

Who Rules?

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Date: 21 April 2024

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[0 : 0 0] Well, there have always been power struggles in our world. Right now, it's wars. So wars like Russia, Ukraine, or even Israel, Gaza, or perhaps even recently the new conflict between Iran and Israel.

Wars, struggles. There are also power struggles in politics. Might be the US presidential election coming up in November, or even in our own nation with the forthcoming general election and local elections.

There's power struggles in politics. And there have always been power struggles happening between different people or different countries or between different political parties.

And they're essentially about who rules, who is in charge, who governs, who has the power, who has the authority. And so this afternoon, we're going to be thinking about another power struggle.

And it's there in our Bible reading from Acts chapter 12. And it's a power struggle between King Herod and the early Christians. And it highlights this increasing wave of persecution that comes upon the early church and the early Christians.

[1 : 1 5] And so the battle is raging, and it is the world versus the church. The kingdom of this world versus the kingdom of Christ.

And it's a struggle that we've seen already in the book of Acts. But of course, it's not a struggle that originates in the book of Acts. It's been raging ever since the Garden of Eden, way back in the beginning.

And it's all the way through the Bible. And we see it being played out in graphic form here in Acts chapter 12, as Herod, the king, fights against King Jesus and his people.

And so today, what I'd like us to do is think through what this means for us. We began our service earlier, and then we sang together Psalm 2.

And it's because Psalm 2 speaks of the world's rulers, the world's kings, the world's authorities in rebellion against God and his anointed king.

[2 : 2 0] And what does God do? Well, God simply laughs at the powers of this world and their perceived authority and rule. Because you see, God is never outplayed by his opponents.

And so Acts 12 reminds us that even if it looks like the powers of this world rule, the reality is that they don't rule.

And so let's see then how King Herod is no match for the true king, King Jesus, who is risen and ascended and exalted. So I'd like us to look this afternoon at three points as we work our way through this passage.

The first is the persecution of God's workers, in verse 1 to 4. The second is the power of God's working, verse 5 to 19. And then the third is the progress of God's work, verse 20 to 25.

So first of all, the persecution of God's workers. You notice that Acts 12 begins with the persecution of the church by King Herod. So verse 1 tells us it was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.

[3 : 35] Now, there's a lot of Herods in the Bible, and they're all part of the same dynasty. And so this Herod is Herod Agrippa.

And he's the grandson of Herod the Great. He's the Christmas Herod, remember, the one who ordered all the baby boys in Bethlehem to be killed after Jesus was born.

And this Herod here, Herod Agrippa, he's the nephew of Herod Antipas. And that Herod was the one who beheaded John the Baptist. And so it's clear that this family doesn't do God.

And that's what we get here in these opening verses as they set the scene for us. So verse 2 says, So what is Herod doing?

Well, he is violently persecuting the church, so he has killed James. And James' execution seems to raise Herod's profile in the opinion polls amongst the Jews.

[5 : 01] And so what does he do next? Well, he seizes Peter with the intention of killing him too, and he puts Peter in prison. And so let's not underestimate just how severe this persecution is or how wicked Herod is.

Because Peter was locked in what I guess is the ancient equivalent of a maximum security prison. And he is awaiting his execution. He's treated like he is a serious threat and danger to society.

But the murder of James and the capture of Peter were way out of proportion to anything that he had said or done. It was like massive government overreach, overstepping its power.

But Herod seems to do what many rulers and authorities do when they resist and when they rebel against God. And what they do is they take it out on God's people.

They target the church. And as I was preparing this, I was reminded of the blasphemy case of Asia Bibi. I don't know if you remember it.

[6 : 10] It made news all around the world. Asia Bibi is a Pakistani Christian woman. And she was eventually acquitted of blasphemy by Pakistan's Supreme Court in 2018.

And what happened was that in 2010, eight years earlier, she was convicted of blasphemy by a Pakistani court. And she was sentenced to death by hanging.

And so she spent eight years essentially on death row being accused of defiling the name of Muhammad during an argument with some Muslim woman.

But even after she was acquitted, after all of that time, she was still held under armed guard and she was unable to leave Pakistan. And she eventually did after some months.

And it's an extreme example. But the reality is that we are caught up in a raging battle as members of Christ's kingdom.

[7 : 13] And we might not always see it, but it is always raging. Which means that being a faithful follower of Jesus today in our society means that sometimes you will feel the full venom of hell let loose on you.

Because you call yourself a Christian. Why is that? Well, essentially because Christians embody everything that an anti-Christian society hates.

