

The river of God’s grace has been threatening its banks in the last few chapters of the book of Acts. Its waters filled its channel when Philip preached to the hated Samaritans, and they were included by God’s election. It splashed over its banks a bit when he stepped up onto that chariot and the Ethiopian court official was included through faith in Jesus. It absolutely flooded into Caesarea when Cornelius and his household believed, and it began covering the earth when it was pushed out into Antioch. Luke has shown that the promise of Acts 1:8 was being fulfilled, preaching from Judea and Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the earth. Now, from here on, all missionary endeavor was going to come from Antioch, not Jerusalem, and go into the Gentile nations. Does that mean God was done with the Jerusalem church? No! Chapter 12 shows us that God’s work of spiritual redemption of Israel continues through Christ Jesus. He is unstoppable to take His people from slavery to sin and bring through the waters of death into the greater Promised Land. Though the greater growth would happen elsewhere, we must recognize that God’s grace is still deep, His redemption still secure, and **His power still present wherever the Church is established.**

Individual stories within biblical narrative books always have a purpose for being where they are in the order of events. Stories, like these ones in the book of Acts, have a flow, a purpose, a context into which they fit and which helps us understand that God, and the gospel of His Son, is unstoppable, even when He seems to be working more powerfully somewhere else, and persecution seems to be overwhelmingly against us here.

This new wave of persecution by Herod, unleashed against the church, reported by Luke in Acts 12, was most likely due to the events of the previous chapters. That is, it was most likely the inclusion of the Gentiles into the covenant community without becoming circumcised which led to the

increasing fearful and violent political response against the fledgling community of Christ Jesus. And Agrippa, Herod, fancied himself a good Jew.

In fact, it was this same truth which Stephen suggested in his sermon, and he was martyred by the mob for it. Now the gospel of God's grace through Christ Jesus alone was expanding to Gentiles in exactly the manner he suggested and persecution against the church finds political power. And this is what is in chapter 12. Stephen was executed by a religious mob. James was executed by the government. At some point the religious powers had convinced the governing power, this King of Israel, Herod, to use his power to harm the church. **Persecution, the hatred of the gospel of Jesus Christ's absolute authority over all things, comes from different sources with varying rights to authority.** Yet, it is always a hatred of Jesus.

And Herod went right after the leadership of the church. The three most prominent leaders in the church were Peter, James, and John. They were the first among equals, but they were recognized by the community as leaders. So Herod arrested James and had him put to death. It seems from the text that Herod was testing the waters of public opinion, like Rich noted last week. One thing that is evident from history is that Herod Agrippa was very anxious to accommodate both the Roman imperial family and the Jewish people because he was a puppet king, installed by the Roman authorities based upon a cozy relationship with Caligula, whom he had befriended while living in Rome. And he was sent to Rome because his grandfather killed his father, whom he suspected of trying to overthrow him. When Caligula's predecessor, Emperor Tiberius, heard that Agrippa made a demeaning remark about him, and threw him in jail for a year. When Tiberius died, Caligula became Emperor and released Agrippa and made him king of Judea, Samaria, Lebanon, and southern Syria. His uncle, Herod Antipas, who was the Herod who executed John the Baptist and Jesus, accused Agrippa before Emperor

Caligula and Agrippa made counteraccusations which resulted in Antipas being banished from the region and Agrippa being given his kingdom. Therefore, his authority and right to be king was always questioned by the Jewish people. He knew that to be a beloved ruler he had to appeal to them. He did this well, even convincing Caligula not to introduce Emperor worship in Judea. Agrippa comes from a family steeped in political intrigue and love of power. **Yet, God is unstoppable by politically powerful people, even the most paranoid, narcissistic, and wicked.**

And what is quite interesting is how Luke tells this story. Look at the language that he employs to describe this persecution, this slavery, and this deliverance. First, Luke doesn't use Herod's actual name. Rather, he uses his title. Herod is a title, like Pharaoh. This similarity is important because Luke is insinuating something by calling him only Herod, and not Agrippa. First, he is connecting this ruler with his predecessor, Herod Antipas, who crucified Jesus and executed John the Baptist. Secondly, he is surreptitiously aligning Herod and Pharaoh on the same team against the people of God and their Deliverer. **This entire story is told in the shadow of the Exodus of Israel from slavery in Egypt.** The audacious claim of Luke here is that Herod is a new Pharaoh, the Jews are the Egyptians, and Peter and the Church are the true Israel, crying out to God in their affliction and rescued by the angel of the LORD with demonstrative power over their oppressors. The next passage is where Herod will be judged, like Pharaoh's Red Sea swim for acting arrogantly.

