

Will prevail through hardship

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Back in 2004, I think it was around about then, I made an application on behalf of my previous church to the New South Wales Department of Commerce in order for us as a church to access government contract rates on a number of different purchases.

The process was painful, to say the least, in terms of the paperwork going backwards and forwards and the amount of time it took. It took weeks and weeks and weeks.

Eventually, after not hearing anything for some time, I rang them up and spoke to the person dealing with our case. He said to me, it's been sitting there and I've been holding on to it because I don't know what to do with it.

He asked me, in the course of that conversation, to finish this deal, if you like. What I need to do is I need a copy of your business's constitution.

I wasn't sure such a thing existed. I said to him, we're a church. He said, well, yeah, but any organisation and institution has a constitution.

[1 : 14] I pushed it a little bit harder. What is it that you want from this constitution? He said, well, basically, I need a wind-up clause. He said, so if the church or when the church ceases to exist, what happens?

So I'm kind of a little bit testy at this point. And I said, I wasn't quite sure what to say. And so I said the first thing that came into my mouth, which is always, not always the best idea.

But I said to him, well, we've been operating since the day of Pentecost. I'm not sure exactly when that was, but it was probably something like 1,700 years before New South Wales government even came to exist, let alone the New South Wales Department of Commerce.

There's around 2 billion members worldwide. And I think our wind-up clause, whatever that is, kicks in when Jesus comes back. And I can't give you the date for that.

That didn't seem to satisfy him. And so I sent him a copy of the Australian government's Anglican Church Constitution Act of 1902, which has got no wind-up clause in it, but seemed to satisfy him.

[2 : 28] And then eventually, after a number of weeks, I got a piece of paper. You see, we were operating on two different worldviews. His worldview is that the church is just like any other institution, and it will come to an end.

And that is the tide of the culture in which we exist now in our country. The church has had its day. In fact, more specifically, God has had his day amongst us.

We are now living in enlightened and technological advanced times that don't need God. My worldview, driven by the scriptures, says that God was the living God when the universe banged into existence.

He was the living God when James Cook put his foot on Australian soil for the first time. He was the living God in 1966 when Time magazine put a title on its front cover saying, Is God dead?

And so, I'm not thinking of a wind-up clause in terms of God and his purposes. No thing, no person will prevail against him and his purposes.

[3 : 38] No matter how big the head of state is right now, no matter how powerful a person might be, Tony Abbott, Barack Obama, whoever it might be, there is not a single head of state in all the world right now who will be ruling in 100 years.

They'll be gone. All of them. The turnover is 100%. And in a brief 120 years, this planet will be populated with, apparently, around 10 billion new people.

That means all the 6, 7 billion, whatever it is right now, that currently have got their feet planted on the earth, will be all vanished and gone.

You and me, gone. Dead. Dead. But God will still be alive and ruling and his purposes still being worked out.

And so, the main thrust of today's passage is, try as you will, as powerful as you may be, you stand against this God and you lose.

[5 : 02] It's that simple. There is no wind-up clause to his purposes. That's the reality here. So, open up your Bible to Acts 12. So far, Acts 1 to 11.

It's an incredible account of the fulfillment of Acts 1, verse 8, which is the key verse in understanding Acts. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

The word of God and the message of forgiveness of sins, new life in Jesus Christ, has spread rapidly in chapters 1 to 8.

And it is simply saying that in chapters 1 to 8, it's simply saying Jesus reigns. He is doing what he said he would do. He is alive and he is active in this world.

And so, in the first 11 chapters of Acts, all in all, it's been a pretty good start. They've had a few hiccups along the way, a few little issues. And, you know, Stephen was killed in chapter 7 and things like that.

[6 : 05] But all in all, vision 8050 or whatever it is that they had, it's had a pretty good start. But when you get into Acts 12, the days couldn't be much darker for this church in Jerusalem and certainly for the early church.

Have a look at it there, verse 1. It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who were belonging 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. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison. Now, that is a major blow for this early church.

