

Counter attack

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 January 2016

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] If you'd like to open your Bibles, it's Acts chapter 12 then. And then to the ends of the earth.

And just last week, Luke was getting geared up, as it were, to start his discussion, description, of this third phase to the ends of the earth.

But then, tucked in here, we have this rather strange passage in Acts 12. Which raises really rather a lot of questions.

Well, here's a question. Who killed who, the brother of whom, with a what? I was told once that in the early 20th century, one of the big missionary societies, I don't recall which one it was now, but when they were interviewing candidates for the mission field, would ask that question to test the candidates' knowledge of the Bible.

So, if you should find yourself in that situation, you'll now know the answer. It's in verse 2. How many people who killed James, the brother of John, with a sword? So, that's one question answered fairly easily.

[1:35] But here are some slightly more confusing ones. Why is this passage actually here? Luke's just about to get us fired up for this big missionary push from Antioch, and suddenly he sticks this rather odd description in, before he's just about to get going, as it were.

Why does he do that? And who, actually, who is it about, anyway? I mean, is it about Peter? Is it about Herod? Maybe it's about angels.

Angels are mentioned three times in this passage, but I'm not sure it really helps us a lot to know about angels. So, I don't think it's about angels. But is it about Peter?

Is it about Herod? What is it about? The one question, of course, that immediately comes to our mind is, hang on a minute. If God could save Peter from Herod, why didn't he save James?

And, of course, you might also think, well, all this seems a little bit far-fetched about escaping from prison and being eaten by worms and things. Is this passage actually historically accurate?

[2:52] Well, some of these questions, I think it's almost impossible to answer without appealing directly to the sovereignty of God.

Why did God save Peter but not James? Well, you could say perhaps James' work was done, but Peter still had some sheep tending to do. But, I mean, you really can't say very much about this question.

The only real answer you can give, I think, is because that is what God chose to do. To appeal to the sovereignty of God. Another question, though, there is actually a fairly simple one to answer. It's actually a matter of public record. That of whether this description is historically accurate. Even secular historians like Simon Montefiore, who's both a Jewish and something of a sceptic, there's an interesting book he wrote, actually, called Jerusalem, the Biography.

And he agrees that actually Luke is a pretty accurate historian. And that these events that are described here really did happen. James was killed by Herod.

[4:02] Peter was arrested but escaped. He has his own theory as to why that was, but I won't go there. But, yeah, Peter were arrested and escaped. And then Herod did indeed do a deal with the Phoenicians, the people in Tyre and Sidon.

And he did then, almost immediately afterwards, suffer a particularly unpleasant death. Apparently of some nasty intestinal disorder.

Which Luke describes here as being eaten by worms. Presumably he means eaten by worms from inside. And he died in agony. So, yes, this is historically accurate.

But if we try to answer that other question, who is this actually about? Is it about Peter? Is it about Herod? Or is it about Jerusalem? Or what is it about? I think we have to think a bit more about some of these questions.

And think about why this passage is here. It does seem like a digression. Why is this passage here? Well, one might argue that this is all about relocation.

[5:16] You may remember that Jesus himself had said, The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

The Spirit is on the move. He's moving from Jerusalem to Antioch, just as the glory had removed at the time of exile, had left the temple.

So again, the glory, the Spirit is leaving the city of God, the Jerusalem itself, and moving on. But Luke wants to point out to us that the Spirit of Antichrist is also on the move here.

And Luke is a very tidy historian, and he wants to finish off the first part of his book. Because the first part of his book very much puts the emphasis on the original apostles, which of course included James, and on the city of Jerusalem.

And of course, Peter. Peter is, as we're the hero of those first chapters of the book. Now, Peter and Jerusalem don't disappear entirely from the narrative, of course, in the rest of Acts.

[6:31] But it is true that the focus changes. Now the focus is in Antioch, and on the Gentile churches, and particularly, of course, on Saul, the Apostle Paul.

So there is a change of focus here, and so Luke needs, in a sense, to wrap up that first part of the book. So how does he do it?

What about Jerusalem? Well, as I said, Peter is the hero of much of the early part of Acts. And in Acts 2, we remember how he stood up and preached the gospel fearlessly in Jerusalem to the gathered crowds, and how his words had great impact, and how the disciples initially met in the temple with the approval of all the people.

But as we go through those early chapters of Jerusalem, we find that the opposition is also gathering in strength and power. So first of all, Peter is just arrested by the Jewish council.