You and me as a believer are the personification of what an atheistic, secular, anti-God world wants to get rid of.

And I know for many of you that in your jobs and your workplaces, to varying degrees, you are oppressed and opposed for being a Christian. And you suffer varying degrees of persecution because you confess Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

And the reason is, is because we're talking about two different kingdoms here. With two different sets of values. And so they are obviously going to clash.

- [8 : 25] And so if your allegiance is with Jesus Christ and with his kingdom, then the kingdom of this world won't like you. Because you don't live according to this world's values.
- And you don't accept this world's authority when it is in opposition to your king, King Jesus. And so here, James and Peter were paying the price for their allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ.
- And very often we will too. We'll face persecution as God's people. And it is an attack against Christ and his kingdom.
- And yet it shouldn't surprise us because Jesus said it would be this way. James was even killed here at the beginning of our chapter.
- And we might not be killed. And we might not be locked up for our faith like Peter was. But we know how increasingly difficult it is to live out our faith.
- [9 : 30] And partly it's because of the fear we have of being persecuted. Just think about what's happening in Scotland right now. Where the kingdom of this world, through the state and through other institutions, is subtly, but sometimes not so subtly, standing in opposition to the kingdom of Christ and to the values of Christ's kingdom.
- And so as a result, the kingdom of this world will start to lash out at Christians. And it's happening, isn't it, in our schools? It's happening in our universities.
- It's happening in workplaces. It's happening in the media. Even in the law courts. Just think of the recent hate crime legislation that is coming into force.
- Where some Christian beliefs can be interpreted as hate speech. Or just think of the recent public consultation on ending conversion practices.
- Where, again, the normal work of Christians, the normal work of churches, could fall foul to the law. And so these are very real threats to our Christian freedoms.
- [10 : 45] About living for Jesus Christ and about speaking for Jesus Christ. And so this power struggle that we see here in Acts chapter 12 isn't just an issue for the early church.
- It's an issue for the church in every age as God's people live for Jesus in this world. Because the battle is always raging.
- From the Garden of Eden to the new creation. The battle is always raging. And that's why we have got to remember, if we belong to the church, who has ultimate power?
- Who has ultimate power? It is not this world. It is Christ. It is the Lord God and his King. And so that takes us to our second point.
- The first is the persecution of God's workers. But secondly, we see through this the power of God's working. Verse 5 to verse 19. And so there's no doubt that the persecution is real here in these verses.
- [11 : 51] But what Luke does, the author of Acts, is he makes it clear where the real power lies. God's power is seen in the way that Peter is rescued from prison.
- So verse 5 tells us, So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. And so it may have looked like Herod was the one calling the shots.
- After all, he wore the king. He wore the crown and called himself the king. And just like today, I guess it may seem sometimes as if God is being overpowered and outplayed by his enemies.
- But in reality, it is God who is in control. Because we see this in this contest of Herod versus Jesus. The world versus the church.
- And in this contest, there can only be one winner. And that's why this is a great account of Peter's imprisonment and then his release.

[12 : 50] Because the focus is actually on the power of God in defeating the persecution of Herod. So even if it looked like the odds were stacked against the church, stacked against Peter, God delivers a simple knockout punch.

And so let's just see how this happened. So it begins with Peter in prison. From verse 6, Peter is fast asleep. He's chained. He's heavily guarded. There's no way Peter's making any kind of prison break at all.

In fact, it seems that Peter's just completely oblivious to his own rescue. So he needs the angel of the Lord to poke him in the ribs and to wake him up. In verse 7.

And then the chains fall off his wrists. And then verse 8. Peter's needing to be told by the angel to get dressed. And then to follow him. And yet Peter still seems to be a bit discombobulated.

It's a great word, by the way. Because verse 9, what happens? Peter followed him 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.

[14 : 02] And so here's the angel leading Peter out of prison, past the guards, through the open gate, and out into the street. Verse 10. This was no human escape.

It was the Lord powerfully working to rescue Peter. So he did it through the prayers of his people and through the help of his angel. Chains fall off, doors open, effortlessly simple for the Lord.

Because we know, or we should know, nothing can possibly stand in the way of the work that God wants to do. Nothing can stand in his way.

And this is what Peter realized when he came to his senses. Look at verse 11. Then Peter came to himself and said, Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.

So it was the Lord who accomplished Peter's rescue. The focus, you notice, is all on the Lord's work. And to emphasize the power of God's working, Luke narrates the whole story with humor and with irony.

