



THE LAST WORD, NOT TO MENTION THE SILENCE AFTER

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 12:1–25

23rd Message

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Though we briefly covered Peter's rescue from prison last week, I want us to take a second look at the material within its larger context, so that we can more deeply absorb the beauty of the Word through Luke's intricate artistry. With our culture's current bent toward speed and leisure time at a premium, we've lost the art of reading and reflection. Even when it comes to the Scriptures, we tend to speed-read, racing to the end in order to capture the main point of the story. Have you ever tried that approach with a first-rate movie, and fast-forwarded through several scenes just to get to the end? What is the result? The movie has no impact on you. Like all good stories, the gospels are written in such a way that every detail matters and by paying close attention to them, we are drawn into the story in a way that it transforms us. The transformation may be imperceptible at first, but at some point the light goes on when you begin to realize that, as a follower of Jesus, *his* story is giving shape and meaning to *your* story. Over time you begin to discover that your life has a purpose and that every detail is significant, even when you encounter setbacks, suffering and injustice, which is the theme of our text this morning.

What do God's people do when they operate within a world of oppressive governments, manipulations, bribery, and have no access to influence those in positions of power? What does the church do when evil is carried out with impunity. What role does prayer play in bringing God's rule to earth? This is what we are praying for in the Lord's Prayer: "May your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." How can we pray with hope? What is the relationship between prayer and human initiative? Who has the last word, not to mention the silence after?

I. Imprisoned by an Angry King (12:1–5)

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. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. (Acts 12:1–5 ESV)

Persecution becomes more intense for the Jerusalem church during the reign of Herod Agrippa, (ca. 9 BC—AD 44), grandson of Herod the Great. His grandmother Mariamne was a direct descendent of the Hasmonean dynasty, thus a Jew. Knowing how profoundly the masses hated his family, Agrippa took every opportunity during his administration in Palestine to win their affection. Given his obsession to maintain his popularity with the Jewish leadership, you can imagine how the rapid growth of Christian population would have provoked a fierce reaction. In this case Agrippa's violent hand reaches into the innermost circle of Jesus' disciples, and he has James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John, executed by the sword. As William Willimon observes, "This is what kings can do. They can merely stretch out their hands or say a few words or with the stroke of a pen send thousands of innocents into oblivion."¹

When Agrippa sees how his execution of James enhances his reputation with the Sanhedrin, he arrests Peter, the leader of the apostles and the one who took the initiative to embrace Gentiles. He is arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, seven days prior to Passover, the great and festive day of deliverance from Egypt. To insure there is no possibility

of escape, Herod took special precautions, placing four squads ("squad" = 4 soldiers) of soldiers to guard him, one for each of the night watches. Though the situation looks extremely bleak, if not hopeless, "earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church."

The battle lines are drawn as two communities reach for power in opposing ways. As John Stott observes, "On the one side was the authority of Herod, the power of the sword and the security of the prison. On the other side, the church turned to prayer, which is the only power which the powerless have."²

II. Delivered by an Angel (12:6–11)

A. Chains fall off

Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." (vv. 6–8)

Herod insists on the highest security measures possible with Peter chained to two guards, one on either side, and two at his cell-door. At the critical moment when Herod is about to bring him out to sentence him an angel appears, filling the cell with light. With a touch of humor we find Peter sleeping so soundly that it takes more than a gentle touch to awaken him. The angel has to "strike" Peter (the same word used when the angel "strikes" Herod in verse 23) to get him to rise out of his deep sleep. Once Peter is awake, he stands and immediately his chains simply fall off. Then the angel gives him a series of detailed instructions—"get up quickly... dress yourself...put on sandals...wrap you cloak around you and follow me"—which suggests that even in the case of angelic intervention, Peter's deliverance is dependent on his unwavering obedience cooperating with the divine intervention.

Luke's first century readers may have observed another layer of significance of Peter's chains falling off. Tiberius put Agrippa in prison on the charge of treason. When Tiberius died, his friend Gaius (better known as Caligula) gave Agrippa a gold chain equal in weight to the iron chain he wore in prison. Agrippa took his gift and proudly placed it in the Temple as a trophy. By contrast, Peter doesn't have to wait for the emperor to die to be set free. Instead God's people pray, an angel shows up and Peter's chains simply fall off.