But that's pretty ineffective, because the internal disunity among the council itself, so they just let him go again. But then some more strident and militant groups of Jews enter the battle.

[7:51] And as we read the description in Damascus and in Jerusalem, some of them were prepared to resort to murder and assassination. And now we find that the opposition has escalated even further.

In chapter 12, verse 1, he talks about Herod, who of course is the political ruler of many of the Jews, and also a representative of the Roman power.

Now the opposition has reached political level, has reached the level of the powers of the empire.

And we notice that the death of James here is neither an illegal stoning, like the death of Stephen was, nor an assassination or murder, but a public execution carried out by the Roman authority.

And Herod plans to submit Peter to a public trial. This is an escalation, an upgrade of the opposition.

Now the Roman authority, the civil authority itself, has got involved. And so these events actually, and what we have described here, they represent a partial victory, don't they, for the Jewish opponents of the church.

[9:12] But Luke wants to remind us that it isn't a total victory, that God is still sovereign and that he still protects his people. So he tells us how, in verse 11, that Peter escapes from prison with the help of an angel.

And so Peter survives, and the Jerusalem church survives. But notice the details of this description, because Luke, the master storyteller, catches our attention, doesn't he, with this rather strange, rather amusing story of the servant girl coming to the door.

It's Peter. Slams the door in his face and goes upstairs again. When you're in the process of escaping from prison, the last thing you want to do is be left standing out in the road.

But actually, I'd like to say that's slightly amusing, but in a sense, the rest of it is the detail that really matters. What we see here is, in fact, yes, the Jerusalem church survives and will survive.

But it is driven underground. Do you notice, it's reduced now, they can't just all assemble together in the temple. It's reduced now to meeting in small groups and in private houses, and you have to keep the doors locked.

[10:35] And notice, the place he went to wasn't even where the main leaders of the church were gathered, because he has to leave a message for them. So what happens?

Peter gives a brief report, and then he flees to a safe house. Chapter 12, verse 17. It appears to be what's happened. Another place, you know, somewhere safe, somewhere out of the way. It doesn't even contact the rest of the leaders of the church. They only get the news secondhand in verse 17.

And in fact, one has to assume here, in fact, the other apostles are also keeping a low profile. Why do I say that? Because who is now the effective leader of the church?

It's James. Now, of course, this James isn't James, the apostle. He's dead, remember. Herod's killed him. Traditionally, it's thought that this James might have been a brother of Jesus.

[11:38] Absolutely sure about that. But he wasn't James the apostle. And as far as we know, he wasn't an apostle at all. But he has now become, effectively, the leader of the church.

And actually, this James, we don't have that much about him. We only get hints in Luke's account in Acts. But some of the secular histories throw some light on this character, James.

And he's no mean politician, it turns out. And he actually keeps, the secular accounts record that he actually kept the Jerusalem church from extermination for many years.

We only get hints of this in Acts, but we do get some hints later on when Paul came to Jerusalem and James said, you've got to go to the temple and clarify yourself.

He couldn't do it forever, of course, and eventually James was executed, was stoned for refusing to deny that Jesus was the Messiah. But he did keep things going for many years and he was the God's man, the right man in the right place at the right time to deal with the church, keep the church alive in time of persecution.

[12:51] It's not always the firebrands that God uses. I'm just thinking, it reminds us, doesn't it, of that time of the Reformation when, you know, the weird extreme Puritans found most of the time got slung in prison for one reason or another.

But Thomas Cranmer, the politician, the careful guy, the guy who would bend in the wind a bit. And he was the guy who guided the church through the early years of the Reformation in England.

Sometimes that's the sort of person that God uses. And here he seems to have used James while the apostles have gone underground. The spirit distributes different gifts, doesn't he?

Sometimes he'll use a fiery Paul, but sometimes he'll use a politician like James or like Thomas Cranmer. But anyway, what we can see is that the church in Jerusalem, yes, it will survive, but it is hard pressed.

It's reduced to meeting and hiding in private houses, locking the doors, you know, hiding in safe houses and passing messages around in secret. So is it now mission impossible?

[14:15] Has now the gospel been effectively suppressed? But no, Luke has already indicated to us in the previous few chapters that the spirit is moving on.

But now, he racks up the suspense a bit by telling us a bit more about Herod. So what's this about Herod? Herod. And you might ask the question, why is it that Luke gives us so much information about Herod?