Major blow. So imagine here for us at St. Paul's. If Chris was just beheaded down at the concourse because he was proclaiming Jesus just before Christmas, and Brian's arrested, he's in Chatswood lockup, or Hornsby lockup, and awaiting the same thing as soon as Christmas and Boxing Day is over.

They'll bring him out to the concourse and do the same thing for him. Can you imagine what we would feel at that point? It would be an unthinkable tragedy. It would be an enormous blow for us as we consider, God, you've given us this mission.

[7 : 31] Things have been going fantastic. And all of a sudden, this has happened to our key leaders. It would gut us in many ways. And so here in Acts 12, we see that Herod is the main enemy.

This is Herod I. He is grandson of Herod the Great, even though he wasn't the first Herod. He was entitled Herod I. He was grandson of Herod the Great, the Herod the Great who hoped to kill Jesus himself by getting rid of all the infant boys around Bethlehem and around the time Jesus was born. Herod I was sent to Rome to be educated after his grandfather killed his father. Close family, this one. And then he grew up in Rome as a friend and of the imperial family.

He became something of a playboy. And in AD 23, he fled Rome to Palestine to escape his creditors. He spent time in prison. And at times he lived in pretty humble, destitute circumstances. However, that all shifted for him when a few of his boyhood mates rose to power in Rome and appointed him to be ruler of Judea and Samaria under their rule.

[8 : 53] This is the sort of story that magazines sell for, you know, this is incredible. For example, Herod I was preeminently a politician.

When amongst the Romans, he would act like a Roman. When amongst the Jews, he would act like a Jew because that was his heritage. He was won by heritage, not by conviction.

And so he would do anything to maintain his popularity with the Jewish people who were his main constituents. He saw Jewish Christians as divisive and believed their activities would disturb the population.

And so with the sudden word here, James was gone. Just one verse, gone. Put to death by the sword. And as soon as the Feast of Unleavened Bread was over, because you weren't allowed to do executions during the Passover, you had to kind of wait for church to be over so you'd go and kill people, there would undoubtedly be a mock trial and Peter would join James in death.

And so the Jerusalem church here would have felt overwhelmed and powerless in this scenario.

And there was nothing they could do except verse 5 says, the church was earnestly praying to God

for him.

[10:16] The word translated earnestly comes originally from a word that means to stretch or to strain. They were straining in prayer, or as one person puts it, they were praying with agony for Peter.

Does anything look more ridiculous to oppressors than a ragtag, harried group of believers praying for God's help in the midst of oppressive darkness?

To those outside the family of God, this looks like terminal weakness. Getting around to pray? You know, one of you leaves is dead, another one's on the way, and the best you can come up with is pray?

It would have been much more sensible to organise a petition. Picket the prison or the palace or something like that, a few placards, release Peter. Plan a reprisal attack, that'll do it.

Car bomb, not that they had them back in those days. Camel bomb, outside the palace. Or a kidnapping, sorry to camels. Or a kidnapping, one of Herod's close confidants or a family member.

[11:27] Show some strength, put political power against political power. The opponents here must have thought, what fools? Herod's power is irresistible.

The sword had fallen once, and it would fall on the helpless neck of another of their leaders. Even verse 11 indicates that everyone in Jerusalem figured that Peter was done for.

And so, zero hours at hand, Passover was complete, and now Herod and his staff could come out of church and kill Peter.

The victim of a kangaroo court. Verse 6 begins the description of this final night. It says, The night before Herod was to bring him out to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.

Peter was sleeping. In fact, quite soundly asleep. It says that an angel a little bit later had to nudge him to wake him up. But his restfulness on this night simply means that he was at peace with himself.

[12:38] He was at peace with God, and he was at peace with these circumstances in which he found himself. It's quite possible that he shared Christ as best he could with his captors, had a time of prayer, fell asleep, resting in Jesus, and on the shoulder of one of the soldiers.

It tells us, verse 4, that Peter was guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod wanted to make sure that this really dangerous prisoner that he's caught was not going to escape.

