

May 3, 2020

THE PREVAILING POWER OF THE WORD OF GOD

Acts 12:1-25

(10 of 17 in a series through Acts)

Acts 12 is an oddly placed chapter, or at least the first twenty-four verses of the chapter. Here's what I mean. Luke has just finished talking about the church at Antioch in 11:19-30, which we looked at last week. And he ended that section telling us that the church sent a financial gift to the church at Jerusalem, and they sent it "to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul" (11:30). Then, 12:25 reads, "And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark." And that leads us into the full-blown Gentile mission as Barnabas and Paul are going to be sent out from the church at Antioch and from chapter 13 on in the book of Acts is largely going to be focused on Paul's missionary efforts.

But right in the middle of 11:30 and 12:25—the sending of Saul and Barnabas to Jerusalem and the return of those two and John Mark to Antioch—we have 12:1-24, which tells the story of James (the brother of John) being killed by Herod, Peter being imprisoned and rescued, and Herod dying. So why? Why did Luke choose to insert these details that I've just mentioned in between two texts that would have flowed well together, with 12:25 picking up directly where 11:30 left off?

I think the answer is related to something we saw in the text we looked at last week and have seen in other places in this book. Last week I noted that Luke gives us glimpses throughout the book of Acts where he shows us the nature of the church or what practices are crucial to the church's mission. We've seen this with texts like Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37 where we're told the church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship while holding all things in common as the Lord continued to add to the church. And we've seen in the text we looked at last week where we were reminded of details of the church's mission and how the church continued to grow. Well, I think chapter 12 functions in a very similar way. Whereas Luke could have seamlessly gone from 11:30 to 12:25, he inserts a glimpse of some events that went on concerning James, Peter, and Herod because he wants to remind his readers of some truths that we need to remember and recognize before we launch into this Gentile mission in the ministry of Paul.

And the truths he's going to remind us of in this chapter aren't unknown to us. In fact, much of what Luke reminds us of in this text can be seen in Jesus' teaching in Mark 13 as he tells us what this age will look like. It is also seen in an interesting chapter in the book of Revelation which the Lord communicates to us through the imagery of the holy city being trampled for a time while two witnesses proclaim God's Word, are killed, and come back to life. In other words, truths the Scripture affirms elsewhere through Jesus' teaching and John's recording of a gripping vision, Luke reminds us of in a narrative, a story. Luke tells us a story of something that happened in these early days of the life of the church in order to remind us of some truths that Scripture

elsewhere teaches and that we must not forget as we continue to carry out the mission given to us by the Lord. What then are these truths? Let me go over them briefly, beginning with the truth that God's people will be persecuted.

God's people will be persecuted

Luke launches us into this interruption of his narrative by telling us that Herod—who was king in this time—embarked on a mission of persecuting the church. He writes, “About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people” (vv. 1-4).

Now, if we're familiar with the rest of Scripture, this scene should not be surprising to us. Jesus had made clear that if the world persecuted him, they'd persecute us as well, saying, “If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” (Matt 10:25). He had also told James specifically that he would suffer. Remember when the mother of James and John had asked Jesus if her two sons could sit on his right and left hand in his kingdom? Jesus had answered saying, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” (Matt 20:21), meaning, “Are you able to bear the suffering that I am going to bear?” And when they said, “We are able,” he affirmed to them that they would indeed drink the cup, meaning that they would suffer for his name's sake. Now here we are, some time later, and James has indeed followed Christ in the path of suffering, laying down his life for the gospel. Similarly, Peter, who is imprisoned in this episode is the one who would tell us in 1 Peter 4:12-13, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you . . . but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings.”

Therefore, what Luke is showing us in this glimpse of suffering for the church at large and James and Peter specifically is that all that the Scripture testifies about the certain persecution of the church is, well, *certain*. It's going to happen. Now, yes, there are certain sections of the church and certain times in the life of the church where that persecution can seem minimal or even inconsequential. But those are exceptions that prove the rule. Throughout this age followers of Christ will face persecution by the unbelieving world.

And this is good for us to be reminded of as we consider our mission as a church because if we're not mentally prepared for this reality we will be surprised or shocked when it comes—the very reaction Peter tells us we shouldn't have. Let us be surprised when we face times of peace and ease as the Lord's people. But when we face persecution let us think, “This is exactly what Jesus told us would happen, so I will not be shaken.” That's the first truth that Luke reminds us of in this narrative. Second, he reminds us that the gospel will prevail.

The gospel will prevail

When Jesus taught us these truths that Luke is reminding us of in this chapter, he had mentioned that his people would be “beaten in synagogues,” “stand before governors and kings for [his] sake,” and “be hated by all for [his] name’s sake,” but right in the middle of all of this he added that “this gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations” (Mark 13:9-13). In other words, Jesus had wanted his disciples to know that no matter how dark things got in this age, they should never think that the mission will fail. The gospel will prevail.