B. An iron gate opens

And he went out and followed him. 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 the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." (vv. 9–11)

Peter's reaction to this extraordinary visitation is so human. As he follows the man's instructions, he tiptoes past two sleeping guards and

then approaches the iron gate which, to his amazement, opens by itself as easily as his chains fell off. The experience is so out of this world, he doesn't know if it is a dream or reality. Back in Joppa he experienced similar feelings when he experienced a heavenly vision. After they made it safely outside of the prison fortress and began walking along the street, the angel left him. Once he is alone he comes to his senses and takes stock of what has just happened: "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." The event was as incredible to Peter as it is to us.

III. Coming Home (12:12–17)

A. The door is locked!

When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" (vv. 12–15)

Peter's first order of business was to give a report of his miraculous escape to his brothers and sisters who had been praying for him. In the tradition of the Psalms, when God answers our prayers, we have an obligation to give public thanks in worship. It not only brings honor to the Lord, but it also brings a surge of life and encouragement into the community as we celebrate God's faithfulness.

After reporting back to the community, Peter needed to go into hiding, lest Agrippa's soldiers find him and take him back into custody. Peter finds his way to the house of Mary, who is the mother of John Mark, and likely a widow, since her husband is not mentioned. She is woman of considerable wealth, with a home large enough for the church in Jerusalem to gather there. When Peter arrives at Mary's home he **knocks** on the door of the gate. As the maidservant Rhoda makes her way to the gate, she hears Peter's voice and is so overcome with joy, she runs back into the house leaving poor Peter anxiously waiting outside the locked gate. When she announces the miracle to the praying crowd, they don't believe her and answer harshly, "You're out of your mind." The term *maine* means, "to be mad, insane," and is used of someone who is demon possessed. Though she is just a maidservant, she stands her ground and persistently "*insists*" that she is not mistaken. It is the same term used just after Peter denied he was a follower of Jesus and a bystander "*insisted*" that indeed he was, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean" (Luke 22:59). Unable to cope with Rhoda's insistence, they propose a more reasonable explanation, "It must be his angel." Tom Wright suggests,

The gathered church supposes that Peter has been killed in prison, and that his 'angel' is visiting them. People in the first century knew just as well as we do that sometimes, after someone we know and love dearly has died...we can experience a vivid sense of them being briefly with us, speaking to us, cheering us up, smiling at us — and then they are gone.³

The irony of Peter's mistaken identity is not lost on us, as Willimon notes,

The reader is also—in relief at Peter's escape—willing to chuckle over the slapstick misunderstanding of the maidservant Rhoda: an angel gets Peter out of Herod's cell, but Peter cannot get through the locked gate to the Christian household because he is mistaken for an angel!⁴

B. Persistent knocking

But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place. (vv. 16–17)

After several anxious moments, the door is finally opened and indeed it is Peter. The crowd is utterly "amazed." Luke uses the strongest Greek word for astonishment and, perhaps with a touch of irony, it can also mean, "to be out of one's senses, lose one's mind." Who is out of their mind now? In their excitement they must have broken into a clamor of praise, which Peter quickly silences with a motion of his hand, lest they arouse suspicion among their sleeping neighbors. Peter hasn't much time and instructs them to tell James, the Lord's brother, about his deliverance from Herod. James is emerging as the new leader in the Jerusalem church and will become its spokesman at the apostolic council in chapter 15, while Peter must leave Jerusalem and go "to another place." As F. F. Bruce writes,

From the middle forties onwards, Peter and the other apostles were increasingly absent from Jerusalem; James, on the other hand, stayed there, administering the large and growing church of the city with the aid of his fellow-elders.⁵

Putting all the details together, we discover that the portrayal of Peter's arrest and deliverance mirrors the story of Jesus' passion. As Johnson observes,

Like Jesus, Peter was imprisoned during the time of Passover celebration and that a "King Herod" had a role in that event...there is the "laying on hands," and the "arresting," the "delivering over," and the "leading forth." Jesus rises from the dead and the event is announced to the women by two figures identified as "angels." When Mary announces that Jesus is raised, she is not believed. When Jesus does appear they "disbelieve for joy." They think Jesus is a "ghost." After Jesus converses with them, he withdraws.⁶

One thing is clear—Peter's supernatural escape reveals that the power of the resurrection is at work in Jesus' followers and that the shape of Jesus' story will give shape and meaning to our lives.