These are extraordinary precautions. Normally, they only chained a prisoner to one soldier, and he's got chains on both sides of him.

And to make it even more so, there's two soldiers standing outside his cell door to keep guard of him. It's pretty hopeless, and then all of a sudden, there's an unexpected turn of events.

Verse 7, Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone, shined in the cell. Boom, brightness.

[13:46] He struck Peter on the side, and woke him up, quick, come on, get up. And the chains fell off Peter's wrists. Now, Peter's been in a deep sleep here.

He must have been groggy, because the angel had to tell him in verse 8 to get dressed. Put on your clothes and your sandals, wrap your cloak around you, and follow me. Just imagine, early in the morning, Peter obeyed, probably in disarray.

Sandals are on the wrong feet. Cloak sort of hanging loosely, his hair's all over the place, grabbing for his long back and his baraka to try and kickstart the morning. He's dazed, he's bewildered like a sleepwalker, not quite sure where he's going, or even why he's going.

And verse 9, it says, Peter followed him, that is the angel out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening. He thought he was seeing a vision. He was confused.

But there was a dawning awareness, a reality, and as he rubbed his eyes, the reality must have staggered him. Verse 10, they passed the first and second guards, came to the iron gate leading to the city, and it opened for them by itself, and they went through it.

[15:02] And when they had walked the length of one street, suddenly, the angel left. And then Peter came to himself. His chains fell off.

He walked right on out by the two guards, which were chained to him. He walked right past the two sentries, and then the gates of the city just swung open.

The word translated by itself in verse 10 is automatae.

The gates opened automatically. I mean, these gates are more reliable than the one we've got out the front here. It opens a close of his own mind. Sleepy or not, he's wandered out there in the streets in Jerusalem, and he must have felt the goose bumps and the adrenaline, and the angel's gone.

Stood on the streets of Jerusalem, the middle of the night, he's rubbing his wrists, rubbing his eyes, holding back a yawner thinking, rightio then. You can just imagine the experience.

[16:18] Do you get the picture? Those ragtag, beleaguered, weak Christians knew a God with greater power than Herod's armies and his prisons.

The legions of Rome barred the door, but it only took one of God's agents to liberate the captive. And what happened here is that Peter's experience re-equated the embattled church in Jerusalem with the true nature of its strength.

No matter how grim, perplexing, and difficult our situation is, God and his angels are present to minister to us. He can deliver at any time, anywhere, in any place.

There is nothing too hard for him. Having said that, let me just take a short diversion and raise one big question that these verses pose.

why was Peter preserved, but James wasn't? James got it, head cut off, Peter didn't. James died by the sword, Peter was marvelously preserved.

[17:33] Why is one saint rescued and another not? Why are we sitting here tonight in complete freedom, with no fear for our life whatsoever, under any kind of threat whatsoever?

We've got it pretty cozy and comfy and yet 100 million Christians around the world today will do this sort of thing under great threat of their life. And in fact, some will give their life for doing this.

Why is that? What's the difference? Let me start with the stupid answer. The stupid answer is, well, because the church didn't pray for James.

As if by our praying, we order God to act in certain ways. Our prayers ought to be informed by humility because they have been taught by God's mystery.

We don't always get God's ways. His understanding is unsearchable. It is infinite wisdom and understanding, but it is unsearchable. And at the very least, the example of James here tells us that the cross of Christ hangs over the existence of every Christian life.

[18:49] And sometimes we are called to suffer for Christ's name. And yet on the other hand, the example of Peter tells us that the power of Christ hangs over every Christian life.

And sometimes our Lord delights to show us how thrilled He is to rescue us from any danger. So on the one hand, we must not forget Philippians 1.29, for it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for Him.

And yet to hold that together with Psalm 116, verse 8, for you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling. To keep those together.

We need to recognize the mystery of God's providence and rest in that mystery.

We need to understand with clarity that God's greater purpose than our safety and comfort in this earth, in this world, is His glory through the fulfillment of His plans.