[15 : 16] Because it seemed like none of the other believers expected that Peter would actually be rescued. So there's Rhoda, the servant girl. She doesn't even open the door to Peter.

Verse 13 and 14. She leaves Peter outside. She goes back in to tell everybody else who's there praying for Peter to be rescued that Peter's there. And what's their response?

Rhoda, you're crazy. She is out of her mind, they say. They didn't believe it could be Peter. And so they say it must be his angel. Verse 15.

And all the time, Peter is outside, chapping away at the door. And then finally, when they do open the door, they're astonished that Peter's actually standing there.

So everything in the narrative is suggesting these believers weren't expecting their prayers to be answered. Because when God does answer them, when God does act, they can't believe it.

[16 : 19] And so without a doubt, it was the power of God at work that resulted in Peter's rescue. And that's the emphasis in these verses. It's on the power of the Lord.

And that's how Peter interprets what's going on in verse 17. Peter motioned with his hand. He's inside the house by this point. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison.

It was the Lord who did it. It was the Lord's doing. It was the Lord's work. And so that doesn't mean that the church's prayers had no part. Well, they did.

They were earnestly praying to God. But God answered in a way that they just could hardly believe. And so that should motivate us not to stop praying, but actually to pray with more confidence.

Not in ourselves and the ability of our prayers, but to pray with more confidence in the Lord's power. Because he's the one who acts. He's the one who works. Because nothing is outside the sovereign will of God.

[17 : 28] And so God will answer in his way because he rules over all people and over all circumstances. And God will ultimately accomplish his purposes.

There's a great hymn by William Cowper that sums this up well. The hymn's called God Moves in a Mysterious Way. And one of the verses says this, And so we pray and we live our lives knowing that nothing but nothing can stand in the way of the work that God wants to do.

Because human power is actually no match for his power. And that's why this episode should really be a great encouragement for all of us.

Because nothing can stand in the way of the Lord and what the Lord wants to do. And that's so obvious here. So not prisons or squads of soldiers or chains or gates or kings or even death.

And so this should give us assurance that nothing can stand in the way of the Lord's work today either. Not governments or legislation or employers or the police or persecution or any human power or authority or even death can stop God doing what God wants to do.

[19 : 06] Nothing can stop the power of God working. Working. And whether he works in a supernatural way or whether he works in simple ways, we won't always know and we won't always see.

But we can be sure that because he rules, he's got the power to do whatever he wants to do whenever he wants to do it. And so that's our second point, the power of God's working.

First, the persecution of God's workers. Second, the power of God's working. And then thirdly, the progress of God's work. The story, the narrative here naturally concludes with God's work progressing.

God's work advancing. And so the question, who rules? These closing verses give us a powerful answer and tell us who rules because we see who the true king is.

And I think that's why there's so much irony in this description of Herod and his kingship in verse 20 and 21. So his kingship is acknowledged here by all the people.

[20 : 15] They're all saying that he's the king. And the king's servant is mentioned. So he's a powerful man. The king's country is mentioned. We hear about his royal robes, how he sat on his throne and the way that Herod delivers a speech to all the people.

And all the people are captive and they're listening. And it all just oozes with great power and great authority and majesty. And it's ironic in the sense that Herod isn't the true king.

And yet Herod lets all of this power go to his head because we see how weak he really is. Verse 22. They shouted, this is the voice of a god, not a man.

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. See how Herod laps up all the praise.

He wants all the glory for himself and he revels in it. And he did not give glory to God because he sees himself as a god.

[21 : 28] He regards himself as deity. So he takes the praise and the glory that belongs to God alone for himself. And so it's hardly surprising that his pride and arrogance is met with God's punishment.

Because his defiance of God had passed the point of no return. And so despite all King Herod's pomp and all of King Herod's power, we're being told here that he doesn't rule.

No matter how much he thinks he rules and no matter how much it looks like he rules, he doesn't rule. Because there's another king, the true king, who does rule and he has ultimate power and ultimate authority.

And he is the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what the book of Acts is saying to us. And that's why here Peter was rescued by an angel of the Lord.

And why Herod was struck down dead by an angel of the Lord. And notice Herod's death. It is a brutal death. Just check out the order. Herod didn't die.

[22 : 39] And then he was eaten by worms. Which is, I guess, the normal process. When somebody dies, the worms eat them. No, Herod was eaten by worms.

And then he died. What a way to go. In fact, Herod's death is also recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus in his antiquities.

And Josephus says this. A severe pain arose in his belly, striking with a most violent intensity. And apparently Herod was in agony for five days.

