

Long Live the King

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[0 : 0 0] Please be seated. For those of you who don't know me, my name's Jordan Hitchcock, and I'm a regular member of the 6pm congregation here at Holy Trinity.

I'm married to Esme. Almost 12 months now, isn't it? And I'm a full-time student at Ridley College. I've just completed a year's worth of study there, so we've got a couple of years to go.

Okay, so why don't I pray? Father in heaven, we come before you. We gather around your word, and we ask that you would speak to each one of us.

And we ask, Father, that it would indeed be you who speaks by your Holy Spirit. In the name of Christ, Amen. It's been a big weekend, hasn't it?

Not big enough for some, perhaps? So this morning we either celebrate or we lament, depending on your point of view, a change of federal government after 11 and a half years of liberal leadership.

[1 : 1 9] What difference will the new government make? Will Kevin O'Rourke turn out to be all that Labor voters hoped for? Will John Howard be missed?

I'm sure many of us listened to John Howard's farewell speech last night. Esme and I found it quite moving. Whether you voted for him or not, you can't really deny that he was a man who loved Australia.

Nevertheless, prime ministers, rulers, they come and they go. They're in power for a season, and then they have to make way for somebody else.

In Acts chapter 12, we meet a ruler, King Herod, who rose up for a time and then fell. Like many worldly rulers in the Bible, Herod was antagonistic to God's people and God's purpose.

But God rescued the church from his tyranny and brought his rule to an end. We'll be looking at Acts chapter 12 in three main sections. In verses 1 to 5, we'll see the great threat that Herod posed.

[2 : 3 1] Verses 6 to 17, we'll see how Christ, the risen Lord, showed himself to be a mighty rescuer. And in verses 18 to 25, we'll see how Christ judged Herod and continued to advance his kingdom through his word.

Now we see from verses 1 to 5 that ungodly, worldly rulers are not without power.

Rather, they often pose a great threat to the church. We know from the previous chapters that the church had been enjoying a period of expansion and growth following the conversion of Saul and the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles.

It hadn't been too long ago that Stephen was killed and a severe bout of persecution had broken out. But through that persecution and in the wake of it, the gospel was advancing.

At the beginning of chapter 12, there is a fresh outburst of violent persecution against the church under King Herod, that is Herod Agrippa I, who was the ruler of Palestine at that time.

[3 : 46] We see that he had the power to imprison, as he put Peter in prison, the power to place on trial, and the power of the sword over any who he saw as a threat in his province, having put James to death.

So we see here that worldly authorities can pose a great threat to Christians because, humanly speaking at least, they seem to have power to destroy the church through the civil authority that they wield.

Secondly, in verses 1-5, we see that worldly authorities pose a great threat when their malice is united with public opinion.

You may say that an attack like Herod's is not likely to happen to us in the West because we live in a democratic society. Rulers are not autonomous like they used to be. No single person has too much power.

That may be true. But when we look at verse 3, we see that Herod's rampage was also fuelled by public sentiment against Christians. It says, After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.

[5 : 05] Political opportunism mixed with an evil sentiment among the people is a very dangerous combination. And such a principle could very easily turn against the church in our Western democracy even, given the right circumstances.

It's threatening enough to have a corrupt ruler against us. But when you join a corrupt ruler with a hostile people, the threat to the church seems insurmountable.

And that's what we see in Acts 12, verses 1-5. We see that it is not only Herod, but it's the Jewish people who have risen up against the church.

Now thirdly, worldly rulers pose a great threat to the church because of the measure of success they have in their opposition. In verse 2, Herod has James, the brother of John, killed with the sword.

And he has Peter arrested and well-guarded in prison, doubtless hoping to kill him as well. Now you'll know that Peter, James and John were the inner three, the leading disciples in whom Jesus confided more than the others.

[6 : 18] It was they alone who had gone up the mountain with Jesus and had seen him transfigured in Mark chapter 9. Peter was called the rock by Jesus because he was to be the human foundation stone on which the church was built.

Now James and John were called Sons of Thunder by Jesus, a title given to them most likely to describe the nature of their ministry, probably their preaching. So you can see that in killing James and arresting Peter, Herod has struck right at the heart of the apostolic ministry and therefore at the heart of the church.

Is that not a great threat? Remember that there were no completed Bibles back then. The church was reliant on the apostles for authoritative teaching and guidance.