Luke reminds us of the same thing in this chapter. He tells us that “on that very night” (v. 6) when Herod was about to bring out Peter from prison and kill him, an angel delivered him from prison. But I’m getting ahead of myself because Luke first tells us that the Lord stacked the deck against himself. He tells us that on this night “Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison” (v. 6). Now, this feels a bit like Matthew 27:65 where Pilate said to his soldiers regarding Jesus’ tomb, “Go, make it as secure as you can.” It’s hard not to think that Matthew wrote that record of Pilate’s words with a smile coming across his face.

Likewise here, Luke tells us that Peter is chained between two guards, with two chains, and with others guarding the door of the prison. In other words, there’s no way Peter’s getting out. But then, an angel of the Lord just appears in the middle of the night, hits Peter on the side (waking him up), and tells him to get up and put on his sandals, as his chains miraculously fall off. And so Peter did. Now, the story of him coming back to John Mark’s house is funny, but I’ll get there in a second. For now, I want to move on to the death of Herod.

It’s one thing for Peter to be out of prison, but what if Herod directs all of his power and resources to go get him? I mean, it doesn’t feel like he’s out of the woods yet with Herod, does it? Well, Luke addresses that in verses 20-23. Luke takes us to a time when Herod was addressing the people of Tyre and Sidon, for those people were dependent on him for food. And as he spoke to them one day, the people began to shout, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” (v. 22). And Herod accepted this praise, so Luke tells us, “Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last” (v. 23). The Lord was accounting for every detail as he ensured that the gospel would prevail.

Now, think about this for a second. Peter is chained and about to be killed, and Herod is intent on stopping the gospel. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to guess who’ll come out on top, and yet Peter is released, Herod dies, and verse 24 tell us, “But the word of God increased and multiplied.” The gates of hell will not prevail against the church, and no power of hell can stop the spread of the gospel. The gospel will prevail.

Brothers and sisters, this is a good reminder to us. I think far too often we come up with reasons why the gospel will not prevail in a certain setting or with a certain person. Perhaps we say to ourselves, “She is neck-deep in sexual sin, living with her boyfriend, and there’s no way that she’ll listen take hold of the gospel, which is going to require her to walk away from that lifestyle” or “He’s so bitter from all the abuse he’s taken in life, there’s no way he’ll let his guard

down and bow the knee to Christ and allow Jesus to direct his life.” But what would you say were the odds of Peter—chained with two chains, to two guards, with others guarding the prison door—to walk out of prison that night without a scratch? I’d say they’re pretty low until you factor in that God wanted Peter to walk out of prison that night unscratched. And with us, the Lord has told us that the gospel is the power of God to salvation, that people from every language will believe, and that the gates of hell will not prevail against our gospel. So don’t hesitate to speak it. Don’t give in to excuses to be silent. Let’s pray for opportunities and look for opportunities to bear witness to the one who lived, died, and was raised for us. The gospel will prevail. Third, we’ll not always be able to see and judge things clearly.

We’ll not always be able to see clearly and judge things accurately

In other words, it’ll not always look like the gospel is prevailing. It’ll not always look like the word of God is increasing and multiplying. Sometimes it’ll look like the enemy is winning. Sometimes things will appear hopeless if we just judge by what we see. But we don’t always see clearly, and we don’t always judge accurately.

Think about where this chapter begins. Herod is the all-powerful king over the empire, and he is against the church. He’s already killed James. And once he saw that it pleased the Jews, he arrested Peter and was determined to kill him as well.

Now let’s imagine that a group of us were gathered in a room discussing the outlook at this point. Wouldn’t we say? Maybe we would say, “We’re toast.” Wouldn’t we think that there’s a small chance that the church is going to continue to be able to spread God’s Word? I mean, things seemed quite possible until the most powerful man in the empire turned his attention to wiping us out. Saul ravaging the church is one thing, but this is Herod.

But now let’s skip ahead to the end of the chapter. Peter is out of prison. Herod is dead. And the word of God is increasing and multiplying. I don’t know how many of us would have seen that coming. Shouldn’t that be a lesson to us? Shouldn’t that teach us that we don’t always see things clearly, and we’re not always equipped to judge things accurately? We can feel at times that the Lord is against us when he’s just shaping us with his formative discipline because he loves us as his sons. We can feel like he’s handed us over to evil when he’s about to bring about great delivery. We can feel like he’s abandoned us when he’s really just getting everything set up where the odds are really against him so that he can show off like he did in Acts 12.