And then he died. So the powerful king, Herod, acting like a god, is taken out by worms. And it simply emphasizes for us how no human power, no human force, can overpower the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

No matter how violently it tries to persecute her. And so Herod's story is really a stark reminder to us all about who rules.

[23 : 43] And so this is a warning to any political power, any state, any society, or even any individual who thinks that they can get away with opposing King Jesus.

Because to do this is to commit high treason. Because all opposition to Jesus Christ will be defeated.

It may come in this life. But it certainly will come in the end. Look at verse 24. But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

So despite Herod's best efforts, his most violent efforts to persecute the church, what happens is the word of God grows and increases.

And so can you see here the deliberate contrast between the death of Herod and the triumph of the word of God? Because the progress of God's work isn't just to defeat opposition.

[24 : 44] It is also to advance and to grow it. And that's how this whole episode is framed. From the beginning of Acts chapter 12 right to the end.

The chapter begins with Herod persecuting the church, killing and imprisoning the Lord's people. But it ends with the deliverance of Peter, the death of Herod, and the word of God spreading and flourishing.

So God's power causes all persecution to rebound into the growth of the church. In our garden we've got a thing called Crazy Catch.

I don't know if you've ever seen it. It's basically a metal frame that's like a triangle. It's got, on each side of this frame, it's got net. It's springy and it's crisscross shaped.

And it's basically a sports training net. And so we got it for our children when they were young. I think I enjoyed it more than they did. I still use it. But it's for anything that involves a ball.

[25 : 47] So football, rugby ball, cricket ball, hockey ball, tennis ball. And it's meant to improve your reactions, to give you just better hand-eye coordination for catching, for kicking, for passing, for throwing, for hitting, and so on.

And so the basic point is, with the Crazy Catch, you chuck your ball off the net and it rebounds in a different direction. Because the net's all crisscross.

You don't know what direction the ball is coming in. But it rebounds and it springs back at you faster than how you threw it. And it's all unpredictable.

But it's good to train you to be able to catch a ball. Now, why am I saying this? Well, isn't that what's happening here with the church? As persecution is thrown at the church by the world, it simply rebounds to expand the mission of the church.

Because the church's mission simply grows and spreads. And so human power can flex its muscles, but it can never stop the advance of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 58] And that doesn't mean that suffering won't come. Remember, James died. He was killed. And so human powers might make some noise for a while, but in reality, they will soon whimper out.

Jesus said, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. The church will dance on the graves of every power that dare try to extinguish her.

Because all God's enemies will ultimately be defeated. That's what these verses are saying to us. And so Herod is simply a graphic example of what happens to those who resist God's rule and try to be king themselves.

Who think that they have the power or even they are the deity and reject God. Because those who defy King Jesus will be punished and will be cast out of God's presence forever.

Because human power is no match for divine power. You can't fight against God. Isn't that the warning in these verses?

[28 : 12] Because one day the risen Lord Jesus Christ will return as judge. And so judgment is coming for us all.

For everyone who has ever lived. And isn't that a good thing? But also, that's why no one should continue to stand in opposition to King Jesus.

Nobody should pretend to be their own king and ruler. Thinking that they are the boss. Because we must all bow before Jesus as our Lord and King.

One day we'll be forced to. Jesus is the true king. And because he's the true king, then he demands and he deserves our allegiance.

Why is that? Well, think. Here, Herod thought himself as divine. Jesus is divine.

[29 : 16] He's God. God the Son. Herod was proud. Yet Jesus humbled himself. Herod used his power to violently rule over his subjects.

Yet Jesus gave up his power to serve. Herod made his enemies suffer. Yet Jesus suffered for his enemies. Herod dressed like a king in his royal robes.

Yet Jesus wore a crown of thorns. Herod wanted to kill. Yet Jesus was willing to be killed. Herod sat on his throne.

Yet Jesus hung on a cross for our sins. Herod was eaten by worms and died. Jesus rose from death.

Jesus rose from death and ascended into glory. Jesus did all this because he is king. And one day he will rule and reign with his people in his everlasting kingdom.

[30 : 25] And so it is the height of foolishness. As we see here in Herod's example. To resist the true king. And to try and be king.

It never works. It wasn't meant to. Jesus is king. So let's bow before him. Worship him. Love him. Serve him.

Because of all he's done for us. Let's bow before him. Follow him.

So let's bow this. Lance. plets- kingdom SPD in his blood. Hope Him. Hope Him. Isn't that a little cranny? If Kim soector's. He's seen in her.