hundreds of worm eggs. The word *scolex* in this text portrays a biological description of permanence which the text demands for the comparison. (*Science in the Bible*).

- ❑ According to Josephus, Herod experienced this pain in his stomach for five days before dying at the age of 54.

IV. The Word of God Spreads

- ❑ Immediately after recording the death of Herod ‘by worms’ Luke writes, in **Verse 24**: ‘But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.’

- Luke beautifully and poetically contrasts the death of Herod Agrippa I and the spread of the **word of the Lord.**
- In the Greek, **Verse 24** literally reads, ‘But the word of the Lord **grew and multiplied.**’
- This is the same phrase used by Jesus when describing the seed that fell on good ground in His parable of the sower.
- In other words, the Word of God, the imperishable seed [1 Peter 1:23], spreads, regardless of the efforts of sinful men.
- Luke concludes this chapter, in **Verse 25**, by writing, ‘And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.’
 - This Verse keeps the narrative moving, recording the return of Barnabas and Saul from their task of delivering famine relief to the church in Jerusalem (11:30). This likely took place in about A.D. 46, two years following the death of Herod Agrippa I.
 - The primary purpose, most certainly, of **Verse 25**, is to introduce the three members of the ‘ministry team’ that the church in Antioch would send on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3).

- In these few short Verses, however, there are several eternal truths concerning God that Luke reveals:

❖ **There is both Mercy and Judgment with God**

- One of the most difficult truths for Christians to grasp is God’s sovereign **mercy and judgment**. BOTH are eternal attributes of His, and both reveal His eternal glory. In other words, we should praise Him for **BOTH**.
 - In fact, God’s judgment is a function of His zeal for His own glory!
 - Romans 9:17-18: ‘For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.’ So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.’
- The same Holy Spirit who blessed the work of the early apostle through miracles signs, works and wonders, as well as incredible growth (Acts 5:12-16) was the same Holy Spirit

who struck down Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). Further, the Holy Spirit delivered Peter from imminent death in Acts 12:6-17 and, here, in Verse 23, He struck dead Agrippa because of his arrogance and refusal to give glory to God.

- ❑ Warren Wiersbe writes, 'Instead of Peter being killed by Herod, it was Herod who was killed by Peter's God! Perhaps the same angel who delivered Peter also smote the king.'

Revelation 6:9-11:

'When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.'

Proverbs 11:8:

The righteous is delivered from trouble,
and the wicked walks into it instead.

James 4:4-6:

'You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: 'He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us'? But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, 'GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.'

Hebrews 10:30-31:

'For we know Him who said, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY' And again, 'THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE.' It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.'

1 Peter 3:12:

'FOR THE EYES OF THE LORD ARE TOWARD THE RIGHTEOUS, AND HIS EARS ATTEND TO THEIR PRAYER, BUT THE FACE OF THE LORD IS AGAINST THOSE WHO DO EVIL.'

❖ God's Timing is Perfect

- ❑ During Peter's imprisonment and following it, it may have seen that Herod had the 'upper hand.' It was, likely, over a year before the Lord struck him down. However, His timing was perfect.
- ❑ Unfortunately, when God does not act immediately in accordance with our timetable, we assume that He does not care about our situation; however, God's ways are higher than ours and He is always on time.

Revelation 6:10:

‘they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’”

❖ **God will Share His Throne [and His Glory] with No One**

- ❑ God is the eternal Creator of all that is! He created out of nothing, and all things are sustained by the power of His hand. He is eternal and unrivaled in glory and majesty.
- ❑ Yet, by nature we elevate everyone and everything **except God** to divine status, reserved only for God.

Isaiah 42:8:

‘I am the LORD, that is My name;
I will not give My glory to another,
Nor My praise to graven images.’

Isaiah 48:11:

‘For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act;
For how can My name be profaned?
And My glory I will not give to another.’

Galatians 6:7:

‘Do not be deceived, God is not mocked...’

- ❑ The Hebrew word most often translated ‘Lord’ in the Old Testament is *Adonai*. *Adonai* can also, appropriately, mean ‘Sovereign’ or ‘king.’ Just as today in places where a monarchy still exists, such as Great Britain, the monarch [king or queen] is appropriately referred to as the Sovereign, so the exalted Christ is the Sovereign over all Creation: the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. As a result, He shares His glory with no one, for He created all things out of nothing, and His glory is His eternally.

❖ **God will Always Have the Last Word – His Word Will Endure**

- ❑ Yet, despite the opposition to God and His Gospel, He will have the final Word!
- ❑ He is, indeed, the Alpha and Omega...the beginning and the end!

Isaiah 55:11:

‘So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
It will not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire,
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.’

- John Stott writes, 'Indeed, one cannot fail to admire the artistry with which Luke depicts the complete reversal of the church's situation. At the beginning of the chapter Herod is on the rampage – arresting and persecuting church leaders; at the end he is himself struck down and dies. 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 hostile human plans and to establish his own in their place. Tyrants may be permitted for a time to boast and bluster, oppressing the church and hindering the spread of the gospel, but they will not last. In the end, their empire will be broken and their pride abased.'