This truth was seared into my psyche on a mission trip to Romania in 1989. Romania's feared secret police (the Securitate) had made several attempts to arrest our friends for housing "foreigners," not to mention conducting illegal Bible camps. We were studying the David story, focusing on his lament for Saul's son Jonathan, who gave up his life in order that David might be king. During our two conferences four brothers (each named Jonathan!) put their lives on the line for us so that we might escape the clutches of the Securitate. Had we been caught, we would have been thrown out of the country, but our Romanian brothers would have gone to prison. With the Securitate breathing down our necks, I was assigned to keep watch over the road, while the others took refuge inside a large tent to worship and study in secret. After four failed attempts of the Securitate, our story read like a script right out of Psalm 27.

When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh,
My adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell.
For in the day of trouble he will conceal me in his tabernacle
In the secret place of his tent he will hide me;
And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies around me,
And I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD. (Ps 27:2, 5–6 NASB)

IV. A Death Sentence Decreed by an Outraged King (12:18–19)

Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be "led away" put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there. (vv. 18–19 ESV)

As a new day arrives we are privy to the goings on inside Peter's empty cell and can't help but take pity on the poor guards, who are attempting to come to grips with the disappearance of their prisoner. There can be no other reasonable explanation than it was an inside job. Can you imagine their conversation as they prepare themselves to face the wrath of the king? Luke's understated "no small commotion" is designed to make us

laugh and reminds us of David's words in his coronation Psalm; "the one enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them," (Ps 2:4). And we laugh too, as we can't help but think of another Herod who, upon hearing the news of Jesus' many miracles, became terrified and thought, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised" (Mark 6:16). In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, "It's déjà vu all over again."

Herod throws all his weight behind an intensive search and investigation and comes up empty. Frustrating royalty can be dangerous to your health. Luke spares us the gruesome details and caps Herod's futile investigation with just two words—"he-ordered / to-be-taken-away" (the verb doesn't even have an object). Luke leaves their fate to our imagination, but the translators couldn't help filling in all the gaps ("put to death" "executed"), robbing the readers of Luke's artistry and suspense. After the mention of James' death in the opening scene, Luke keeps us in suspense wondering, who will the next victim to die at Herod's hand? But Luke keeps that dreaded demon at bay until the last scene, when death's dark shadow falls upon the king in all its terrible horror.

V. A Death Sentence Executed by an Offended God (12:20–23)

Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" 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. (vv. 20–23)

Like an angry child who hasn't gotten his way, Herod leaves Judea and storms off in a huff to Caesarea. Despite all his pomp and power, Herod has been upstaged and humiliated by a young church that has learned how to pray. If you've ever been infuriated and not dealt with it, you know that it doesn't go away. You may bury your anger for a time, but beneath the surface of respectability it churns and burns until it becomes a seething rage that can erupt with volcanic force, destroying everything in its path. When a king is enraged the potential for damage can be horrific.

After Herod returned to Caesarea the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon somehow offend the king, adding fuel to his anger. "Angry" is a weak translation; "fuming mad" or "violently angry" would be more like it. This rare verb is made up of two words *thumos* ("anger, wrath") and *machomai* ("to engage in physical combat, fight"), which together mean, "to be extremely angry, with the implication of violence." Regardless of whether Herod's anger is justified or not, the citizens of Tyre and Sidon better find a way to appease the king's wrath for, as Bruce notes, "The cities of the Phoenician seaboard, Tyre and Sidon, depended on Galilee for their food supply, as they had done in the days of Hiram and Solomon (1 Kgs 5:9 ff.)."⁸ With great skill the people of Tyre and Sidon won over Blastus, the king's chamberlain, and made him their friend. Blastus in turn worked his statecraft to create an amicable stage where the two parties could meet to pursue peace.

Question: So how does one appease the wrath of an angry king?

Answer: Turn up the lights and make him a rock star. Intoxicate him with pride!

