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Acts 12:1-25

Eighteenth Message

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TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

We have all been affected by the devastation in the Indian Ocean. The faith of some in a sovereign, loving God has been severely shaken. Allan Laing wrote the following in a recent edition of *The Glasgow Herald*:

God, if there is a God, should be ashamed of himself. The sheer enormity of the Asian tsunami disaster, the death, destruction, and havoc it has wreaked, the scale of the misery it has caused, must surely test the faith of even the firmest believer. I hope I'm right that there is no God. For, if there were, then he'd have to shoulder the blame. In my book, he would be as guilty as sin and I'd want nothing to do with him.

The emotion behind these words is understandable. Most of us feel confused and angry at times when our circumstances seem so painful and God seems silent and distant. Why is it that we pray at times and God heals and other times he does not? We pray for God's protection and he responds; we pray for him to protect someone else and he does not respond. How can we explain these strange reversals in life?

With these questions swirling in my mind I was encouraged in recent days by the passage to which we come in our studies in the book of Acts. I trust you will be encouraged as well. Acts records the marvelous growth of the church in the first century AD as the gospel spread out in concentric circles from Jerusalem. Luke has already described the power of the gospel to change many lives: three thousand on the Day of Pentecost, the Samaritans, the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus, the Gentile centurion Cornelius and the sophisticated pagans of Antioch.

Luke is about to describe the greatest advance yet, what we call the first missionary journey. But before we shift our focus to the Gentile ministry, leaving Peter's ministry for that of the apostle Paul, Luke takes the opportunity in Acts 12 to reveal two final glimpses of God's working in the church in Jerusalem. In this chapter the destructive power of Herod is contrasted with the saving power of God.

Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard

him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. (Acts 12:1-4 NASB)

This is not referring to Herod the Great, the king who destroyed the innocent children in Bethlehem, but his grandson, Herod Agrippa I. James was an apostle, one of the twelve, not the Lord's half brother who wrote the letter of James, but John's brother. These two and their mother came to Jesus and asked for the best seats in the kingdom. Jesus affectionately nicknamed them "Sons of Thunder." Our Lord had predicted that James would die a violent death. James was the first of the apostles to be martyred, and his brother John was the last to die. The deaths of these two apostles bracket the deaths of all the apostles. So this faithful follower of our Lord has his life taken away from him right in its prime by this wicked man Herod.

Luke goes on to say that this was the Passover season. The Feast of Unleavened Bread is the feast that accompanies Passover. Jesus had been executed during this feast 12 or 13 years earlier. Herod was something of a political animal. Concerned only about his position in the Roman Empire, and desiring to please the Jews, he had Peter arrested as well. Executions were not permitted during the Passover, but as soon as the feast was over there would undoubtedly be a mock trial and Peter would join James in death. Worried that some people might try to break him out of jail, Herod takes special care to see that Peter is secure, detailing four squads, sixteen soldiers, to watch this one man. Peter was under the guard of four soldiers at all times; two were chained to his wrists, and two stood guard at the door of his cell. Herod was taking no chances that Peter would be rescued in some kind of strategic coup.

What a scene! The church was in shock. John must have been terribly shaken at his brother's death. The beleaguered church felt overwhelmed and helpless. They were not expecting this. And it was Passover week. The grim associations of our Lord's crucifixion must have filled their thoughts.

In their grief and pain the believers turn to prayer.

So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.

On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and roused him, saying, "Get up

quickly.” And his chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, “Gird yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” (12:5-8)

Luke uses the adverb “fervently” to describe the prayer of the believers. He used that same word in his gospel to describe Jesus’ prayer while he was in intense agony in Gethsemane. John Stott writes, “Here then we see the two communities, the world and the church, arrayed against one another, each wielding an appropriate weapon. On the one hand we have the authority of Herod, the power of the sword, and the security of prison; on the other hand we see the church turn to prayer, which is the only weapon the powerless possess.”¹

But Peter himself shows no sign of anxiety or alarm at all. His courage is impressive. On the night before he is to die a martyr’s death he is sleeping soundly. He was aware of God’s sovereign power. He had already experienced an angel opening the prison doors. Remember also that the Lord had told him that he too would die a violent death. Probably thinking that this was his time to go home, Peter goes to sleep.