I mean, he's always referring to political reasons of one, political leaders of one sort or another, but Herod here seems to get a full section, a full chapter. Why is that?

Why is he so important? And I think perhaps you can find clues to that if you look at verse 3 and also in verse 23. Herod wasn't just any Roman leader.

He was a Roman appointee, but he did actually also lay claim to the title of being king of the Jews. How did he do that?

[15:28] The Herod's claim actually to the title was pretty tenuous. They were actually Idomians, Idomites, the Herods. And their claim to the throne was based on the fact that this Herod's grandfather, Herod the

Great, had married a Maccabean princess, Marianne.

And who was she? Well, she was a descendant of Judas Maccabeus, who about 200 years earlier had briefly ruled over an independent Jewish state.

Now even Judas Maccabeus, who does seem to have been a godly man if you look at the histories, but even Judas Maccabeus was not actually a descendant of David. But still, he did have some claim, at least having freed the country, to be the king of the Jews.

But he's, let's say, Judas Maccabeus does seem to have been a fairly godly man, but his descendants went downhill fairly quickly, as is usually the case, just as David and Solomon's descendants went downhill fairly quickly.

And by the time of Herod the Great, which is Herod at the time of the birth of Jesus, their line had pretty much died out, but there was one surviving Maccabean princess, Marianne.

[16:52] And so, Herod the Great married her to give him at least some sort of title to the throne. Because really, of course, his title to the throne was that he was a Roman appointee.

All the Herods were staunchly pro-Roman. Most of them were personal friends of the emperors at the time, one way or another. Pretty dangerous thing to be a friend of the emperor.

Some of them suffered for it, but most of them were actually quite friendly with the emperors of the time. But the problem they had, of course, these facts that their claim to the throne was pretty tenuous, that they were actually not really Jews at all, and that their real power base was the Roman Empire, their support of the Roman emperors.

This was not actually going to endear them to their strict Jewish subjects. So, the Herods were always on the lookout for ways to ingratiate themselves with the Jewish leaders.

And so, Herod the Great, in fact, had built that magnificent temple that Jesus talks about. Well, he'd started building, he actually wasn't even finished by the time of Jesus. It took 40 odd years to build.

[18:08] But he'd done that to say, well, okay, I'm actually an Edomite, I'm actually an Idomian, but I'm one of you, really, I'm going to build you a temple.

And he's doing a similar thing here, this Herod is doing a similar thing here, isn't he? He's doing things to try and please the Jewish leaders.

He's executed James and he's going to try Peter, and then later on he's going to do a deal as the king of the Jews. So, implicitly, Luke is asking us the question, whether these Herods are genuinely anointed kings of Judah?

Is Herod Christ, in other words, anointed, or Antichrist? This particular Herod is Agrippa I, he's the grandson of Herod the Great, the one who had tried to kill Jesus at birth.

He's the nephew of Herod Antipas, who had executed John the Baptist, and remember had filched his brother's wife, Herodias.

[19:19] Herod Antipas had got himself exiled, he was friendly with the wrong emperor, and when there was a change in power, he got in, or something went wrong, he got himself exiled.

The best thing you can say about Herodias, actually, is that she did go into exile with him, so she was at least that loyal. But anyway, he'd lost his throne.

Another uncle of this was Philip the Tetrarch, who by all accounts was the best of the bunch, and he actually gets a brief mention in chapter 13, verse 1.

But this particular Herod was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, and he'd been appointed by the Romans as the Jewish king.

And so Luke is asking us whether this claimed to be the king of the Jews, does it really stack up? Well, he certainly didn't start well executing James, but then maybe he didn't immediately execute Peter, so perhaps we'll give him a second chance.

[20:28] And so what else is there to say, as Luke got to say about this Herod, Herod Agrippa I? Well, he made a deal with the Phoenicians, with people of Tyre and Sidon.

Well, that's not a bad thing. In fact, that has a very good precedent. If you know the ancient history of Judah, Jerusalem, that both David and Solomon had been on very friendly terms with the Phoenicians, with the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon.

So, yeah, okay, he's doing something useful. There's at least one good thing to be said for him. He has sorted out this problem with the Phoenicians. But then comes the crunch, doesn't it?

Okay, perhaps, maybe his claim to be the rightful king of the Jews does stack up then. But then comes the crunch. A true king of the Jews would have done what?

