

The Worm That Turns

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Well, it would be great if you opened your Bibles to Acts chapter 12 on page 124.

As you do, I just want to welcome on your behalf the Reverend Guy Bellaby, who is for many years a member here at St. John's. Amongst his many exploits, he is an ordained Anglican minister in Saskatchewan, the chairman and head of Saskatchewan Essentials.

But by far his greatest exploit is that he is the father of Kimberly Graham, and so we're glad that he's with us. Well, now Acts chapter 12 is a passage for everyone who is feeling weak and powerless and overwhelmed.

And it is, of course, the nature of the Bible as we come to it week by week to uncover things as they really are, allow us into the mind of God so that we can see ourselves and we can see one another and we can see the world even as God does.

It's wonderful. You know, there's so much we don't understand, and as we go through the book of Acts, it's wonderful to see our brothers and sisters in the early church struggling and suffering with great uncertainty and trusting God and seeing the hand of God operating in the most remarkable ways.

[1 : 23] I mean, just take a look at chapter 12 for a moment. If all you had was the first 22 verses, wouldn't you think that there was absolutely no hope for this new Christian movement, that it would be extinct before too long?

They're weak and powerless and ineffective, in danger of being totally overwhelmed by their enemies. But in verse 24, Luke, Dr. Luke, who writes this, steps up to 50,000 feet and he summarises what's really been going on.

You see verse 24? But the word of God grew and multiplied. If you haven't been with us over this series, this is the third time the good doctor has lifted us up to 50,000 feet and given us a summary of what's really going on.

Just keep your finger in chapter 12 and turn back to chapter 6 for a moment, please. The first one, 6-7. Each time he comes to these summaries, the words change, the tenses change.

We read verse 7, and the word of God increased and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. Chapter 9, 31 for the second one.

[2 : 47] The church, 9-31, the church throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. It was multiplied.

And now we come to the third summary in 12:24. Since the Holy Spirit came upon the church, there has been growth and expansion.

3,000 people on that first day. 5,000 a few weeks later in chapter 5. And then the gospel goes outside of Israel, Cornelius the Gentile, then to Antioch amongst the Greeks.

And next week in chapter 13, we are going to begin the first missionary journey with the Apostle Paul. But before we get there, chapter 12 shows us that the Christian gospel and the Christian church faces bitter, vicious, violent opposition precisely because of this word of God.

Let me just remind you of the first five verses. About that time, Herod the king, Herod Agrippa, laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church.

[3 : 59] He killed James, the Apostle James, the brother of John, with the sword. And he saw that it pleased the Jews. He proceeded to arrest Peter also. But he doesn't want to be distasteful and so he waits until after the unleavened bread, puts four squads of soldiers over him.

Verse 5, So Peter is kept in prison but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. We need to be very clear. The chapter begins with the senseless, vicious, grisly murder of the Apostle James.

And the Apostle Peter is arrested and the full expectation is that he'll be dragged out of prison tomorrow and receive the same treatment. Herod has all the cards.

He has absolute power. He has the backing of Rome. And as you move through chapter 12, his power only seems to grow until we get to the coast and he arrives in Caesarea and there he is proclaimed by the crowd, a god.

But he comes to a very sticky end. And I was surprised that not many of you laughed when we read verse 23. which Dr Luke provides us with some helpful detail which we'll come to in just a moment.

[5 : 17] I want to say Luke begins with Herod in power, dealing death to the church and the chapter ends. Herod, who has lost power and the word rules.

And I think the question the passage forces on us is who is God? Who really is God? Where is the real power? Is it Herod? Or is it this invisible risen Jesus Christ?

See, when you start in verse 6, Peter looks like he's a dead man. He's in maximum security. He's got four squads of guards. He's got two guards shackled to him each side, two more weighed out the door.

In the morning there's going to be a mock trial and then he's going to be put to death by some awful means. And yet, somehow in verse 6, he sleeps, and I'm not sure what to make of that.

But only a few blocks away, what is the response of the church? What's the church doing? I mean, what do you do when one of your leaders, one of the apostles, has been dragged off and brutally murdered and it looks hopeless for Peter.

[6 : 23] The church has no political clout. It's Herod Agrippa we're talking about. You know, Herod Agrippa was a close personal friend of Caligula's. And when Caligula died, he ensured that Claudius became emperor.

What can they do? Verse 5, they make earnest prayer to God. Earnest prayer. There's nothing cool.

There's nothing mechanical. There's nothing casual about their prayer. The word means intense and constant and I think it's the same word used of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

As you see, prayer is not their last resort. Prayer is their first resort. What prayer does is it says, we do not recognise Herod to be the supreme authority.

We are going to take this to a higher court. What do we do for our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted in Korea or the Sudan or Nigeria?

[7 : 25] First thing we should be doing is to be at prayer. And in the middle of the night in verse 7, God gives them more than they were asking for.

An angel of the Lord appears in the cell. I just want to point out, there is nothing cuddly about this angel. There's nothing soft and sentimental.

In fact, in verse 7, we read, he whacks Peter on the side. That's a forceful blow. It's not a whack. On his side. He orders him to get up.

