

“God Responds to Opposition to Jesus”

Acts 12

As we work our way through the book of Acts Luke appears to be laying out a pattern for us that helps us keep a balance in the Christian life. Because we all have a tendency to have an imbalanced perspective on the way God is working due to our circumstances or the Scripture passages we are focusing on, separating it from the context. For example, two people could have a discussion about the book of Acts. One could say, ‘I really love the Book of Acts. There’s so much good happening, people being saved, churches growing, the Spirit is working. Acts is a great manual for a church.’

Meanwhile someone else could say, ‘I really don’t like the Book of Acts. Believers are mistreated so much in there. Every time something good happens it’s followed by something bad. The apostles get flogged. Stephen gets stoned to death. Saul drags husbands and wives out of their homes and arrests them because they believe in Jesus. James gets killed, Peter gets arrested. Paul almost dies in a shipwreck and gets bitten by a snake. It’s a very negative book.

So who’s right? Neither because both of them have an re-emphasizing view one perspective of Acts. We need both perspectives to keep a balance. Because if I believe only good should happen to believers I will be thrown when bad happens. Or if I only see the negative I will miss out on seeing the good God is doing.

Luke writes Acts as a summary highlighting major events in the history of the early church to teach disciples that God is alive and working all around us. But, that we also have an enemy who hates to see the work of God progress. So not surprisingly every time something good has happened for the church, it’s followed by something bad. Ch. 10-11 it’s something good, the Gentiles get the gospel. So as we come to Ch. 12 what should we expect? Bad.

Yet Luke puts this chapter together in a way that warns us not to swing the pendulum too far when bad or good happens. Let’s learn how to keep a healthy perspective on the way God works and the way the world/enemy reacts. Ch. 12 opens with perhaps the most negative experience the early church faces; the senseless murder of an apostle, James the brother of John.

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

It’s not the first time the apostles have been arrested but it’s the first time one has been killed for his faith. While Luke spends no time on how it affected the others, it had to have hurt them deeply. These 11 have been together for 4-5 years now. James of course was John’s brother. Almost every time we read James and John, rarely one or the other. Surely this was devastating. But they don’t have time to mourn because Peter is arrested too. So in the midst of the joy that the gospel goes to the Gentiles, we are reminded that ...

We Live in a World Opposed to the Gospel **(12:1-4)**

James death “pleased the Jews”. The Jewish religious folks who rejected Jesus, had Him crucified and have given the apostles a hard time because they don’t like being reminded by them that they killed Jesus. And they are tired of all this resurrection ‘conspiracy theories’, which of course was true. Herod Agrippa I (grandson of Herod the great, who ruled when Jesus was born and hoped to kill Him as a baby when he ordered the massacre of Bethlehem baby boys) wants to keep the Jewish leaders happy (which makes Rome happy), so he arrests Peter too with the same intention to kill him. Ironically its Passover again and they want to wait until after that.

We shouldn’t need a reminder that the world is opposed to the gospel and yet I think we do need it occasionally. Two weeks ago we were in 1 Peter 4:12-19, looking at what should we expect as ‘aliens’ [temporary residents on earth since we’re citizens of heaven] and he said

“[stop being] surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though something strange were happening to you;

So we do need this reminder because we don’t always have a balanced theology that says ‘God is working all around us/Satan hates that and don’t be surprised if there’s trouble.’ What should we do then?

⁵ *So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*

This is a key verse because in the Greek we are to read it like this: ‘On the one hand Peter was kept in prison but on the other hand prayer was fervently being made to God for Peter. Something was happening to get Peter’s release – prayer. So, yes, we live temporarily in a world that opposes God and the gospel ...

But We Serve the God Who is Sovereign Over the World **(12:5-17)**

We can always pray or ‘We can always pray!’

We forget sometimes that we have direct access to the God who controls this world through prayer. Prayer shouldn’t be a ‘We’ve tried everything else so we better pray’ approach. Instead we should ...

Continually pray for God to act (vv.5-12)

The way Luke worded this was that yes, Peter was in prison but the church was praying! Like, we have the upper hand, the advantage. Did they not pray when James was arrested? I’m sure they did. But “it” didn’t work. Sometimes we talk about prayer as some kind of magic formula that if we just say the right words, or if we have enough people then we can make prayer “work”. No prayer is our purposeful choice to ask God to act in a situation and we are totally dependent on God accomplish His will in that. Why did God not spare James but spared Peter? I don’t know, other than He chose to glorify Himself somehow through this. If we had all the answers where would faith be?

Prayer gives us the advantage because we trust the living God who ultimately controls the events of our lives and invites us to participate in His work through prayer. It's exciting to know God answers our prayers and wants us to involve us in what He's doing. And it is disappointing when God chooses not to answer our prayers, but as Jesus pointed out in the Garden of Gethsemane always ask for God's will to be done. That means we leave things in His hands to do what He wills because somehow it will result in His glory and our spiritual growth.

The church was fervently/intensely/earnestly/ continually for Peter's release. And "the night before when Herod was to bring him to trial" .. 'Behold or suddenly, an angel of the Lord" shows up, a light shines in the cell gives Peter a little wake up boot and says 'Let's go!' It's somewhat comical because Peter is totally out of it. Even thinks it's a dream at first (he had one recently!) until he's standing out on the street.

Did Peter seem worried? Chained between two guards he's sleeping like a baby. The guards are totally oblivious to what's going on. Peter was quite content, trusting God. After all, he had been miraculously released from jail before (but so had the other 10 apostles). He seemed content to what God had planned. When Peter is fully awake he says

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.

