

# The Hand of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] ...ground on the island of Malta. The locals put on a bonfire to welcome the visitor. It's a bit like a country bonfire. You light the fire everybody gathers around it.

And the Apostle Paul's there and he's picking up sticks and he's throwing them onto the fire. He picks up a stick which turns out to be a poisonous viper. It sinks its teeth into his hands and there it is hanging off his hand.

And the locals watch this creature hanging off his hand. And what is really interesting is their response. Nobody goes for first aid. Nobody tries a compression bandage.

They just sit there waiting for him to die. And they say to themselves, he must be a murderer. He's escaped the sea but justice has caught up with him on the land.

And then he doesn't die. And they say, he must be a god. It's a variation on karma.

[ 1 : 04 ] Bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people. Karma's in our churches.

I was in a church in January and I encountered a terrible variation of this. A person got up and led the prayer time and they prayed about the earthquake in Haiti, as we all were.

And she prayed that God would forgive those people for their superstition and their witchcraft. Now that's an okay prayer to pray normally.

But the problem is she linked it to the earthquake. And so her prayer linked the wickedness, their wickedness, to this earthquake which had befallen them.

She didn't say it, but 200,000 people died in this pagan nation. Bad things happen to bad people. Bad things happen to bad people.

[ 2 : 34 ] Bad things happen to bad people. Bad things happen to bad people. In Luke chapter 13, Jesus commented on the local tragedy that had happened at Siloam where a building had collapsed and 18 people had died. And Jesus' question was, do you think that they were more guilty than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem?

I tell you, no. And unless you repent, you too will all perish. When somebody dies, when something bad happens to someone, we rush to ask God the unanswerable question, why?

And too often we slip into seeing it as judgment or karma and we're very, very quiet about it sometimes. And we do it because we have a distorted understanding of God.

We fail to see our own desperate need of him. We fail to understand his purposes. Acts chapter 12 begins with death and disaster for the early church.

I hope you've got your Bibles open. I'm going to keep referring to the passage. Acts chapter 12, verse 1. One of the leaders has been put to death with the sword, possibly beheaded. Another is heading the same way.

[ 3 : 52 ] You might even quietly and cruelly ask what they've done to bring it upon themselves.

Verse 1 says, It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church intending to persecute them.

He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. And when he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. Herod's the king in Palestine.

History says that he's Herod Agrippa I. He's the grandson of Herod the Great in Jerusalem who was killing babies when Jesus was born.

He's the nephew of Herod who executed John the Baptist and who Jesus refused to answer when he was on trial. And he becomes the latest threat to the growth of God's church.

He is a persecuting, try-hard despot wanting to carry favour with the Jews by having James executed.

[ 4 : 57 ] James is one of the twelve apostles. He's the brother of John. Together they were nicknamed the sons of thunder. They had a reputation. I have in my mind that if they were alive today they'd be riding Harley Davidsons and doing burnouts out on the Pacific highways at night when nobody was watching.

Or maybe when everybody's watching. But what's going on here is Herod lashes out at the leadership of the church. He executes James and makes a serious play to follow through in the same way with Peter.

The church is in great danger. Their leadership is being eliminated one at a time. Peter is arrested. He's under very heavy security.

Verse 4. Four squads of four soldiers. Verse 6. He's bound with two chains. He's sleeping between two soldiers and two more are standing outside the door of his cell.

He is being treated like a very serious criminal. Herod's determined. Seriously heavy security.

[ 6 : 04 ] The intention of having a show trial after Passover. He knows the outcome he wants already. He's on track to doing away with Peter. Story moves on.

Peter's asleep. Chained between two soldiers. Quite amazing really. He's snoring his head off when he had every reason to be fretting about his impending execution. And verse 7 tells us the cell lights up.

Angel whacks him in the side. Wake up Peter. Wake up Peter. Chains fall off. Put your dacks on. Follow me. He's got no idea what's going on.

He thinks he's seeing a vision. They walk past two lots of guards. The iron gate of the city opens by itself. They walk the length of a whole street and the angel disappears. Poof. And a lot had happened before he even knew it had happened.

And verse 11. Peter came to himself and he said, Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.

[ 7 : 13 ] He experienced the unexpected. And so did the rest of the church. When Peter realises what's happened, he goes to John Mark's mum's place where a whole lot of the believers were gathered and they were holed up together and they were praying.

Knocks on the door. Servant girl. Servant girl. Named Rhoda. She answers. She hasn't got one of those spy holes. I said at 8.30, we've got a spy hole in our door at Rain Street.

It's fantastic. I've never had one before. So if you come along and I don't want to see you, I can just look through and decide not to open the door. It's wonderful. But she hasn't got one of those.

But she recognises Peter's voice and she's so overjoyed she just forgets to open the door. She goes back to the others. They think she's crazy or maybe it's Peter's angel, whatever that is.

Verse 16. Knocks on the door again and they are astonished. They experience the unexpected. Verse 17.

[ 8 : 18 ] He tells them how the Lord has brought him out of the prison. And Peter's place in the story right here just finishes. He goes to another place. Presumably he doesn't hang around to be re-arrested.

He hung around in chapter 3 or 4 but this time he's out of there. Then the story gets really good. The soldiers are executed for dereliction of duty. How fair is that? Were they ready on that day to meet their maker?

Herod, he goes on holidays to Avoka. I mean the coast. He goes to Caesarea. And the people of Tyre and Sidon come crawling to Herod and he comes out in his royal robes and the people scream like it's at a rock concert.