There are a few reasons that I conclude this Exodus connection. First, Luke uses a rare word to describe Herod's intentions on 'laying hands on' certain church members. The ESV translates it as "violent", the NAS states it better, because it is an infinitive, not an adjective, as "in order to mistreat them." The reason that this is important is that this word is only used 6 times in the NT, 5 of which are used by Luke. The first and nearest reference is back in chapter

7, in Stephen's sermon, where he uses the word to describe the treatment of Israel by the Egyptians in their slavery:

“And God spoke to this effect-- that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave and afflict them four hundred years. (Acts 7:6 ESV)

And a few verses later he uses it again in the same way:

“He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. (Acts 7:19 ESV)

Thus, Herod is intending the same cruelty against the Church as Pharaoh had intended against Israel.

Not only is this comparison fairly clear, but then Luke specifically mentions the timing of the Passover. Yet, he doesn't only mention this, but he specifically mentions the “Feast of the Unleavened Bread.” This feast was enacted to commemorate God's expedient deliverance from slavery and danger, so expedient that the people didn't have time to let their dough rise. They were to move quickly, by night, just as the angel instructs Peter to do. The Passover commemorates God's deliverance of His people via the blood of a sacrifice, the Passover Lamb because God is unstoppable by any empire and will judge all who oppose Him.

The people are making “earnest prayer”. That is, their prayers were intense and intensified. They were crying out to God concerning Peter. Their prayers went up to the Lord and He heard them and would respond with deliverance, just as he heard the groaning of the Israelites and saw the oppression on them by Pharaoh and came to deliver them.

This earnestness in prayer is clearly revealed when we see that Peter is released by the angel in the middle of the night, and when he arrives at Mark's mother's house, the church is gathered in prayer. Everyone else was

sleeping, but not the Church. Thy must have been praying all night. They probably gathered after work, when it was still light out and had been crying out to the Lord concerning Peter.

A few more notes on this prayer. First, it was *to God*. Now, that probably seems like an obvious given, but let's consider it for a moment. Not all prayers are offered to God. Some of you may be thinking, "Well, of course. Some people pray to other gods. Muslims, pagans, people who worship their ancestors, etc." But that is not what I'm talking about. Others of you, particularly with Roman Catholic backgrounds, may think that I am referring to those who pray to saints or to Mary. But that is not what I'm talking about, either.

I'm talking about many of the prayers uttered by supposedly Christian people in corporate prayer gatherings, and I am suggesting that many times they are not offered to God at all, but to the people within earshot. You know to what I refer, don't you? Rich warned us about it last week: preaching in your prayers. These are prayers that are not really offered to God, but are seeking to instruct or impress the people around us.

Charles Spurgeon warned his students to beware the temptation to pray eloquent prayers for the sake of the ears of our fellow mortals when he wrote:

"Beware of having an eye to the auditors; beware of becoming rhetorical to please the listeners. Prayer must not be transformed into 'an oblique sermon.' It is little short of blasphemy to make devotion an occasion for display. *Fine prayers are generally very wicked prayers.* In the presence of the Lord of hosts it ill becomes a sinner to parade the feathers and finery of tawdry speech with the view of winning applause from his fellow mortals. Hypocrites who dare to do this have their reward, but it is one to be dreaded. A heavy sentence of condemnation was passed upon a minister when it was flatteringly said that his prayer

was the most eloquent ever offered to a Boston congregation. We may aim at exciting the yearnings and aspirations of those who hear us in prayer; but every word and thought must be God-ward, and only as far touching upon the people as may be needful to bring them and their wants before the Lord. Remember the people in your prayers, but do not mold your supplications to win their esteem: look up, look up with both eyes” (*Lectures to My Students*, 55-56).

Prayers are to be offered to God, and as such approached with the utmost authenticity, reverence, neediness, and humility, even when we cannot figure out what to say. A one-word prayer of frustration with our own battle-weary struggle against the pervasiveness of our own heart’s willfulness to sin, or the brokenness and injustice of our circumstances poured out in genuine humility before God, offered to God, is greater than a beautifully poetic, eloquent, theologically accurate, prayer which moves people to tears but has no capacity to move God at all because it was never offered to him in the first place.

Secondly, the church was praying *together*. As important as individual prayer is, when persecution against the church comes, what is exemplified here is united prayer: Christian people gathered together to pray in harmony. It is this union of spirit, of purpose, of intention fervently and earnestly expressed together that is of high value.