The chains fall off. He orders him to put his shoes and his cloak on. He orders him to follow him. He turns around and marches out. It's very like the sergeant major. Peter is in a deep sleep and so he's fuzzy in his head and he sort of walks out of the cell and the chains fall off and the door opens before him and he goes past the second guards and then the lock-up and out to the great big gates that lead into the city and opens before the angel and he gets out into the street and the angel disappears and he realises that it really is real because of the great big pain in his side.

Read in verse 11, Now I am sure, he says, the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting. Now why does God do it this way?

[8 : 46] Why does he wait to the very last moment to rescue Peter? Well, when you watch God in the scriptures and particularly here in the book of Acts, everything he does is to encourage the faith of his people and to demonstrate that he is God.

This is the way God works with us. He takes us out of our comfort zone. He takes us way past where we feel it's even fair for him to take us. He takes us beyond our resources, beyond our abilities so that we might learn to trust him.

I take it that's why the angel burst through the doors. I mean, God could easily have just picked him up and transported him to the upper room but the angel is showing Peter every single obstacle, every gate, every power that humanity can try to hold us with falls in the face of God.

Peter comes to his senses and he runs off quickly to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. This is some house. This is a big house. I mean, this is an outer courtyard with an outer gate.

Likely the place where Jesus celebrated his last supper. It's likely the place they were praying when the Holy Spirit descended upon them. John Mark's mum, Mary, the Mark who wrote the gospel, who's about to join Paul on his first missionary journey.

[10 : 16] And there's this lovely scene in verse 13 where Peter knocks on the gate and young Rhoda, Rosebush, comes running down the stairs.

She obviously doesn't open the gate because it's dangerous. She hears Peter's voice and recognises it and in her excitement races back upstairs to where the church is praying and says, Peter is there, Peter is there and she leaves Peter standing at the gate.

And it's the middle of the night and I'm guessing that those, the church, who have been praying have been doing so for a very long time and they're probably feeling that their prayer is entirely futile.

I mean, we pray and we pray and we pray. Nothing's changed. Did we not pray for James when he was arrested and look how he ended up? And I'm guessing, you can't get this in the text, but I'm guessing that they had a discussion and that some of the Christians were no longer praying for Peter's rescue and that instead of praying for his rescue, they were praying that when he gets executed, he will be brave and bold and speak the word with courage.

Don't you often find, when you're with groups of Christians, do we pray that God would act dramatically or do we pray that we would accept whatever comes from God's hand? And I think that's probably why when Rhoda breaks into the room with her news, they say literally to her, you are a maniac.

[11 : 42] But when God's people pray, God gives us more than we are hoping for. Now the angel of the Lord makes one more appearance in the chapter from verse 20 onwards.

This time it's on the coast, up in Caesarea, and King Herod, Agrippa, is furious with Tyre and Sidon.

These cities are kind of in his territory, kind of outside his territory. They're wealthy cities and they are not compliant. They won't do what he wants. But they have a weakness.

They depend on Herod's territories for food. So Herod arranges a gastronomic siege. Bring them to their knees.

And everything falls into Herod's hands. There are a couple of bad harvests. The leaders of Tyre and Sidon come to Herod begging and Herod, he wants to rub their noses in this.

[12 : 45] Herod is one of those people who is absolutely unbearable. You know those people? Everything falls into place for them effortlessly. His ruthless cruelty to the Christians only seem to make him more popular and even the crops and the weather seem to cooperate with him for heaven's sake.

It must have been very difficult for the Christians back in Jerusalem, who are already fearful for their safety. It just seemed like Herod's power was growing and growing and growing. What on earth is God doing?

You know that God allowed Herod to raise up more prominently so that he would be brought down more clearly.

And if you go to Israel today, you can go to Caesarea and you can walk into the amphitheater where this scene happened.

Herod gathered all the people of Tyre and Sidon and the leaders so that they would worship him. The Roman historian Josephus tells us that he had a special robe made for himself out of silver and he stood in a particular position so that when the sun came up in the morning, the sun would shine off his silver garment and dazzle the crowd.

[14 : 02] Isn't that great? I just... And he harangues the crowd with this speech in verse 21. And then we read verse 22. And the people shouted, The voice of a God and not of man.

The voice of a God and not of man. Immediately an angel of the Lord smote him because he did not give God the glory and he was eaten by worms and died.

And you may be interested to know that there are very long books written on intestinal worms of the ancient Near East that seem to afflict Herod.

And Josephus tells us that it took him a couple of days to die. And I can provide you with those titles afterwards if you're interested. What's important for us, of course, is that Luke tells us it was the angel of the Lord that struck Herod, smote him down.

That's exactly the same word used for the angel striking Peter in the prison. Isn't that interesting? So the angel strikes Peter and delivers him for life.

[15 : 15] And the angel strikes Herod, judges him for death. And the question is, who is God? Herod thinks he is. He has the power.

He has Rome behind him and everything runs his way. But by the end of the chapter, he has been brought down. He is literally being eaten alive in a very un-God-like manner.

Because he did not give glory to God. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled. All those who humble themselves will be exalted. Great chapter.

