

Bethel Live! Sunday 12th May 2024

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Preacher: John Ross

[0 : 00] Very good morning to you. Nice to see you. Even if you haven't got a friend you want to bring to the breakfast or you've tried to invite a friend and it's failed, come yourself.

! Mike's talk on I'm okay, why bother with Christianity, I think will be a help to all of us. Well, it'll certainly be a help to me, if it won't be to anyone else.

Some of us remember back to 1957, some of us don't. Harold Wilson was the Prime Minister. Sorry, Harold Macmillan was the Prime Minister, sorry, I don't remember back.

And we've got to have a picture of him so that you know what he looks like, it's always helpful isn't it? And that's not him. There he is. And this is what he said. He said, most of our people have never had it so good.

That was his phrase, never had it so good. Great phrase isn't it? Like Ian's phrase, never had it so good. Now that's been the story in the Christian West for the last 60, 70 years.

[1 : 03] In many ways we've never had it so good in being able to make Christ known. Christianity has been the accepted religion. In fact, in this country it's been a state religion.

The doors of churches have always been open. No one has been stopped from coming to church. And we have been free to talk to anybody about Jesus Christ. But I want to suggest to you this morning that the climate is changing.

And it's changing extremely fast. Our privileged freedoms are being curtailed. Opposition is rising substantially. And we are in difficulty when we start to assert that Jesus Christ is the King above all other kings.

As soon as we specify who is not king, we're heading towards a hate crime. Now our story here in the book of Acts, we've arrived at chapter 12, started with strong beginnings in Jerusalem, where Judaism was a protected religion.

It was only forced out of Jerusalem when persecution arose. Or the Christians were only forced out of Jerusalem when persecution arose. And here we are again in chapter 12 with another chapter of strong opposition to the Jesus followers.

[2 : 24] I hope we realise how costly it is to follow Jesus in many parts of the world. It was certainly true here in the first century. And even if we've never had it so good up to now in this country, I'm sure that persecution will start to rise.

The gospel train has been making headway into Roman Gentile territory. Peter explained the gospel to the Roman man Cornelius in chapter 10.

And now we move to Peter with Herod. Herod represents the anti-Christian world. In chapter 11, the gospel went to Antioch.

But now trouble arises from the Roman authorities. So I think the first thing we need to say to ourselves from this section is expect opposition.

You see how the chapter starts. It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church. He intended to persecute them.

[3 : 27] He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. And when he saw that this met with approval from the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.

This happened during the festival of unleavened bread. I think that's mentioned because Jews were a protected grouping. And he did something stupid in the Jewish festival.

After 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 a public trial after the Passover.

Now, previously, opposition has come from Jewish leaders. The mainline Orthodox Jews did not like the followers of Jesus, the Jewish Christians who followed Jesus.

Now, opposition comes from the official authorities of the Romans, King Herod. King Herod was really Rome's puppet king. He was appointed to pacify the Jews.

[4 : 29] This particular Herod, Agrippa, was the grandson of Herod the Great, who was the last Jewish king of Judea. Well, we say Jewish king. He was an Edomite.

So, he was a descendant of Abraham, but not through the line of Isaac. So, a sort of half-Jew. He was a friend of Roman emperors.

He gained extensive Palestinian territory. But he was far from loved by the Jewish people, or from the Jesus followers. He's had Stephen killed, as you just saw.

And now we wonder what's in store for Peter. He's had James killed as well. Now, what's in store for Peter? So, the chapter is set up knowing that Herod is going to be the opposer of the Christians. Wherever the gospel makes headway, wherever it moves forward into new territory, we can expect opposition, can't we? There is a wicked devil in this world.

[5 : 29] Who hates God and hates his gospel. And he will do all he can to oppose God, and to oppose God's people. He can use internal strife, as we've already seen through Acts, with troubles within the Christian group, as well as persecution from outside.