We can’t always see clearly, and we won’t always judge accurately if we judge merely based on what we see—again, compare the beginning of the chapter to the end. But in those times our call is to press on ahead in trust and obedience. We trust and we obey. That’s what believers do. And lest we want to push back by saying that I’m attempting to apply a lesson to us based on an extraordinary reversal of events that dealt with the apostles in the book of Acts and we’re nothing like them, I’d answer that I think Luke’s very point to us as his readers is to say, “Look what your unchanging God can do.”

I think particularly this morning of some of our members we've sent out into hard places. Christopher and Logan in New York have lost two of their members in this season of the pandemic, the economy has been hit hard, and I'm sure what looked somewhat hopeful could feel much more hopeless. And yet, the God who reversed the situation of Acts 12 is on our side. And he can be trusted. This reminds me of one of my favorite Luther quotes when Philip Melanchthon was feeling discouraged and hopeless. He wrote, "Great though our cause is, its Author and Champion is also great, for the cause is not ours. Why then, are you constantly tormenting yourself? If our cause is false, let us recant. But if it is true, why should we make Him a liar who has given us such great promises and who commands us to be confident and undismayed? . . . Christ knows whether it comes from stupidity or the Spirit, but I for my part am not very much troubled about our cause. Indeed, I am more hopeful than I expected to be. God, who is able to raise the dead, is also able to uphold his cause when it is falling, or to raise it up again when it has fallen, or to move it forward when it is standing. If we are not worthy instruments to accomplish his purpose, he will find others. If we are not strengthened by his promises, where in all the world are the people to whom these promises apply?"¹

And we all know that the cause for which Luther fought actually turned out pretty well as we sing, pray, and preach, regularly rejoicing in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. We trust and obey because we know that we don't always see clearly and can't always judge accurately. And one of the ways we obey is with the weapon of prayer, which brings us to our last point—prayer will accomplish much.

Prayer will accomplish much

As Luke tells the story of Peter's imprisonment and rescue, he gives us an early indicator that things are going to turn out better than we might anticipate. He mentions that Herod has James killed and imprisons Peter—intending to do the same to him—but then he writes, "So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church" (v. 5). And he mentions again in verse 12 that many were gathered together and praying.

In other words, Luke says, "If you want to know the key to Peter's rescue, it was the church praying." That's how he sets it up. And I doubt that if I asked any of us this morning if you thought that prayer was a powerful weapon that we have as a church that any of us would say no. My guess is that everyone would affirm it is. We believe James when he tells us that the fervent prayer of a righteous person accomplishes much. We also believe him when he mentions that Elijah prayed that it wouldn't rain and it didn't for three years and then prayed again that it would rain and it did and adds, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours." In other words, James doesn't mention Elijah and his powerful prayers in order to affirm that he's *not* like us but to affirm that he *is* like us.

¹Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, Vol. 18 of *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. Theodore G. Trappert (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 146-47.

I believe that we all know this academically. We could get all the answers right on a true-false test concerning prayer. But it's one thing to know the answers and say we believe it and another thing entirely to live like we believe it's true, right? Far too often there is a divide between what we say we believe about prayer and our practice of actually praying. But if what the bible says about prayer is true, then shouldn't we spend time praying, asking God to do things that are even beyond what we can imagine? Of course we should.

And if you say, "I just don't think I have this level of great faith that the early church had," then consider what happens when Peter is delivered from prison. Luke tells us that after the angel delivered Peter from prison, he went to John Mark's house. That's where a number of believers had gathered together to pray. And Peter shows up and knocks at the door. But apparently when he knocked he also said something because a little girl named Rhoda went to open the door and as soon as she recognized Peter's voice, she got so excited that she didn't open the door but ran back and told the group that Peter was at the door.

Now, are you ready for their reaction? Here's a group that's been praying earnestly for Peter, and in the middle of their prayers one of the little girls who'd been in the house with them comes to announce that Peter's at the door. You'd think they'd be like, "I knew this was going to happen. Our prayers are answered." But Luke actually tells us that they said to the little girl, "You are out of your mind," and when she insisted, they said, "It is his angel!" (v. 15). It was only when Peter continued knocking and they actually got up and answered the door that they believed it was him. And even then Luke tells us they were "amazed" (v. 16).

So here's the point: these weren't people of some amazing kind of faith that so far transcends what you and I have. They were people—like us—who pray about things and find themselves surprised when what they pray for comes about. But our prayers aren't answered because we're so amazing but because the one to whom we pray is. So let's pray because the testimony of Scripture again and again is that the prayers of God's people accomplish much. Let's continue to cry out to our God, knowing that he's able to do more than we ask or imagine (Eph 3:20-21).

So once more this morning, in the midst of being unable to see and judge clearly, knowing that the world will always persecute the church, but knowing the prevailing power of the gospel, let's stop one more time and pray. May our history be written, "It was an uncertain and dark time in many ways, but earnest prayer was being made by the people of God." Who knows what our God might do in our day? Amen.