[20:00] God will always act to glorify His name and advance His gospel. Now that does not mean that we are simply tools in His hands or pawns to be thrown around wherever we like.

God's providence is always perfect. And He is a careful shepherd of His sheep.

I just quoted from Psalm 116 just a moment ago, verse 8, where it says, For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling. Psalm 116, verse 15, seven verses later, says, Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.

Reflecting on this verse, the great Charles Spurgeon wrote, They shall not die prematurely, referring to the saints, they shall not die prematurely, they shall be immortal till the work is done.

And when their time comes to die, then their deaths shall be precious. The Lord watches over their dying beds, He smooths their pillows, He sustains their hearts, and He receives their soul.

[21:22] Do you recognize your perfect safety until your work is done for the Lord Jesus? This God is to be trusted, no matter how dark things appear.

Calm, secure trust in Him must be our response in all situations. This Peter who slept soundly in the prison cell had just seen one of his mates, heads cut off, and he knew what the outcome was likely to be for him, and he rested in God's purposes and providence in between two Roman soldiers.

I don't think he expected to get out of it, but God was delighted to demonstrate His power, not just to Peter, but to the church, and to Herod and to everyone else, and to bring him out of prison.

And so there he is, standing in the streets in Jerusalem, probably asking just as many questions that we have about the mystery of God and why.

And then finally dawns on him what God has done for him, and so he went to the house of Mary where many people had gathered for prayer, and he knocks on the door. What follows is a story of confusion and joyful humour.

[22 : 51] A servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door that Peter was knocking on, and she became so befuddled at Peter's voice that she ran to announce his arrival without even opening the door for him.

She excitedly busts in to the prayer meeting and says, Peter's at the door. And the response of the prayer meeting, the church that's gathered is now famous.

Verse 15, you're out of your mind. You're crazy, Rhoda. And when she kept insisting, no, I'm not crazy, he's at the door. No, it must be his angel.

But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were like, Peter's here. At first they thought she was mad, then they switched the story to that she was just, you know, Peter's angel or spirit.

You just imagine it. The church is there, agonising in prayer for Peter. Rhoda comes busting in. Peter's at the door. And they're, shh, quiet Rhoda. Can't you see we're praying in agony.

[24 : 11] Don't bother us with the answer to our prayers. It's not a very idealistic picture of the church here, is it?

But is this not a picture of ourselves? Sometimes we go through the motions and even the earnestness of prayer and when God answers those prayers, we are just taken by surprise that God would answer our prayers.

We pray fervently for the conversion of relative and when it happens, it's like, that was unexpected. Dude, amazing. What is amazing here is our slowness to believe God's ability and his willingness to answer our prayers.

This section is a humorous rebuke for this church in Jerusalem as it is for us. Can it be the case that even in our most earnest prayers, we sometimes find that we're almost going through the motions without actually expecting that God will hear us or that he will act.

It's almost a throwaway line, oh, I'll pray for you. A throwaway line, I'll pray for you hoping that we can potentially stop this conversation happening further.

[25 : 34] I'll just pray for you and then forget about it altogether. Some of us have been reciting for years, creeds, singing songs, reading the Bible that declare that God is creator, that he sustains everything, that he is almighty over all that is in this world.

And when he answers a prayer, we're like, that's surprising. it's like we weren't expecting him to be listening.

Or maybe we weren't expecting him to be able to do anything. Or maybe we weren't expecting him to actually want to do anything. I think that when we go through the motions in this way, we tend to treat prayer like a technique forgetting what we want rather than seeing that prayer is a relationship. The really encouraging thing here is that God is not bound by our imperfections. Apparently in this passage, God answered unbelieving prayer.

We may say things incorrectly or say things without sufficient belief, but God just loves to hear his people pray.

[26 : 56] And he is well able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine. My friends, prayer, one of our core values is to devotion to prayer. Prayer ought to be a constant statement to God, to our world, to us as a church here, St. Paul's, to our own consciences that we exist to do things that we cannot do without the supernatural grace of God.