The voice of a God. The voice of a God. Not of a man. And Herod didn't honour God. And verse 23. Fantastic. Don't you love it?

[ 9 : 44 ] God judges. And we're glad he judges. Lethal weapon 5. Herod bites the dust.

And then the end. Big picture again. Verse 24. The word of God continued to increase and spread. See the picture?

Right at the beginning. The chapter starts with real threat. James is dead. Peter's heading the same way. What's going to happen to God's church?

Last week I told the story for anybody here about getting some advice from Brian King who was my bishop in Parramatta about dealing with difficult people in church. And he told me about three people that he had strife with at Manly.

I can tell you because there's no problems at Chatswood. And he told me about three people at Manly who caused him grief. And he said he prayed. One left. One got converted.

[10:46] And one died. And last week we were in Acts chapter 9. We saw Paul persecuting the church. And God did the most astonishing thing in bringing him to faith.

He was converted. In Acts chapter 12. Herod is persecuting the church. And God takes him out. He's dead. God removes the threats to his purposes in whatever way.

He chooses. What do you do with a passage like this? He talked about it with Brian Tung the other day.

And he said that the big lesson probably is don't cross the church leaders or you die. You'll be like Herod. Staff thought that was fantastic. Maybe not true.

I want to look at what's going on here from a human point of view first. And then I want to think about it from a heavenly point of view second.

[11:53] From a human point of view. The situation is desperate and it is tragic for believers.

James' death is gruesome. And Peter's situation appears hopeless. If it happened here in Sydney and our archbishop was executed by the government and then other church leaders were being targeted for the same, I think we would have a lot less people in church.

Big negative church growth. I hope we wouldn't, but I think we might. And if all of a sudden having your bottom on a seat in church might cost you your job or your life as it does in numbers of countries in the world, we would have to think deep and hard about what we believe and why we are here.

Would we still be prepared to nail our colours to Christ's mast? See there are all sorts of unanswerable questions here.

Why did God allow a leader like James to die? Surely the believers were praying for him too. Did he bring it on himself?

[13:32] Was he too outspoken? We all know what sort of a reputation he had. He was one of the sons of thunder. Did he still have a hot temper? Should he have gone a bit more softly, softly with Herod?

That's when we rationalise, don't we? I do it. Do you do it? Perhaps he deserved it in some way. And that is when we really overstep the mark.

And what about Peter? His situation just appears hopeless.

The security is huge. The believers are powerless. The security is huge. The believers are powerless. They are not an advocacy group. They don't have political connection and clout. They are not a military group. They don't operate with violence like a guerrilla movement. They've pulled back together. They are powerless in terms of the world.

[14:34] They have gone into their homes and they are doing the only thing that they know to do. They pray. Verse 5.

Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. Verse 12. Many people had gathered and were praying.

So humanly speaking, the situation was both grave and hopeless. Wonderfully, the people of God were on their shaking knees calling upon the Lord in fear and in faith.

They were depending upon all that they had to lean on. There's a heavenly perspective which you can bring to this passage.

James' death is tragic, but he's not lost. He's a believer. He was with the Lord.

[15:56] And so you don't even need to begin to punish yourself with the unanswerable question, what did he do to deserve death? As tragic as the circumstances were for him and for his family and for his Christian family, he was safe.

He was okay. And the church would have easily been able to give thanks for his life and for his safety with the Lord. They could have been deeply comforted that he was with the Lord.

From heaven's perspective, he was safe. God can see the threat to his church.

He's not blind. He's not dead. And it's not explicit, but you presume that he hears the prayers of his people. And God intervenes to rescue Peter in an astonishing way.

Peter has to pinch himself to believe it. And the church is blown away too. They experience the unexpected. God saves Peter's life and he doesn't do it for James.

[17:09] God thwarts Herod. Herod has one thing in mind. God has another. Death is on Herod's mind for the church leaders. Death is on God's mind for Herod.

Drop dead, Herod. And the church must have been ecstatic. So God intervenes in just the right way and at just the right time to preserve his church and to preserve his mission.

Herod, the great, wealthy, powerful, well-connected despot, dies. And in verse 24, the word of God continued to increase and spread.

God's people could see the threat. They could feel the threat. They were experiencing the threat.

Be encouraged because God could see the threat as well.

And he had the power and the will to deal with it in his way. So from heaven's perspective, James is safe.

[ 18 : 27 ] Peter's safe. God's people are safe. The word of God continues to increase and it spreads. Presumably numbers are growing even though people can see that some believers are losing their lives for what they believe.

Quite remarkable. God rules his church. God protects his people. If our church is going to grow, it will be because God grows it.

In Acts chapter 12, God's people, humanly speaking, were in a state of powerlessness. They didn't have reputation. They didn't have wealth.

They didn't have prestige. They didn't have power. The political leadership of the nation despised them. But they did have Christ.

And in their powerlessness, they were on their knees before him. Harm happened. James' life was lost.

[ 19 : 44 ] He was safe. And in the goodness of God, he removed the threat to his people and his mission. We must see that our power does not come from whom we are in the world.

Our security comes from Christ. There is nothing better than for us to be on our knees before Christ, reduced to helplessness, so that we might see that he is the one who lifts us up and guards and protects us and allows us to participate in his glorious purposes.

Please, Lord Jesus, grow your church in this place, not by our cleverness and power.

Grow us by your power as we humbly depend on you. All glory be to you. Amen.