Remember also that this was a particularly vulnerable time for the church. The Gentiles have only just begun to be included. That ancient promise given to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him, that promise is just beginning to be fulfilled.

There has been rejoicing as great numbers of Gentiles have turned to the Lord, Acts chapter 10 and 11. But there are still a number of crucial issues as yet unresolved in this transition.

[7 : 42] How will Gentiles integrate with Jews? What about the Jewish law? And by implication, what does it really mean to be saved by grace alone?

Now these questions are just beginning to be asked in chapter 11. But now one of the chief three apostles is dead and Peter, the founding rock, is imprisoned, presumably to meet with the same fate.

Does this not constitute a grave threat to the church? Can you see in these opening five verses that persecution, particularly persecution from civil rulers and hostile countrymen, is no light matter?

How does the church respond? Well, the church responded with the best response possible in this situation. We're told in verse 5, While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

Whenever we find ourselves in a crisis, we must pray. How must we pray? We must pray fervently.

[8 : 55] To say that we must pray fervently is just another way of saying that we must address God with our whole hearts. Jeremiah 21.13, a very famous verse, says, When you search for me, you will find me if you seek me with all your heart.

God has made no promises for half-hearted seeking. And we all fall short in that. But the way forward is not to excuse half-heartedness, but to ask God to make us wholehearted in our prayers and intercessions.

So the church was praying for Peter in this way. But what were they praying for? And what should we pray for persecuted Christians and our own missionaries?

Well, the text at hand doesn't give us the answer to that. But I found a very good example in Philippians 1, verses 12 to 26.

You might know that in the writing of the letter to the Philippians, Paul himself was imprisoned, experiencing persecution. And when we read verses 12 to 26, we see that Paul sees that a number of very great things have come about as a result of his persecution and in spite of his imprisonment.

[10 : 13] The first one is, I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ.

And most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. Now, one important thing we ought to pray for persecuted Christians is that they would be emboldened to share the gospel even with their persecutors.

And we ought to pray that other believers would see that example and themselves be emboldened to speak the word. Now, that's one thing we ought to pray.

How do I know that? Because it's good fruit that comes out of gospel ministry under persecution. Whatever you see in the New Testament is good fruit that comes out of persecution.

That's something that you ought to pray for when we see Christians persecuted. Another thing we see in Philippians is that Paul is hoping for deliverance in verse 19, chapter 1, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.

[11 : 47] Now, deliverance from physical suffering is something we ought to ask God for. Now, we know from Acts 12 that James didn't receive that. We know that Peter did, though.

It pleases God sometimes for Christians to suffer unto death. At other times, it pleases him to deliver Christians so that they may continue their ministries.

We ought to pray for deliverance. We ought to leave it in God's hands as to how he delivers and when he delivers. But it pleases God that we pray for deliverance for persecuted Christians.

And the third thing from this passage that we can pray for is faithfulness even unto death. Now, Paul says in verse 20, it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way but that by my speaking with all boldness Christ will be exalted now as always in my body whether by life or by death.

So we ought to pray for the persecuted that they would be faithful even unto death as God has commanded.

[13 : 00] So that we have three things that we can pray for the persecuted. Boldness and faithfulness in spreading the gospel. Two, deliverance whether that be God's will or not.

And three, faithfulness to the point of death. So returning to Acts 12 at the end of verse 5 we have a grave situation under Herod's attack the first martyred apostle in James the seeming imminent martyrdom of another Peter and a fervently praying church.

Next we come to verses 6 to 17 and here we have an abrupt change of scene don't we?

An abrupt turnabout in the narrative. We read that the very night before Herod was going to bring him out Peter bound with two chains was sleeping between two soldiers while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison.

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him saying get up quickly and the chains fell off his wrists.

[14 : 09] The angel said to him fasten your belt and put on your sandals. He did so. Then he said to him wrap your cloak around you and follow me. Peter went out and followed him. He did not realise that what was happening with the angel's help was real.

He thought he was seeing a vision. After they had passed the first and the second guard they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord and they went outside and walked along a lane when suddenly the angel left him.

Then Peter came to himself and said Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.

Now those verses are truly amazing aren't they? a surprising act of deliverance. But in one sense we shouldn't be completely surprised because Christ had promised the disciples that he would be with them to the end of the age.

Matthew 28, 18 the Great Commission. He revealed himself on earth as a miracle worker and he has that same power and greater authority now that he is in heaven.