Josephus fills the details in his account.

At Caesarea Agrippa exhibited shows in honor of Caesar, inaugurating this as a festival for the emperor's welfare. And there came together to it a large number of provincial officials and others of distinguished position. Agrippa put on a robe made of silver throughout, of altogether wonderful weaving, and entered the theater at break of day. Then the silver shone and glittered wonderfully as the sun's first rays fell on it, and its splendence inspired a sort of fear and trembling in those who gazed on it. Immediately his flatterers called out...and addressed him

as a god...He did not rebuke them, nor did he repudiate their impious flattery. But afterwards he looked up and saw an owl sitting on a rope above his head, and immediately recognized it as a messenger of evil... and a pang of grief pierced his heart. At the same time he was seized by a severe pain in his belly, which began with a most violent attack... He was carried quickly into the palace...and when he had suffered continuously for five days from the pain in his belly, he died, in the fifty-fourth year of his age.⁹

Luke's account penetrates beyond Josephus' account and highlights the root cause and source of Agrippa's death—"The angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory." Luke concludes the scene with the gruesome detail that Agrippa was eaten by worms. For you speed-readers the main point is: **Self-exaltation can be dangerous to your health.** As the Psalmist writes,

Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.
When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;
on that very day his plans perish (Ps 146:3–4)

VI. Epilogue: The Last Word (12:24–25)

But the word of God increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. (vv. 24–25)

In striking contrast to the sudden and gruesome death of Herod, Luke concludes this scene with a surge of new and vibrant life as the word of God takes deeper root and bears more fruit on its luscious vines. An apt illustration of Isaiah's words:

The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.
(Isaiah 40:7–8)

Stott's summary captures Luke's artistry: "The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod on the rampage; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free and the word of God on the rampage."¹⁰

By the time this Gospel was written, Augustus and Quirinius, such mighty men in their day, ruler who could speak and make the whole world shake, were now rotting in their graves, relegated to the dusty, forgotten footnotes of history. But the babe at Bethlehem, the one whose advent no one noticed, that baby has overturned the world of Augustus, Herod, and Quirinius, as his followers would upset the world of Felix and Festus. It was that babe at Bethlehem, who was to have the last word...Acts is a revolutionary manifesto addressed to a church determined to show Caesar that God, not nations, rules the world.

God has the last word, not to mention the silence after, but what made the difference?

A. Earnest prayer

Peter's deliverance was the result of the church's "earnest prayer." "Earnest" (Grk. *ektens*) combines fervency with constancy. Luke uses the same term to describe Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane.

And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:43–44)

Spurgeon eloquently expressed it: "Prayer without fervency is like hunting with a dead dog. Prayer without preparation is like hawking with a blind falcon...The Holy Spirit is he author of prayer, but He uses thoughts of a fervent soul to fashion a golden vessel. Let our prayers and praises be the steady burning of a well-kindled fire, not the flashes of a hot and hasty brain."¹²

B. Prayer plus human initiative

Peter's rescue came about not only through prayer, but prayer coupled with human initiative. The first scene is framed by *prayer*, but in between Peter has to follow the detailed orders of the angel if he any hopes of freedom. The second scene is framed by *knocking*. Just as Peter's friends persisted in prayer, so now Peter must persist in knocking if he is to get past the gate into safety.

This April I attended the Global Prayer Gathering for International Justice Mission. Senior Vice President of Justice System Transformation, Sharon Cohn Wu gave a stirring talk, illustrating how it takes "human initiative" coupled with "earnest prayer" in order to bring justice upon the earth. She writes,

In May 2002, IJM assisted authorities in an operation in South East Asia, to rescue a number of children being held in a brothel. Many things went wrong...there had been a tip-off. We were trying to find 5 girls, were taken away just before the police arrived. When, days later, the girls who were turned over to the police by the brothel keeper, three of the victims, who were from Burma, were put in jail on immigration violations for having been trafficked and raped without proper documentation. All day we tried to secure their release from jail. Our attempts were fruitless.