And we have to say to ourselves, as brothers and sisters in Christ, let's beware of the devil's schemes, wicked schemes. We won't always have it so good.

He uses Herod here as his tool. He puts Peter in prison, with a really, really heavy guard. Did you notice that in verse 4? Look, four squads of four Roman soldiers each.

He's really, really putting the pressure on the Christians here. And we discover that Peter sleeps in verse 6.

The night before he was about to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and centuries stood guard at the entrance. It's overkill, isn't it?

[6 : 38] Absolute overkill. Heavy stuff here. We're entering a new phase. This is state opposition. Yes, Herod may have been the puppet king. Yes, Herod may have been deeply hated by the Jews.

Maybe he was only put in power to try and please them. But he really, really is acting for Rome here, and all the opposition to the Christians. And he's showing his strong hand against this new movement.

In fact, the power went to his head. It went so far to his head that he recognised himself to be a god. By the end of the chapter, he thinks he's god.

No one can ever think that and get away with it. And he's just killed by the end of the chapter. Dead. Now, we have had many, many peaceful years in the West.

With Christianity, as I say, almost a protected religion. But I fear not for much longer. Think of our brothers and sisters that we pray for in Nepal.

[7 : 38] Think of the situation in Burma. Think of the Christians who struggled in China and still do. How long before the authorities come for us too?

So Acts 12 for me has been a real, real wake-up call. I hope it will be for you too. A real wake-up call. Luke is more concerned to emphasise the divine hand on the whole situation in helping Peter escape rather than focusing on the opposition.

You see, having told us about the strong arm of Herod, we need to notice the even stronger arm of the living God. Look at verses 6 to 10. The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and centuries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly, 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.

Then the angel said to him, Put on your clothes and sandals. And Peter did so. Wrap your cloak round you and follow me, the angel told him. Peter followed him out of prison.

[8 : 51] I love this little bit here at the end of 9. But he had no idea what the angel was doing was really happening. He thought he was seeing a vision. There's the first touch of humour, I think, in the chapter.

There's quite a lot of humour in the chapter, and I've had a good laugh at it myself. So please do. They passed the first and second guards. They came to the iron gate leading to the city.

It opened for them by itself, and they went through. When they walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. It's a great way to get out of prison, isn't it? Then Peter came to himself and said, Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.

You see? He's out. He's escaped. He had no idea what was going on. He thought it was just a vision. He couldn't leave his eyes. People don't walk out of prison that easily, do they? This was the hand of God. This was the hand of God. You see, when he came to himself in verse 11, Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel, rescued me from Herod's clutches, and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen, which is to shut down the Christian movement.

[10:11] Peter realised that God was at work. In fact, if you just turn back a couple of chapters, come back with me to 1034. 1034.

Just look at this. This is at Cornelius' house. And Peter begins to speak, and he says, Yes, he sees the hand of God back then, in Cornelius' house.

He feels the hand of God now, on his own shoulder here, in chapter 12. It's true, isn't it?

We've always got more to learn about God, haven't we? We can't wrap God up, and tape him, and keep him into a little box, can we? We've always got more to learn. And I think Luke is telling us, there is Herod, with all his power, thinking he's the grand God, and here is the living God, taking Peter out of prison.

See the greater hand of God, at work here. Never underestimate that God is always stronger. God is always more full of surprises, than we ever imagined. God is always able to have the upper hand.

[11:29] When things look dark and bleak, God hasn't fallen asleep. He's always working, for the good of his name. How has Peter been set free?

By the miraculous intervention of God. Sending an angel. But did you know a verse we skipped over? Did you remember? To look at verse 5 as we read it.

I skipped over it when I read it. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying, to God for him. Now Luke brings that out to the fore, in the next set of verses.

If we are to expect opposition, oh that's Herod by the way, if you want to see what he looks like. I don't know if that's a true representation, but that's what they thought, in some early centuries. Now we're told to keep praying.