And I want to conclude and draw out two things that Luke points us towards which have to do with our relationship with the community and the culture roundabout.

And the first is this. Two questions. Whose opinion matters? There's a very interesting relationship in the book of Acts between the church and the surrounding community and culture.

- [16 : 24] When the church begins, they enjoy the approval and goodwill of all. The Christian witness is admired. The miracle in the temple in chapter 3 gets a terrific response. Even after Ananias and Sapphira, people hold the church and Christians in high regard. But that gradually changes. And with the martyrdom of Stephen in chapter 7, the tide begins to move the other way. And instead of having the admiration of the crowds, the community turns against the Christians and the church becomes the target of persecution. Now what changed? Did the Christians drop the ball? Did they suddenly become nasty and unattractive? Was their preaching different? No. No, that they continued to live godly, generous lives. What has happened is that those outside the church have begun to understand the message and from now on, from Acts chapter 7 until the coming of Christ, the gospel goes forward and the church goes forward in the face of deep opposition.
- [17 : 37] Don't you think that often throughout history the church and the culture track closely to one another for a little while and the church enjoys peace and popularity. But by far the majority of times the two paths diverge and Christianity is misunderstood and disliked and sometimes persecuted. And I want to say to us this morning, it is not always possible to hold the goodwill and the approval of the surrounding community and the culture and be faithful to God. Because God is God, the goodwill and the approval of the community is not in our hands to control. It's not as if we were really nice. If we were really like Jesus, we would have the approval of the community. I mean, how did Jesus finish up? He was rejected and killed and so it will be for us. We may not like this but the normal operating mode of the church of Jesus Christ is in the midst of disapproval and opposition from the community. And it's not because the community is as wicked as it could be or because they hate Jesus or hate Christians necessarily. I mean, Herod didn't hate Christianity, he was a pragmatist.
- [18 : 52] You look back in verse 3, he read the current mood of the society brilliantly and played the crowd. You see in verse 3, he had his focus groups out working. He discovered that if he were to persecute violently the Christians, it would increase his popularity. His motive in persecution was to gratify the people. He wasn't driven by a principled hatred or religious zeal. His motivation is a private one. His cruelty is a direct result of the unpopularity of Christianity and his own personal desire for popular approval. That's why he wounds the church. That's why he's trying to silence the gospel. It's all to make him popular. That's why there's nothing monochrome about persecution and suffering. I mean, often it just comes from the individual character of the person involved. Do you remember Nero in AD 64? He burns Jerusalem and the people hate him for it.
- [19 : 54] So he tries to find a scapegoat and he looks at this new minority, this Christian thing and so he blames the Christians and puts several thousand of them to death. If God is God, it's not the opinion of Herod that matters. It's not the opinion of our community that matters, but God's alone. And the second and final point, who is under threat? On one level, it looks like the church, doesn't it? They have nothing to offer against this violent opposition except the weak word of God and the powerlessness of their own prayers.

They seem weak and unimpressive and foolish. Herod holds all the cards. But even though Herod has all these resources at his fingertips, the chapter finishes at this point with the word of God growing and multiplying.

The Bible's view is that the word of God is a living, breathing reality that can progress and can multiply and grow in times of peace and in times of persecution.

[21 : 13] It really makes no difference whatsoever to the growth of the word. What's really happening when James has his head chopped off or when Peter is arrested is that the word of God is growing and progressing.

What is really happening when the angel rescues Peter and when the church is praying is that the word of God is growing and progressing. What's really happening in the politics of Herod Agrippa I and his death is that the word of God is growing and progressing and I think this is enormously encouraging.

It is not the church that is under threat. It is the community and the powers that be. You see, when Christians pray and proclaim the word of God, it's an enormously dangerous thing for the status quo.

It's God who acts in answer to our prayers. It is the word of God that is spoken. The problem with the tug of war illustration here is that God is not like the pillar.

God is like a NASA rocket taking off in the other direction, if you will. Herod does not lay siege to the gospel. It is Herod who is under siege from the gospel.

[22 : 32] That is exactly what Jesus meant when he said to Peter, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. It is the powers of death that are under siege from the church.

Turn over one last reference to 2 Corinthians for just a moment. I want to show you this cover this week. 2 Corinthians chapter 10 on page 173. 1 Corinthians Reading from verse 3 of 2 Corinthians 10 the apostle Paul says although we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds.

We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ. Our weapons what are they? Their love and faith hope in Jesus Christ our weapons are prayer word of God holding one another in obedience to Christ and Paul says they destroy strongholds it's the picture of a siege there is a stronghold and it is destroyed by those things and then the love of Jesus Christ crucified enters the city and takes every thought captive that they may serve him.

I want to say this to us very clearly so important for us to understand this we must not the church must never have a siege mentality as though the gospel is under threat the gospel is not under threat any more than the risen Jesus Christ can be under threat God is still God and I think the way that we demonstrate that we believe that is for us to pray and proclaim and move forward with the gospel trusting that it is God who will grow and multiply his word Amen Parrish you

Thank you.

[25 : 55] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[28 : 25] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.