If he was giving a speech, like Solomon did, he would have given praise to God, wouldn't he, for this peaceful resolution of the problem.

[21:43] And the crowd start shouting at him, he's like a god, he's like a god. And what should he have done? He said, no, there's no God but Yahweh, but the Lord. And give praise to him.

But he doesn't do that, does he? He takes the credit for himself, in verse 23. And so he's unmasked.

His claim to be the true king of the Jews is shown to be false. And Herod's spirit, impressive though it may have been, it sounds as though he gave a very good speech, a very spirited speech, but in fact Herod's spirit is shown to be the spirit, not of the Christ, not of the true anointed king, but the spirit of Antichrist.

And so God declares the verdict, and Herod dies. So he dies as it happens, in a most unpleasant way. But notice the but that we get in verse 24.

Well in fact, you don't have to translate that Greek word but, it can mean but, but it can also mean yet, or it can even mean so, as a consequence of. So once we have the verdict on Herod, we can reassess the events of this chapter in a new light, can't we?

[23:12] So what's Luke actually saying here? Well, Philip the deacon, you remember, had gone to Caesarea, preached the gospel there.

Sorry, Phil's checking up on my Greek now, but, that's what strong says anyway, if I'm wrong. Philip the deacon had gone to Caesarea and preached there.

Peter had preached there to a Gentile, as we read in the last chapter to Cornelius. So, opposed in Jerusalem, now the spirit of God was moving on to Caesarea, Caesarea, and then on to Antioch, and out into the world, but the spirit of Antichrist must react too.

He's got to counter-attack. So what does he do? He goes to Caesarea to talk to the Gentiles. And what's he coming with? A nice political package.

He's got a message for the Gentiles too. It's a message of a political deal, a way to solve the problems of both the Jews and the Gentiles, an attractive political message.

[24:32] And so that's the question. Which king of the Jews will the Gentiles go for? They're offered a choice. They could go for Herod, king of the Jews.

He's offered them a good deal. Or they could go to the other claimant of the throne, the Lord Jesus Christ. Which of them are they going to go for?

But God doesn't allow this false gospel any more traction, does he? the fake is exposed and judged. And so Herod's opposition is nullified.

But in verse 24 is important. Antichrist has been bound, at least for the present, and the gospel has free passage, is free to run.

one. Okay, so what about us? This is all very interesting, but it's all ancient history.

[25:40] Does it have much relevance to us? And I would say that Luke is actually here asking us another question. And this in fact is the real question that this passage is answering not who killed who, the brother of whom with a what, but where is hope to be found?

And for the Gentiles, where is hope to be found? Is it in able rulers, or is it in the gospel of Jesus Christ? And it's a good question, isn't it?

And a question that we still need to answer today. So what can we say about this question? First of all, that God knows what he's doing. Why did God save Peter, but not James?

Well, we don't know, to be honest, but we do know that God cares for his people, and that even more importantly than that, that the spirit of God is not bound and defeated by the schemes of men, or even the schemes of nations.

That's why I chose that Martin Luther to him. But still, there is a bit more to be said than that, because it is true that, on the other hand, that when he is resisted, the spirit may well decide to move on.

[27:04] Even back in Genesis 6, verse 3, he says, the Lord said, my spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal, his days will be 120 years.

There, he's talking, obviously, particularly about the lifespan of a man, but what he's saying is that the spirit will move on at the right time. That's what Jesus said, isn't it?

The wind blows where it wills, and you can see, hear the sound of it, but you don't actually know where it's going. Well, they didn't have satellites in those days, I suppose, maybe now you do know where it's going, but get the point anyway.

So, what's Luke telling us? He's telling us that, in fact, the time of judgment for Jerusalem and the Jewish kingdom was rapidly approaching.

The signs weren't good. The spirit of Antichrist was active. The people were becoming decadent. And that raises questions for us, doesn't it?

[28:09] What are the omens for our society? How are the entrails pointing for our society? What do we find when we look around?

We find that increasingly the celebrities we looked up to have been doing disgusting things in private. We look at our politicians, like Herod.

What do we find? Well, usually one of two things. Either they're more interested in what is popular than what is right and don't stand up for what really should be right, or those that do stand up for what they believe in and what they think is right, attempt to silence opposition and debate.