At the end of the day the only thing I could think to do was just stay put in the jail right outside their cell. I had a few things going for me. 1) I was fortunate to be in a suit. 2) I didn't speak their language. 3) The head jailer did not speak English, which meant that I could continue to seem very confused by his indications that he wanted me to leave. There were holding cells for men, women, and these children, and, although they were kept separate, some men in the jail already knew that the girls were from a brothel and were sending them notes through the bars. It seemed best for me to simply sit tight and wager that it was far too complicated to physically throw me out. So I pulled up a chair, and I waited. I didn't speak their language and therefore could not communicate with the girls, so mostly I just sat there and tried to be present for the girls—to provide some wordless assurance that they were seen and that they mattered and that we weren't leaving them.¹³

Sharon's refusal to leave and insistence "to be present in the midst of suffering, to sit alongside the suffering Jesus," ultimately secured the girls' release from prison.

C. The key role that servants play

We must not miss the significance of the initiative played by two servants. By being faithful to the roles they are given—Rhoda as Mary's house servant, and Blastus as the king's chamberlain—they are privileged to play the final card in the drama that brings justice from heaven to earth (one for salvation and the other in judgment). Rhoda's refusal to cave in to ridicule and her persistence to speak the truth to an unbelieving crowd, removes the final obstacle to Peter's safety. That locked door at Mary's home is a metaphor for our unbelief and Rhoda's persistence reveals what it takes to break it down. Blastus is a model statesman. In his willingness to listen to and be persuaded by the needs of a people who are seeking peace, he exemplifies a true servant leader, who uses his office for the benefit of others. Plus he shows great skill in how to give needy people access to a narcissistic king. It shouldn't escape us that by becoming the friend and advocate for needy, Blastus could have lost his head.

The fact that Rhoda and Blastus are the only players to get their names in the credits highlights the importance of their contribution in the cause of justice. There are times when just being faithful to the job you've been given and makes you a key player in the kingdom. Luke is careful to demonstrate that Joel's prophecy that God's Spirit will be poured out

those days" (Acts 2:18) is fulfilled in Rhoda and Blastus. without measure "even upon my male servants and female servants in

D. The role of angels: Would you like to be one?

In our text today angels played key roles in the two sides of justice, that of rescuing an innocent victim and punishing the perpetrator. I find it interesting that in both Greek and Hebrew the term for "angel" (Grk. *aggelos*; Heb. *mal'ak*) is the same as "messenger," which means one can't always be sure whether the "messenger" is human or divine. In the end it doesn't make much difference as angels take on human form and model for us the kingdom work of justice. What do you think those young girls from Burma were thinking when Sharon Cohn Wu walked into their lives and refused to be removed from their presence. Did they think she was an angel sent from God? If they did, they were right.

Gwen Leong, one of our young adults, emailed me last week, explaining how she had been moved by my message "Crossing the Divine Bridge" and the need to embrace and love "outsiders." So she challenged me with an invitation:

Would you like to meet a community of outsiders? Next weekend, a group of us will be attending the Fanime convention (Fanime is short for fan-made anime—Japanese animation) where we hope to reach out to a community that suffers from depression, anxiety, identity crisis, gender confusion, mental illness, materialism, escapism, and broken families. A lot of the people in this community have had a bad experience with the church. The anime convention is a place where they feel like they belong, where they feel accepted and loved.

How could I refuse? As I watched Gwen and the others enter into that world, I learned a lot of what it means to be an angel. Like thousands in attendance, she wore a costume of one her favorite cartoon characters. While a self-appointed preacher hurled insults of judgment to passers-by, two members of our group had T-shirts that read, "You are loved the way you are." Gwen's enthusiastic and welcoming smile gave her instant access to the hearts of many. By the end of the day it dawned on me that the paradigm of going to great lengths to take on the persona of a cartoon character is not far removed from what I do as a Christian. Christ has given us a new wardrobe of righteousness and armor for the ultimate battle of bringing justice upon the earth.

1. William H. Willimon, *Acts*, Int (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 111.
2. John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 209.
3. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One*, Chapters 1-12 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 188.
4. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP5 (Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 218.
5. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 253.
6. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 218.
7. "θυμομαχέω" L&N, 762.
8. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 254.
9. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 254-55.
10. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World*, 213.
11. Willimon, *Acts*, 122.
12. Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Volume I* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 46.
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