

Acts 12:1-24

The Sovereign Power of God

Introduction: Acts is the history of the earliest Christians showing us what Christians were all about and where they got their power and how this small insignificant multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-class band of people changed the world. As this story that we'll look at today will show it was not by their cunning, by their political power or any human explanation but it was by the sovereign power of God.

Luke has been recording the great advances that have been made through the Church, by the work of the Spirit, since the death of Stephen. In that time the Gospel has gone to the Samaritans, to Ethiopia (Through the Ethiopian Eunuch), to Saul of Tarsus, to Cyprus, Phoenicia, and Antioch, and to the Gentiles via Cornelius the Roman centurion. This last section of Acts has been so exciting, and groundbreaking, taking ground for the Gospel and the kingdom of God. But it wasn't without its blows and setbacks. We know this to be true in our own lives, though we believe that God has ultimately triumphed and will triumph through the victory of Jesus Christ.

This text really has three main Characters: Herod, Peter and the Jerusalem Church, and the sovereign God.

1. The Powers that be

1. **“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.”**

1. The story of the people of God is the continually story of how they suffer, persecution and often death and how the Lord faithfully preserves his people and his Mission to the world.

2. The story of Herod here in this chapter is in some sense a very typical one. A powerful king who oppresses the people of God.
2. Herod - is the grandson of Herod the Great. He is an Edomite a people group who were ancient enemies of Israel. Yet this Herod was brought up and educated in Rome, and was a childhood friend of Caligula (Roman Emperor from 37A.D.- 41A.D.) because of his connections with the Roman Emperor he had great power over Ancient Palestine and even given the title king. But because he was a Edomite by heritage and in cahoots with the Roman's he worked very hard to observe all of the the Jewish customs, holidays, and religion and he had great favor with the Jewish people. Josephus records that he was in fact not a fearful tyrant like his Grandfather was (Herod the great was a shrewd king. He murdered most of his family for fear of them rising to power) But that he was often very generous, and charitable, and liked by the rich and affluent for contributed greatly to the temple and Jewish worship. (historical records show that Herod was not an observant Jew except for when he was in the land and around the Jews - a bit of religious hypocrisy).
3. Herod treats the persecution of the church as a political threat - seeing as James is beheaded (Roman capital punishment) and not stoned (Jewish capital punishment). Whether Herod saw the church as an actual threat to his authority and the Roman authority is not clear, he probably used it as an excuse, we do know that he did it because it pleased the Jewish leaders.
4. I think what is clear from the information that Luke gives us, and the historical records, is that Herod was a deeply insecure person who cared so much about his own popularity, this is why he did most of the things that he did - whether his great generosity and charity to the Jewish He persecuted the church, killing James and arresting Peter ultimately because it pleased the Jews. Herod lives for the praises of people, ultimately living for himself and his own glory (this will bring about his downfall). It seems that his charity, generosity, religious observance was really about getting acceptance and approval from others.
5. Power is toxic; if were using it to please people and get there approval you will pervert justice; you'll find yourself doing things you

never dreamed of - why because you need people's affirmation and acceptance, you need their praise.

1. Only by receiving as a gift (unearned, undeserved) God's love and acceptance will you be able to use power without it corrupting you. Only by God's filling will you no longer need the praise and approval of others.

2. The Weakness, Passivity and Silliness of God's People.

1. **“So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”**

2. Praying fervently -“prayer is the only power which the powerless possess” -Stott

3. This looks so pious - persecution breaks out and immediately the church goes into fervent prayer for Peter's release. Of course this Church had no political power, it had no religious power in the community, they were a persecuted, fringe, minority. We might think as Americans who live in the west when persecution or unfairness arises, we can march, protest, sue, we can get our voices heard, and I am not saying that we don't have the rights as American citizens to these things, or that we should or shouldn't do these things but what is clear from this text and our own experience -The Church has always doubted the power and significance of prayer. We will do everything before we will pray, and then even when we pray - we doubt whether God really hears us or cares, or will answer.

1. The church prays and God answers in a miraculous way - a way that even Peter the Apostle doesn't expect. An angel of the Lord releases him and walk him right out of that prison...He thinks it's a dream. When Peter comes to the house where everyone is gathered to pray for his release and knocks at the door and calls out - the servant girl Rhoda, because of her excitement forgets to let Peter in and runs and tells everyone that he is at the gate. What is their response? You are out of your mind! Such disdain, and criticism - it's clear that though this church is praying passionately, fervently, their is still huge unbelief on their part.. What is it in us that doubts so much the power o prayer and God's desire to do us good?

1. Jesus, you remember is the one who taught us to pray **“Our Father who art in heaven, holy be your name. Your**

kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

2. It's true that we don't always know what that looks like in a given situation, But we as Christians should never be in doubt of God's goodness and his intentions for us.
2. God proved his great love for us by giving his son to the shame, brutality and death of the cross, by Jesus becoming sin for us. We cannot measure God's love based on whether our prayers are answered or not, or in the way that we want them to be, we must always measure the love of God for us by the depth of the work of redemption through the cross of Jesus. God cannot love us anymore or any less - he loves us perfectly and has displayed that in the cross. A huge component in prayer is trusting in that truth though often times we are like the man who said to Jesus, **“Lord I believe, help my unbelief”**.
4. Look at the church here - Half believing, half doubting in their prayers yet that doesn't keep the Father from answering their prayer and delivering Peter. To their surprise and the surprise of Peter God answered their prayers for deliverance. Jesus told us, **“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”**
 1. Do we believe this? I pray that we do, and that we grow to believe this more and more...
5. Now, I cannot tell you why James dies and Peter is released from prison. I cannot tell you why some get cancer while others experience chronic illness or bankruptcy, and why others live mostly at ease. I cannot tell you why some prayers are answered and some are not. But two things I know -It is not because God doesn't care, or love us - He proved that in his willing death on the cross. We are supremely loved.
6. Tim Keller in his book on Prayer says, “(In Prayer) God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we knew everything he knew.” God is not arbitrarily answering and denying prayers - he is answering them according to the good work he is doing in us.
7. God is playing the long game when it comes to our prayers - he gives us and allows only what is ultimately good for our sanctification

- our conformity to Jesus, and what will cause us to lean more on him and less on ourselves, our power, and our understanding..

3. **The Sovereign Power of God**

1. At the close of this section we see that Herod is dealt with “But the word of God increased and multiplied.”
2. An Angel of the Lord (the same one that delivered Peter?) struck Herod because he failed to give glory to God (If you are having any sympathy for this man, it is misplaced. This final act was more like the straw that broke the camel’s back)
3. One cannot fail to admire the artistry with which Luke depicts the complete reversal of the church's situation. At the beginning of the chapter Herod (local representative of the world power) is on the rampage - arresting, and persecuting church leaders; at the end is himself struck down and dies. The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God (the good news of Gods coming kingdom) triumphing. In the end every attempt to snuff out God's church will fail. Every attempt to thwart God's kingdom will ultimately be crushed - nothing can stop the promises of God.
4. **Why is it important for us to be reminded again and again of the sovereignty of God?** - Biblical stories like this are such great reminders in a world with an ever changing atmosphere of the culture around us, the uncertainty of life, the breakdown of our own bodies, relationships and friendships, the inevitability of death, the losing of all that we’ve stewarded over, the triumph of evil...The story of Herod is a reminder that nothing can truly stop the message and work of God’s love through Jesus Christ getting out into the world he so dearly loves.
5. As Paul would go on to write - **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him”**

graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.