So you lose both ways, or either way. What happens in business? Well, you find nowadays it seems that to succeed in business, you've got to be ruthless.

this. Now our hero is Alan Sugar, isn't he? You're fired. What happens in sport? Well, it seems that to succeed in sport, you have to cheat.

[29:21] You have to take drugs and you have to bribe people. Take money to throw matches or to win matches. what happens in our universities?

They're supposed to be guardians of free speech, but often they stifle free speech in the name of political correctness. I'd say the University of Oxford recently has stood up in favour of free speech, but the general tenor isn't good.

What about us ordinary men and women in the street, as it were? What about the ordinary families of our land? What do we find? That they're so self-centred that fraud and violence is rife.

We have people, carers, and even carers of our relatives stealing from their elderly relatives.

There's an article about that in the paper, a day or two ago.

We find our families blow themselves apart through selfishness, not the lack of commitment to each other. We find our children are being trapped in a culture of sexual exploitation, not only by adults, sometimes by adults, but even quite often by each other.

[30:49] Again, I read another article in the paper that said the youngest victim of revenge porn on the internet was 11 years old.

This was reported ones in the last year, I think. The youngest victim was 11, and the oldest victim was 66. Although there was a slight difference because the 66-year-old, they didn't use the internet. They sent the dirty photos by snail mail. But, yeah, we have a culture where not only do our adults trap our children for sexual exploitation, they even do it to each other because they've had no moral guidance.

Okay, it's true that things in Western Europe are not yet as bad as they could be. There is still some integrity around. People still do complain about the bribery in sport and so on.

At least people don't think, oh, well, what do you expect? There is still some integrity around. But things are certainly heading in the wrong direction. And they're heading in the wrong direction simply because if you preach a gospel of the only thing that matters is me, then it's bound to happen, isn't it?

[32:13] What matters is, I'd like to earn my keeper as a cricket player by earning a lot of money as a good player, but if I can make a bit on the side by throwing a match or something, why not?

And so what can we make of this? Well, I think what we have to say is that without Christ, there can be no real progress.

And that's not to say that you can't improve some things. I mean, as you said, Herod did indeed do a deal with the Phoenicians, and probably that made life better for some people for a short time.

It didn't really last long, because the root problem, the problem of sin and selfishness, has not been dealt with. We take two steps forward and one step forward and two steps back, don't we? Actually, if you look at the history of the last half century or so, people have started to make some sort of progress in eliminating poverty and disease in the third world.

[33:30] The Make Hunger History campaign doesn't actually seem totally nonsensical now. And yet, what do we find as soon as we start making progress on that, that global warming pops up and threatens to push us all back to square one?

We all cheer when communism falls in Russia, and what do we find? It's replaced by a rapacious form of capitalism instead.

French actually have a proverb, don't they? Excuse my pronunciation. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. The more it changes, the more it's the same thing.

The threat of nuclear war recedes, and what do we have instead? We have extremist barbarism, and possibly the worst refugee crisis in human history.

the kings of the earth may preach peace, they may even mean it, but like Herod, ultimately, they're just not up to the job of restraining human wickedness.

[34:47] Why is that? Because of course they're caught in it themselves. Cast your mind back eight years or so. Do you remember the celebrations when President Obama was elected?

This is a new beginning. there was literally dancing in the streets. As one commentator pointed out rather amusingly at the time, President Obama got the Nobel Peace Prize.

Why? Well, basically because he wasn't George W. Bush. But now, eight years on, what do we find?

Well, Obama liberalism is widely perceived to have failed in the forces of reaction are rampant. And actually, if you look at it, most of the failures were not really Obama's fault.

He didn't create the violence in the Middle East. He's not particularly responsible for the economic instability that's marked all the period of his reign as President.

[35:57] But in a sense, that's just the point. Obama is not Herod. I think he's probably an honest and good, well-meaning man.

But even so, even he can't do it. He's the most powerful man in the most powerful and richest nation on earth. He's access to military force that could have blown away the Roman Empire in a few days, hasn't he?

But can he solve the world's problems? No. And so we turn to somebody else.

We turn from the liberal to the right winger. But Obama can't solve the world's problems and neither can Trump. Where is hope to be found?

That's the question that Luke wants to ask ourselves. And he's quite clear on the answer. It's only in King Jesus, the true King, the true King of the Jews, that provides a way forward.

[37:11] So let's sing again and then Chris will come out and and the and the and the and the