Too often, and you see this on social media a lot, we think of effective united prayer in quantitative terms. Maybe this is because we think too highly of the power and ability of man, even in prayer. Prayer becomes a counter, the coinage of fools, whereby we think if we can gather enough prayers than we can purchase God’s answer according to our will. We suppose that is one prayer is good, then two is better. If two is good, ten would be even more effective. If we’re not getting an answer in the time which we determine to be

best, then we need to get twenty people praying. And if we have a big project, a big ask, if you will, then we'd better on Facebook and see if we can get more people praying so that God will listen. Often our assumption of the 24-hour prayer night is not in the earnestness or fervency of prayer, but in the fact that we can get more prayers offered up in case God didn't hear us in the first 23 hours. This concept of "more" is not Christian, of course. It's pagan. It's based upon a purchase of God's blessing by our efforts in quantity of prayers. However, the value of united and corporate prayer is not in the numbers, it's in the position of minds and hearts of God's dear children united together on the matter at hand. There is great value, but it's in the unity of purpose, spirit, and humble faith which it brings in a manner which only such corporate and united prayer can express, mostly because of the singular suffering which compelled it.

So, here we have a church united by persecution against one of its dear brothers, one of its most outspoken leaders. James and John were given the nickname, "the sons of thunder." They were fiery in zeal and outspoken in antagonism towards injustice and those powerful men who opposed Jesus. In fact this zeal earned him the only martyrdom of one of the 12 apostles mentioned in the New Testament. It is probably that this was intended by Herod to warn the Church to be silent, not like James. So, it makes sense that the church would earnestly pray concerning Peter, for James had already had the knife put to his throat.

Yes, James was beheaded *with a knife*. The English says "sword", but the word is for a small blade, a dagger. To be killed by this would be eerily similar to the way in which our brothers on a Libyan beach died almost 2 ½ years ago. The Church in Jerusalem watched James die the same way, but with the approval of the government. It is horrible! And now Peter is

imprisoned, chained up by numerous guards. So they earnestly prayed. They cried out to God when they were persecuted.

This is our third point about prayer. **It is to God, it is together, and it is for our oppressed brothers. They prayed “concerning Peter.”** Take note. They didn’t implore Herod to let him go. They didn’t rally outside the Antonia Fortress with signs and rage and demands. They didn’t begin a social mailer to list the injustices of the current Herodian administration under Agrippa. They implored God. They held up signs to God for their oppressed brother. **They recognized, first and foremost, that the only one with true power in this situation is God, their Father who loves them deeply.**

And like Rich pointed out, their prayers weren’t *full* of faith. I mean, they had the faith to pray, but I’m not sure what they were praying for, because when God released Peter they were not only surprised, they didn’t believe it! Maybe they were asking God to strengthen Peter to die well. Maybe they were asking God to remove Herod, imprecatory style. I think that they were most likely praying that Peter would be released in the normal order of court. Whatever they were praying, they did not expect God to release Peter in the middle of the night miraculously, via an angel with a mean left hook. No! Their faith was imperfect, little, but we cannot say it was faithless. **God honors little faith, even while correcting or admonishing it.** So, come with your little faith and cry out to the Lord. The Holy Spirit will perfect your prayer and deliver it to the Father according to His will. That is exactly what the Spirit of God does, and He knows the mind of God because He is the Spirit of God.

With James’ death in the background, and the church crying out to God concerning him, what was Peter doing? Well, apparently Peter practiced what he preached, when he later wrote his first letter, he advised the believers dispersed throughout the Roman Empire to “cast all your anxieties upon Him, because He cares for you.” (1 Pet 5:7) Talk about anxieties! On the very last

night before he was to be likely executed by a sawing dagger, Peter was found sleeping. Sleeping! The man who had once swung a sword to fight those opposed to Jesus was now snoring between two of them. Bound with iron chains, two guards at the doors, he was not only asleep, but deeply asleep!

Now, for those of us that can sleep anywhere, this is a good proof-text for the doctrine of napping. Napping shows a deep and abiding faith, right? ☺ This would be an example of misreading Scripture. Don't do that.

No, but this does show us that Peter is ready to die for Jesus. He is not afraid. He is not fretting. His concerns, which I'm sure were present, are not so great that they keep him up at night. He knows the resurrected one! He has seen Him raised from the dead. He does not fear death. He is no slave to such a fear, for death has no victory over him. **God is unstoppable even by death.**

He believes this so deeply that it is revealed in a bit of a humorous note by Luke. He says that the angel who appears has to strike Peter with a sharp blow to wake him. The word "strike" is usually used to describe a fatal blow! And Peter is such a deep sleeper that even when the angel wakes him, he still thinks that he is walking in that fantastical half-realm of delirium, not reality. The angel tells him to get up quickly, get dressed, and leave by night, the same commands given to the people of Israel when they left Egypt. Peter's deliverance likens him to the people of God's covenant, and all of it is presented as God's gracious initiation. The only thing that Peter contributes is sleep, incredulity, and lethargy. **God is unstoppable by our lethargy or confusion.**

The angel gets Peter past the guards and out the iron door, which opens on its own, says Luke. Clearly God is sovereignly intervening. Then he leaves him a block outside the fortress and Peter "comes to himself" and understands what has happened. He runs to Mary's house, whose name is really Miriam, where the servant girl Rhoda, or Rose, recognizes his voice. This shows us that Peter

was a regular visitor to John Mark's household. This helps us understand why John Mark became the scribe of Peter's gospel telling, which bears the scribe's name, the gospel of Mark. His family was a first family in the early church, whose home was the meeting place in Jerusalem from the beginning.