And look, here's another touch of humour. Peter goes to Rhoda's house, or the house of, sorry, the house of Mary the mother, and Rhoda's on the door. Look at 12.

[12:34] When this had dawned on him, that he was out, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, John Mark, where many people had gathered, and were praying. Yes, they were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, it would be a courtyard, with houses in the courtyard, and there would be an outer door.

Peter knocks on the outer door, and Rhoda comes to answer the door. I remember when we were at college, Daphne had digs with a lady, whose name was Rhoda, named after this incident.

So we always had to knock on her door, very loudly. When she recognised Peter's voice, she's so thrilled to hear him, she's so overjoyed, she runs back without opening it, and says to the others, Peter's at the door.

They say, you're out of your mind. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, it must be an angel. But Peter kept knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.

Yet that's just what they'd been praying for, it's released from prison, there he is at the door. It's rather funny, isn't it? Well, I think it is. So overwhelmed is Rhoda, she leaves Peter at the door.

[13:42] And so unbelieving were the others, that they thought she was out of her mind. An angel was their best guess. Do you know, it's so truly human, isn't it?

So truly human. Nobody expects answered prayer like that, do they? Now, I wonder why Luke makes such a lot of this incident. Look, it goes on from verses 12 to 17. Quite a section there, isn't it?

And Luke makes quite a bit of that. In fact, when Peter does go into the house, at verses 16 and 17, he keeps knocking at the door, and they opened it eventually and saw him, they're astonished. He motioned with his hand for them to be quiet. And describes how the Lord brought him out of prison. Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this, he said, and then he left for another place.

Why do you think Luke spends so much time on it? It's almost a comical incident, isn't it, in the middle of the story?

[14 : 43] Would you think it's because it's a good reminder to us to pray? To be serious about prayer? To expect God to answer our prayers?

To not give up praying? It was a helpful reminder to me. Keep praying. Keep praying. I need such reminders. Don't you?

You see, prayer might be imperfect, but it's still effective. That's so good, isn't it? One writer says, God answers unbelieving prayer.

Thus we keep at it. However poor we are at praying. Now, why is it that we pray so fervently? Why is it we should pray so fervently? Because of this truth, this big truth in the chapter.

The big truth is God will win. That's the big truth. Herod will get his comeuppance. We'll see that in a moment. He's going to show his ruthlessness in executing the soldiers that were responsible for securing Peter in prison.

[15 : 48] Look at 19. In the morning there was no small commotion, 18, among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and didn't find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

He's a very nice chap, isn't he? Really, really charming fellow. That's Herod for you. That's how much he disliked people who wouldn't obey him.

And then Luke adds this next section, which I think is meant to make us shudder. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

He's gone up north. He had been quarrelling with the people on the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They now joined together and sought an audience with him.

After securing 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.

[16 : 53] On the appointed day, Herod, wearing his royal robe, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. And they shouted, this is the voice of a God, not of a man.

Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms and died.

But the word of God continued to spread and flourish. Herod's ruthlessness in executing the soldiers.

Herod's trying to pacify things and the people have to use this man with one of the best names I've found in the Bible, Blastus or Blastus. Not a great name for a chap. Blastus.

He secures an audience with the leader. Suppliers return. There'd been trouble over supplies for Tyre and Sidon. So people call Herod a God. And the problem was, he believed him.

[18 : 00] He believed it. It went to his head. For failing to honour Yahweh, the true and living God, Herod is struck down dead. One writer puts it like this.

Herod, who denied food for Tyre and Sidon, himself becomes food for worms and dies. It's well put, isn't it? Herod, who denied food for Tyre and Sidon, Blastus intervenes, himself becomes food for worms and dies.

Now, if you think the Bible is just dull old history, look at Luke's irony here in this chapter. Herod thinks he's the big gun. He's arresting the believers.

He's putting them in prison. If the guards don't obey, he kills them. He has James killed. Now he's seized Peter. But by the end of the chapter, he has his comeuppance and he's eaten by worms.