[15 : 20] The first thing we notice about Peter's great rescue is that the Lord left it to the last minute. It was the night before Peter was to be put on trial. He had been in prison over the week-long festival of unleavened bread.

But God chose none of those earlier nights to deliver him. It came at the last possible moment. Have you seen God work this way?

Has it been your own experience? many times God's people have had to wait. Abraham had to wait for his son. Joseph had to wait in prison in Egypt.

The Israelites had to wait under slavery and cruel persecution in Egypt and they were almost thoroughly discouraged before God intervened. God's deliverance often comes at what seems to be the last minute and that's because he wants us to trust him the deliverer not the deliverance itself.

The second aspect of Peter's rescue is that it magnifies the sovereignty of God. Notice that Peter is mostly passive and highly disoriented the whole time he's being delivered.

[16 : 45] Peter doesn't contribute here. he doesn't take any of the glory because clearly he's got no idea what's going on. It's only when the deliverance is complete and the angel leaves him that he realises what has happened.

Brothers and sisters if we are to be rescued from anything be it the power of the rulers of this world such as Herod or the power of the devil and certainly the power of sin it must be by God's sovereign arm and by that alone.

let's not make the mistake of thinking that we have contributed to our salvation and that some of the glory belongs to us. The picture of Peter's physical deliverance from the clutches of Herod mirrors the pattern of God's salvation the whole Bible through.

Salvation is from the Lord. It is not found through our desire or effort as Romans 9 says it is entirely of God's sovereign mercy. Now third to rescue Peter the Lord uses a powerful agent.

Notice that through this whole chapter it is not God himself who acts directly but an angel of the Lord. We don't talk about angels very much do we?

[18 : 05] And we certainly shouldn't have an unhealthy interest in them but the fact is that there are literally hundreds of references to angels throughout the Bible. Hebrews 1.14 says that angels are spirits in the divine service sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.

Angels have served God's people all throughout history. Whenever you read of a major stage in redemptive history there you will find the ministry of angels delivering God's messages bringing about God's judgments serving God's people.

Even Christ received the ministry of angels after he was tempted in the wilderness. Why did God create angels? And why does he use them? After all we know he could simply do everything himself if he wanted to.

Well asking why God created angels is a bit like asking why God created anything at all. All of creation glorifies God and angels display God's wisdom and his power as they do his will.

When we read of angels and the power of their ministry we are amazed at the thought of how great God himself must be and we marvel at his love that he has enlisted such great beings to serve us his children.

[19 : 33] Now fourth Peter's rescue was beyond imagination. Returning to verse 12 Peter goes to the house of Mary where the prayer meeting was being held. Again it's a testimony to their fervor that they were still praying in the middle of the night.

The encounter between Peter and the servant girl is clearly intended to be funny isn't it? He gets left out the front wildly knocking on the door while Rhoda runs inside and tells them that he's there.

Now does Luke intend that as a brief moment of light relief or is he trying to communicate something to us? I think he is trying to say something very clearly.

There has been a prayer meeting going on long into the night fervent prayer which they are commended for. Yet when Rhoda tells them that their prayers have been answered they say to her you're out of your mind.

Why did they respond this way? Was it the imperfection of their faith? Well lack of faith may be involved but as I was reading this passage I was reminded of the prayer of Paul in Ephesians 3.20 where he prays Amen.

[20 : 58] What is happening in Acts 12 is that these faithful believers who were devoting themselves to God in prayer for the sake of Peter received an amazing answer that they never could have asked for or imagined.

Doubtless they were faithful but who would have expected this? Would you or I have expected it? Herod has been on the rampage. James is dead.

The mission of the church is severely compromised. Peter is chained in prison and under heavy guard. He's been that way for up to a week. It's the night before some kangaroo court will decide his fate, most likely the same fate as that of James.

You may pray fervently in such a situation but what do you really expect? Well I think that if God is the same yesterday, today and forever, if he is the same God who brought Abraham up from the Chaldeans and told the aged man that he would be the father of many nations though he was a hundred years old, if he is the God who divided the Red Sea to deliver Israel from the hand of the Egyptians, if he is the God who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, we can gather here this morning with our Bibles in our hands and declare with all confidence that in impossible situations we have clear warrant to expect the impossible.

We can't manipulate God to do what we want but we can, we ought to expect him to perform impossible acts of deliverance in our time, particularly that great deliverance that happens when a soul that has been steeped in darkness and sin is brought into the marvellous light of salvation.