Suddenly an angel appears and things begin to happen in quick succession. First, the angel brings some light; perhaps he simply glowed. He then strikes Peter. That must not have felt good. The angel tells him to get up quickly and his chains fall off. He must have been groggy and not fully awake, because the angel has to tell him how to get dressed: “*Gird yourself and put on your sandals*”; and then, “*Wrap your cloak around you and follow me*.” Peter probably had his sandals on the wrong feet, his tunic hanging loosely, his hair uncombed. Dazed and bewildered like a sleepwalker, he probably didn’t know where he was.

And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.” (12:9-11)

As Peter is slowly waking up, rubbing his eyes, staggering forward, he walks right past the guards he was chained to, right past the two guards guarding the cell, and the big iron gate opens by itself. The Greek word translated “by itself” is the word from which we get our word automatic. His adrenalin started pumping. Then suddenly the angel is gone, and there stands Peter on the streets of Jerusalem, rubbing his eyes, realizing that this was an unexpected, miraculous deliverance.

And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named

Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. And they said to her, “You are out of your mind!” But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, “It is his angel.” But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, “Report these things to James and the brethren.” And he departed and went to another place. (12:12-17)

Their prayers had about as much assurance as ours often do. I’m sure they were probably disillusioned by James’ death. The church had prayed just as earnestly when he was arrested and God had not answered their petitions for his release. They pray again for Peter and God does answer and they are quite surprised. There is a lot of humor in this passage. The servant girl Rhoda is so excited when she realizes it is Peter that she forgets to open the door. And all the while they are arguing, Peter is continuing to knock.

When we read all this, we ask, Why? Does God know what he is doing? Why is James taken and Peter allowed to remain? It all seems rather capricious and mysterious. God seems to be acting in ways we can’t understand.

Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.

Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king’s chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king’s country. (12:18-20)

This fact goes way back into Israel’s history. These people were dependent upon Judea, and especially Galilee, for food. But now they can’t get any food, and they appeal through Blastus, Herod’s treasurer.

On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. The people kept crying out, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.

But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied. (12:21-24)

Josephus, the Jewish historian, a contemporary of Herod who may even have witnessed this event, wrote that Herod was wearing a beautiful robe woven of silver. As he moved in the sun, the brilliant reflection at times blinded the people. Combine that with the fact that they were just flatterers look-

ing for food. They cry out, “He’s a god and not a man!” Herod accepted their adulation, and immediately was “struck” by an angel. There is divine word-play here. The same word was used when the angel “struck” Peter to wake him. Maybe it was even the same angel. But the results are certainly different. Herod dies a terrible death. He is immediately struck with some intestinal illness and dies a few days later. The NASB says he was “eaten by worms.” Apparently this was some terrible internal illness. What in the world is going on? Peter escapes and Herod is slain. Earlier, James was slain and Herod triumphed.

Luke wrote this chapter to encourage the early church—and us as well. They may have felt small and insignificant in the Roman Empire, thinking they were overpowered, with some of their best leaders killed on a political whim. But the truth is, if they remain with Jesus they will win, if they oppose him they will lose. Human tyrants may oppress the church and temporarily hinder the gospel, but they can never altogether suppress it. That is why Luke closes the account with this statement: “*But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.*” Man’s power cannot limit God’s word. John Stott summarizes what happened: “The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God triumphing. Such is the power of God to overthrow hostile human plans and to establish his own in their place.”² So be encouraged. Be bold and courageous to spread the word of truth and leave the outcome to God.