The Lord sent His angel because the church prayed. So God denied Herod more gloating and upset the Jews looking to get rid of Jesus followers, which ultimately they can't. So we need to continually pray and

Believe God will act! (vv. 13-17)

We have a little more comedy as Peter knocks on the gate of Mary's house, [mother of Mark] (probably the Upper Room house) and calls out. A servant named Rhoda hears his voice but leaves him at the gate, tells the others and they don't believe her. 'Sit down, and get praying for Peter's release!' they probably told her.

Sometimes we don't always have faith to believe in what we're praying for. James, the Lord's half brother, writes in his letter:

^{1:5} If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

None of us are perfect and none of us have perfect faith. But we have placed our trust in the God of this world who everything He's promised has come true so far. Who has given us new life in Christ and a purpose in life. We're here to serve others with our various gifts and abilities and the world around us by meeting their needs and sharing the gospel. Through these God works and accomplishes His will. Prayer works alongside all this as we serve and share we pray that God's will would be accomplished through this. Jesus said in John 5:17,

Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.

Pray and believe God will act. Here, God acted according to their prayers, releasing Peter. Peter told them to report this to James [not the apostle, but the Lord's half-brother] who had taken

over leadership in the Jerusalem church. This would have been encouraging to the leaders who would have shared this answered prayer to all who would have all praised the Lord.

But the chapter isn't over yet. Luke has something more we need to see as we put the whole chapter together and keep a balanced perspective on the ways and work of God. Because there are some loose ends to tie.

Herod of course is greatly angered. Under Roman law if a prisoner escapes under your watch, those guards will lose their life. Even though they were not at fault, Herod has them killed. Four more needless deaths.

Herod came to Passover to please the Jews to make it look like he too is celebrating God's deliverance of Israel from the ruthless tyranny of a despotic ruler (Pharaoh). How did God do that? By miracles. How will God deal with Herod, who obviously doesn't believe in miracles? Through poetic irony of course.

Herod leaves for Caesarea where he has a meeting with the leaders of Tyre and Sidon, major coastal cities along the Mediterranean. For some reason Herod seemed to have stopped shipping grain to them in exchange for goods from there (v.26). It's rather important to keep food and goods being traded [!] so they bribe Blastus and trade continues and peace is restored. So all the politicians gather to pat themselves on the back and Herod wears (according to Josephus the historian) a dazzling outfit made of silver. It's a sunny day (as it usually is in Israel. Herod delivers a speech and the people (wanting to keep trade going) shout his praises:

They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man."²³ 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.

Those were the things a crowd would say about the Roman Emperor, not another leader. Herod should have said 'No, I'm just a man like you', etc. but he doesn't. Is. 42:8 says

I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to idols.

And God strikes him with a painful disease. He immediately left the event and died 5 days later. Why did God have Luke record this? To help us not become unbalanced or unsettled by man's/Satan's attempt to destroy the work of God. Yes we live in a world opposed to God, Jesus and the gospel. But, we serve the God who is sovereign over the world,

Therefore, Trust God to Remove His Opponents and Build His Church (12:18-25)

Jesus wasn't kidding or making an exaggerated political speech when He said 'I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' [Matt. 16:18]. The gates of hell – through Herod – tried here by killing James and then planning on killing Peter. James did die but Peter was rescued for now. The church wasn't defeated. But one of God's opponents was removed.

While it takes only 3 minutes to read Acts 12, we understand things don't often happen that quickly. This could have been days or even months later (fairly quickly actually). But this is where we need to trust God to remove His opponents,

In His time and manner (vv.18-23)

Ultimately, we are still waiting for God to remove the ultimate enemy to the gospel Satan, the accuser. He leads all God's opponents to hurt, deceive and remove if he can Jesus' disciples. But God doesn't hide from Satan nor his demons what will happen to them in the future. And that is our encouragement as well. We know we win.

But in the meantime it's not always easy because the enemy wins smaller battles and at times seems to have the upper hand. And there are very few believers in certain parts of the world. We are all outnumbered, humanly speaking, but we are more powerful, divinely speaking. Not because of our own wisdom or skills because God is our Rock and refuge, a great fortress in times of trouble. He does not sleep or slumber. He never leaves us nor forsakes us. He deals with the Herods in his time and manner. And the church continues to grow. See how the chapter ends?

²⁴ *But the word of God continued to increase and spread.*

²⁵ *When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.*

God and Jesus continue to build their church,

By His all-powerful Word and through anyone He chooses (vv.24-25)

Luke is an excellent writer. The chapter begins with the death of a leader of God's church by a politician who is trying to make unbelievers happy with the hopes of silencing the word of God. He thinks he'll do it again by arresting Peter. God uses the Passover to delay Peter's death by saving him from a political tyrant – by a miraculous delivery. Peter lives to keep spreading the Word. The chapter ends with a miraculous death of the tyrant and a comment that the Word of God kept spreading and multiplying. And that God has even raised up another servant of the gospel, Mark, to pass along the Word of God.

Mark will end up writing a gospel and eventually a helper to Paul. James the apostle dies but James the Lord's brother becomes leader of the Jerusalem church and also writes a letter in God's Word. And we're still here 2000 years later, doing what? Growing His church and spreading the Word with the prayer that it will multiply.

The enemy is still active but we are not powerless. Through prayer we have immediate access to God to will and to act. Use it, constantly.

Will God get rid of all those who oppose Him? Eventually, but remember, 2 Pet. 3:9 says He delays judgment because He wants more people saved. So let's do our part to keep the Word spreading, discipling people to grow so that this church and all God's world wide church reaches the ends of the earth.

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