[22 : 52] What do we expect when we pray? What do you expect when you pray? Our God is a great God. Our Saviour Jesus Christ is a mighty deliverer.

Now finally verses 18 to 25. When morning came, there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what became of Peter.

When Herod had searched for him and could not find him, he examined the guards and ordered them to be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. So they came to him in a body and after winning over Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for a reconciliation because their country depended on the king's country for food.

On an appointed day, Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat on the platform and delivered a public address to them. The people kept shouting, the voice of a god and not of a mortal.

[24 : 05] And immediately, because he had not given the glory 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 advance and gain adherence.

Then after completing their mission, Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem and brought with them John, whose other name was Mark. You see, not only is our risen Lord a mighty deliverer, he is also a fearful judge.

Psalm 2 warns rulers, serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet, or he will be angry and you will perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled.

We read in Acts 12 that this warning was not heeded by Herod. And so God's anger was suddenly kindled and Herod was struck down. God's judgment is not a pleasant topic to speak about, but it is graphically depicted throughout scripture, and we would be very unwise to downplay any detail of it, however unpleasant it is.

Psalm 2 even says that God laughs at wicked rulers and has them in derision. That's Psalm 2 verse 4. This is what's happening in Acts 12, 18-19.

[25 : 31] Have a read. When morning came, there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and could not find him, he examined the guards and ordered them to be put to death.

Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. Herod and his soldiers have been completely bamboozled, haven't they? God has them in derision. Luke brings this out in verse 18 when he says, when morning came there was no small commotion.

You can hear a bit of holy smugness in his tone, I think. A hint of sarcasm. When God judges his enemies, he holds them in derision.

You might not think that God would do such a thing, but Psalm 2 says that he does. And in fact, the greatest example of this was seeing when God confounded his enemies in Christ Jesus at the cross, when he broke the power that sin had over us.

Colossians 2.15, Paul says that at the cross, Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

[26 : 44] The NIV says that he made a public spectacle of them. By mocking his enemies in this way, God shows us that the battle between them and him is so far from being an even match that it's actually quite amusing at their expense.

Again, I'm not saying that this is pleasant, but it is clearly what the scriptures teach and it's what we see here in Acts 12 in the demise of Herod. It's interesting how Psalm 2 goes on to say that after God derides his enemies, he terrifies them in his wrath.

This is what happens to Herod as well. We read of a political dispute between him and the people of Tyre and Sidon, which sets the stage for some blasphemous flattery on the part of the people who kept calling him a god.

Unfortunately, it didn't do Herod any good because he seems to have accepted the compliment or at least not rebuked the people. So the angel of the Lord struck him down.

The scriptures tell us that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to the risen Christ. He is the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and God will judge every ruler who does not acknowledge this, every ruler who pridefully exalts themselves over Christ and his people as Herod did.

[28 : 11] finally, the last two verses reveal the unstoppable advance of God's word. Luke is clearly contrasting the advance of the word with the demise of Herod.

We are reminded of that famous passage, Isaiah 40 verse 6, which is quoted by Peter himself in the letter of 1 Peter. All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers, the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever. Herod withered and fell, but the word of God advanced and gained adherence.

Though Acts 12 doesn't say it explicitly, we can be sure that one of the main reasons Peter was rescued from prison was so he could continue his part of the Great Commission, which was to testify concerning Jesus, to preach and teach the word of God.

The kingdom of God comes with the advance of God's word. Christ exercises his sovereign rule through his word. He does work miracles, he does send his powerful angels to rescue us and minister to us, but all of these things are to bring us to the word of life in which we find salvation.

[29 : 47] So in conclusion, let us go forward with boldness in our mission. It is true that we have enemies in high places, enemies who from time to time exercise their authority to harm us rather than to do us good.

But as we have seen, Christ, our risen Lord, is with us as a mighty rescuer. There may be opposition, there may be persecution, but this is no more than what Christ has already warned us about.

And his power is always present to deliver us and to advance the cause of his word. So don't be afraid. Go forward with boldness and courage.

What ministry has God given you to do? Exercise it to the fullest. Let us also make a new resolution to pray, to pray with fervour and to pray with great expectation, to pray for our Christian leaders that they would have courage in the time of trial, to pray for ourselves that we also would be found faithful in the evil day.

Let us go forward with boldness in our mission, for Christ our risen King is with us to rescue us from worldly authorities and to advance his kingdom by his word.

[31 : 10] Amen.