The Scriptures tell us very clearly that our lives are part of a transcendent drama. We are actors, and the world is the stage. Behind the scenes there is a master puppeteer, Satan, who is attempting to manipulate things for his own advantage. Scripture calls him the “god of this world.” He is a fallen angel, a created being. He is a terrible, evil, vicious enemy. Jesus called him a liar and a murderer. His goal is destruction; his method is deception. He kills and murders because he wants to get back at God.

The book of Job has an illustration of this. The author wrote that one day when the sons of God appeared before God, Satan was with them. When God praised Job’s character, Satan said to God, in effect, “Sure, he is that way because you bless and protect him. Sure, he loves you. Job is healthy and wealthy. He has beautiful children. Who wouldn’t trust you with those circumstances? But take away all those nice things and he will curse you to your face.” God removed some of those protective hedges around Job’s life, and Satan went to work. He caused a number of natural disasters—fire, lightning, an earthquake—and two armies attacked and killed all those in his household. Job was left with nothing except his wife. Yet he responded, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him.” Job counted on God in the darkness. He didn’t know anything about that heavenly battle that was going on. He simply trusted and loved God.

Then Job’s so-called friends came along and told him that he was being punished for his sin. Job argued convincingly, although a bit arrogantly, that that couldn’t be true. He hadn’t sinned enough to deserve all this. Then another friend, Elihu, said that suffering is educational. But God interrupted his eloquent speech with these words, “*Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?*” God invited Job to look at his creation—the stars, the snowflakes, the animals. He told Job that if he could understand the intricacies of his plan in nature, than maybe he could understand the intricacies of his plan in history. Job admitted that he could not. He never did understand all that was going on behind the scenes in his life. But we know, because we have the complete revelation. In the invisible spiritual realm there was a great cosmic struggle going on between God and Satan.

I believe that struggle is still going on today.

We don’t always understand what is happening and why. Very often the real struggle is not what is occurring in our time and space; it’s a battle in the spiritual realm. We don’t know why it has to be that way, but Scripture reveals that is what is going on. We may never see the results of our suffering and never feel the victory of it.

That is what was happening in Acts 12. We don’t understand why James was taken and Peter delivered. I don’t know why particular tragic events occur. But the question for us is, Will we go on believing and trusting and loving God in the darkness and silence?

God does not have to prove himself. We think he does. We demand answers as to how a sovereign and loving God can allow such apparent evil and tragedy. We want to see the results of our suffering. We don’t need to see some cause and effect relationship to believe that God is good. We know that he is and we can trust him in the darkness, no matter how much hurt and pain we feel.

The Bible tells the story of God and the story of specific people in specific circumstances making specific decisions, always presented as short chapters in God’s eternal, transcendent drama. Only with God at the center, at the beginning and at the end, moving through every detail, can meaning and joy be found in our story.

We are not the center of the story. We are not the star of the play. We don’t have the lead role. That is reserved for Jesus. He is the center of God’s story. Everything that happens will be to his honor and glory. We have an important but supporting role. We often assume that God’s glory will be revealed in our prosperity, whether financial, relational, physical or emotional. As long as we believe this we will always walk in the flesh. It is so natural to think that the presence of Jesus has no greater purpose than to improve the quality of our journey through this life: marriages should work, biopsies should come back benign, ministry efforts should succeed, and we should feel pretty good about how things go.

I do know that without trials, without pain, without shattered dreams, only spoiled brats would enter heaven. And that would turn heaven into hell.

This ought to change how we view prayer and how we pray. God is not a heavenly vending machine into which we insert a prayer and out comes the answer. That's not how prayer works. To pray in Jesus' name means to pray as Jesus prayed, to pray in line with heavenly policy, to pray according to God's will. Remember how Jesus prayed in the garden: "*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.*" It may be God's will for us to go through very difficult circumstances, equipped with his power, and not be removed from them, and not see the results of our suffering.

But be encouraged! Like Job, you may not see with your physical eyes all that is going on behind your difficult circumstances, but rest assured that our sovereign, loving God is still in control.

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 208-209.

2. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 213.

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