In the meantime, Peter is imprisoned. But neither Herod nor Peter can control what God does. And even those praying for Peter's release leave him standing on the doorstep.

[19 : 12] You've just got to smile through the chapter, haven't you? God will always win. Isn't that what Luke is trying to tell us? God will always win. Because that's how he concludes.

But, 24, the word of God continues to spread and flourish. Yes, God will win. Victory is secure. Of course he'll win. Because only Jesus deals with sin and death.

Just as he's quite capable of turning around a saw to use him for his work, so he can take out a Herod when he gets in his way. In my own Bible reading notes the other week in Philippians 4, I came across this comment which I thought was really helpful.

There is no trial too difficult. There is no obstacle too high. There is no temptation too strong. There is no opposition too powerful. There is no persecution too threatening.

Put your faith and trust in God and follow him in obedience. This joy will be your joy and this contentment will be your contentment. See, the chapter tells me God's gospel is unstoppable.

[20 : 26] God will win. His gospel is unstoppable. Luke began the chapter by telling us how well it looked for Herod and how dark it looked for the church.

James killed. Peter imprisoned. He now ends the chapter with Peter's deliverance, the death of Herod and the triumph of the word of God. John Stock puts it so, so well.

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.

The best example I can think of for this is over the last hundred years, the last 80 years probably, the communist leaders of the Eastern Bloc of the world.

Do you know they fell? They rose into the revolution, whenever it was, 1918 or wherever it was, and they fell within 80 years. They opposed God.

[21 : 34] They opposed the gospel. They thought atheism was the answer, but communism meant we're all equal until they discovered within their souls they were unequal.

They rose above, some of them. They had very nice dachers. And there was another revolution and they fell, one country after another. In our lifetime.

Well, all the people's lifetime. In other words, the gospel makes headway. The gospel makes headway here in Gentile territory. The gospel makes headway in Gentile territory, albeit with opposition, very strong opposition.

You see, God can get his man out of prison. God can take another man out of power. But above all, his gospel will endure. Our task is to pray and persuade people that that gospel is the one to believe in.

My friends, if you believe and follow Jesus Christ and you believe in his good news, you belong on the side of the unstoppable gospel. Whatever humans or Satan does cannot stop the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ.

[22 : 45] Do you know, from here, it even reached our shores in this country. And even when it arrived to this country, it penetrated hard hearts, including mine and maybe yours.

Isn't that great joy? So remember, opposition is to be expected. God can deal with rebels.

Christians must keep praying, believing God answers prayer.

The word of God will flourish, whatever the opposition. Believe it. Pray for it. Work hard for it. Now maybe life will get tougher and tougher.

Maybe Christians will no longer be tolerated on our shores. Maybe we'll be hated. What should we do? We should give ourselves to serious prayer.

We should take courage and continue to hold out the word of life. We should expect God to act.

You see, only Jesus Christ makes sense of life.

[23 : 54] Only Christ can handle rebellious hearts. Only Christ has conquered death. Only Christ can give us eternal security. Only Christ can turn antagonistic hearts into peaceful hearts.

Our hope is in Christ. Christ. Let's pray together. Dear Father God, we thank you for the great news of Jesus Christ, that death is overcome, sin is defeated, and we can go free.

And that's the gospel that we want to embrace. But we are well aware that it's not cost-free. There are those who want to oppose it, some with the power of the sword and the state, and others by throwing churches into confusion.

Please help us to talk to you often, to plead with you to rescue and free our friends from the terrible grips of sin, stubbornness, and selfishness. We are so grateful to know that you are sovereign in all matters.

You will win. Evil will be defeated. Even evildoers will face your punishment. So whilst we have opportunity to speak about Christ openly, please help us to make the most at every conversation, give us boldness, give us love, help us to make Jesus known.

[25 : 19] And please, Lord, don't stop the gospel march until you've filled eternity with your elect, we pray. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.