That's what happens when we pray. We can rattle off the creed about who we believe as a God, but we actually demonstrate that we believe what we just said in prayer.

That's how we truly believe it. is when we pray, this God, is a God who is not just in relationship with me and wanting to hear my prayers, but he is able to act and wanting to act.

St. Paul's exists mainly to do the humanly impossible, everything good and worthwhile and eternal and God glorifying that we want to do as a church we cannot do without the supernatural power and grace of God.

It is pride and it is arrogance to think that we can build a church that we can see ministry flourish and people come to Christ just by putting in right strategies and having the right language and the

programs into place.

[28 : 19] We must be devoted to prayer. And so, we now come to the end of the passage because the rescue of Peter isn't the end of it.

God hasn't finished with Herod just yet. Verse 20 and 24 tell us what happens next.

He, Herod, had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon. They now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured 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. 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.

And immediately, 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. And so what happened was Herod presents himself to the theatre in Caesarea to make a speech.

[29 : 37] The historian Josephus said that he wore a very impressive royal ornament, a gown that was woven out of silver and so that as he walked in the sunshine, the reflection blinded the people can you see the divine poetry here as the angel went into the cell with Peter and made bright the cell.

The crowd heard him speak and they shouted the voice of a God and not of a man. And this incredibly twisted king received their worship in verse 23 he was immediately struck by an angel and again we have the divine poetry here because the same word was used when the angel struck Peter to arouse him from his sleep in verse 7 and possibly it's the same angel here striking Herod though the results are very different.

The historian Josephus says that immediately upon giving his speech Herod hit the ground in excruciating pain in the abdomen area. They carted him from the Caesarea theatre and five days later he died having suffered for five days of excruciating agony.

Immediately he was struck down by the angel. The one thing Herod didn't realise when he went for his diplomatic journey was that God hadn't closed the case.

He thought he had executed the soldiers but the blood of James still cried out to God from the earth and Herod was going to learn what Isaiah 40 verses 23 to 25 means when it says he brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of the earth to nothing.

[31 : 43] No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, then he blows on them and they wither and a whirlwind swips them away like chaff.

To whom will you compare me or who is my equal says the Holy One. Acts chapter 12 is all about God and Herod.

This chapter begins with Herod killing James and it ends with the angel of the Lord killing Herod.

The main point of this chapter is very plain.

If you oppose Jesus, you lose. He has no equal. You cannot stop his purposes. Luke put this chapter together in such a way to make it plain for this church in Jerusalem in its dark day.

you may feel small and insignificant in the Roman Empire. You may think that you are overpowered when your best leaders are killed on a political whim.

[32 : 54] But the truth is that if you stay with Jesus and stand firm with him, you win. And if you oppose him, you lose.

God here turned the tables entirely on everything that Herod was trying to do in squashing the church.

He turned it around so that in verse 24, Herod is dead, but the word of God grew and multiplied. God exalted God and not Herod. He made the reputation of Jesus spread, not Herod's. And this is the goal of all that God does, to magnify his wisdom and his power and spread the fame of his son who saved sinners.

So be encouraged. We're not facing what the Jerusalem church faced, but we have our own issues in this country and for us as a church. Do not be impressed or discouraged by temporary worldly triumphs over the gospel.

[34 : 14] Be bold and courageous to spread the word of God and leave the outcome to God. God will bury the messengers of his message, but he will not bury his message.

His messages will come and go and they will enter their eternal reward, but God's gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ continues to move on to the ends of the earth.

It will not stop. God's gospel of the gospel of the Lord Jesus. And in this commitment series, I am calling you to commit your life to the unstoppable God and seeing his unstoppable purposes being fulfilled through us here as a church at St.

Paul's. will you give yourself to this God and move with Jesus rather than stand opposed to him?

Amen. Finally, if you can come and you will take seuplain to a Christ will you and will you be and will you Give open Your withdrawals and see you