The great irony here, however, is not that Herod was confused at Peter's escape, but that the praying church was confused at Peter's escape. Though praying, and presented here as somewhat faithful, their faith did not expect this deliverance. Maybe James' execution gave them pause. They discovered, and will need to again and again, that **God does immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine (cf. Eph 3:20), and God is gracious towards our myopic faith.**

This part of the story shows us a few things about entrusting ourselves to the unstoppable God in the midst of persecution, trial, the squeezings which are brought upon us by those opposed to the Christ who is the exclusive Savior and Master.

First, **Peter's deliverance came at the last possible moment.** He had been imprisoned for up to a week. God could have rescued him at any point during the Feast of Unleavened bread. But he waited until the final night of Passover. It was only at the last possible time that God rescued Peter.

Many of us don't like this. We get into situations from which we need to be rescued, but we are not willing to wait for it. We fight. We lobby. We try to negotiate with God. We may even sin in order to be released from the discomfort, the pain, the agony of our sufferings and the fearfulness of impending doom which gets closer and closer. I know my own wickedness, the fearfulness of my heart which is most tempted to lie when a high-pressure meeting or moment is coming closer and closer by which there are expectations upon me. Rather than entrust myself to God, I fret, sleep less, not

to pray, mind you, but just to worry. And I am tempted to lie to get out of the tension because I do not trust the Lord to work it for good.

Yet, Peter, though it was the last minute and God had not yet ordained his release, must have presumed that what Jesus had spoken to him was about to come about, even though he was not yet old:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”
(Jn. 21:18-19 ESV)

And even with this prophetic word of Jesus and the circumstantial evidence that his death was less than 24 hours away, Peter entrusted himself to the Lord and slept...deeply.

Secondly, **why was Peter spared and James not spared? We don't know the answer to that question.** We might think it was because Peter had great things to do, yet. However, we are not told that. In fact, there are no more stories in the book of Acts about him. What we learn from this is that God is sovereign. He clearly could have spared James just like He did Peter, but he didn't, and some things which He chooses to do remain a mystery. He chooses one to share in Christ Jesus' sufferings through violent death and one to glorify Him through divine supernatural rescue. **It is enough to leave this determination to the wisdom and goodness of God, to entrust the One who gave His own Son over to death.** His heart is gracious towards His children, even when daggers traverse the edge between life and death, for not even daggers or crosses can stop God from deliverance through such deaths.

Finally, **this story illuminates the nature of our spiritual Exodus.** Peter's case was hopeless, humanly speaking. He was in prison, surrounded by guards, chained with two iron chains. He was condemned to die by an authority which God ordained to its position AND who was so vicious, calculating, and paranoid over its power that he had his own soldiers executed over this. Yet, Peter was asleep, not planning. He was unconscious, not strategizing. The angel didn't throw him a key and tell him that he must take it. His case pictures our own case in slavery to sin. We are chained up in sin, oppressed by it, abused by it, unable to escape. We are asleep, without power or will to fight it until God breaks into our dungeon and the Holy Spirit shatters the shackles which bind us and lead us out, passing over the sins we committed because the blood of the Lamb has been shed in our place. I think that this is the history which Charles Wesley recalled when he wrote his hymn, "And Can it Be":

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray
I woke! The dungeon flamed with light
My chains fell off! My heart was free!
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee!

This is why, I believe, that Luke communicates this story with the shadows of the Exodus. He sees in God's redemption and rescue of Peter the story of the gospel and argues that the Church is the true people of God and those opposed to Jesus as the Christ are enemies of God like unto Pharaoh and his armies. And God always rescues His girl from the dragon.

The redeeming power of God to supernaturally deliver His people is the ironic twist in this story. It confuses and surprises the enemies of the Church and it also confuses and surprises the Church! **Because the glory of God in**

redeeming His people belongs to Him and Him alone! He possesses and executes His divine rescue in spite of our circumstances and in spite of the smallness of our faith. **He will not be stopped, O fretting soul, from delivering all that He has promised,** even when He colors outside the lines of what we expect, His masterpiece of His great love for you is being brushed upon every single moment of your life, whether you are imprisoned and sleeping faithfully or earnestly crying out of doubting fear...God will not be stopped from completing all the good that He has planned.

So, get up quickly, O beloved saint! Get dressed for holiness and for mission! Entrust yourself to the unstoppable God, knowing full well that because He cannot be stopped then we have nothing to fear. Therefore, we can attempt great things for God and expect great things from God by taking great risks for God. He...is...unstoppable!