

When Nehemiah prayed a prayer of repentance to the Lord, he recalled that God made a name for himself by judging Pharaoh and his armies for “acting arrogantly against our fathers.” **Economic strength often leads to arrogance.** That is, having wealth usually means having power, and we tend to view power and strength as coming from our own sheer will, according to our own greatness. (Even when we don’t have power or wealth, we believe that we are owed it because of our inherent greatness.) This is evident with all forms of power, but particularly political power. Yet, even so, God is not mocked. The wickedness of the politically powerful is temporal. This Herod, who wanted to show his superiority and eloquence and glory to the people who were seeking his help already, chose to glorify himself, taking credit for providing food in the midst of a famine. It was not Herod who caused the rain to fall where it did. It is God who causes the grain to grow and rains to fall. **It is God who provides whatever strength that we have. To claim otherwise is to attempt to steal glory from God.** Josephus comments on this event that Herod’s royal robes were actually woven silver, and his oration took place at daybreak so that the sun’s rising rays would shimmer off of them and awe the crowd. Spin has been around a long time. Appealing to the Tyrian and Sidonian sense of power, he made much of himself, and received the praise of men as more worthwhile than the praise of God. And just as Pharaoh could not let the power of the Israelite workforce go, so also Herod could not let the

power of provision and the recognition for it go, and they were both judged by God for their arrogance.

All words and claims of this world are temporal and will come to an end.

Only the Word of God remains.

The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the Word of our God remains forever. (Isaiah 40:8)

So, Luke's primary point, and the point which the Holy Spirit is communicating to us, is in v24, "But the Word of God was increasing and multiplying." Luke is carefully comparing two messages, two voices: Herod's voice was hailed as the voice of God, but the worms had the final word. Only one word doesn't fail and has the authority to which death itself submits: the Word of God. Herod dies, his oration forgotten, but the gospel lives, growing and increasing because of the essence of the eternal one who speaks it. And this certain statement sets the stage for the great hope of God's glorifying work in its proclamation through Saul, Barnabas, and John Mark in v25.

Herod had been the individual ruler whose opposition to the gospel was the most demonstrative and powerful. At the beginning of the story the persecutions of the Church were not as intense. There were imprisonments and beatings, but not executions. The Sanhedrin did not like it when the disciples of Jesus went around proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead. They really didn't like it when they accused the Sanhedrin of murdering Jesus,

whom God then vindicated, implying strongly that God was opposed to them. But there was a certain tolerance of the church because of their weakness, and they were not terribly hostile as long as the church upheld the traditions of their fathers. Usually they just told the disciples to shut up and to go home. Stephen was stoned, but it was an illegal act. James, however, was beheaded by the courts, a legal act of supposed justice.

Thus, Herod's persecution was a demonstrative step towards the severe. He was going to execute Peter, too, proving that Herod was not repenting of James' execution nor was it to be a one-time event. It was the first domino to fall in a line of deadly dominoes which he had set up. But now, as this story unfolds, it is he who is knocked down by the angel of the Lord, and the gospel which he sought to silence prevails and prospers. As John Stott states eloquently,

“At the beginning of the chapter Herod is on the rampage – arresting and persecuting church leaders; at the end he is himself struck down and dies. 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. Tyrants may be permitted for a time to boast and bluster, oppressing the church and hindering the spread of the gospel, but they will not last. In the end, their empire will be broken and their pride abased.” (*Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*)

It is always this way. Since the beginning of history it has been this way. The enemies of God have always opposed Him and His people, to varying degrees. The enemies of the cross have always opposed the gospel in varying forms and severity. But in spite of them, the message spreads and effectively transforms people, families, and communities. Why is it that the good news of Jesus' authority and salvation continues to spread when so many enemies have tried to silence and destroy it through coercion, assimilation, and violence? Let me suggest a few reasons.

First, the Word of God is effective. It is more powerful than you or I can even fathom. It is the very breath of the God who spoke all things into existence. The Word of God prevails because it is God who speaks His Word. Peter discloses to us that God created all things by His Word, and He upholds all things by His Word, and He will judge and destroy and renew all things by His Word:

...scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. ⁴ They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." ⁵ For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, ⁶ and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. ⁷ But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. (2 Pet. 3:2b-7 ESV)

And through the writer of the book to the Hebrews the Spirit reveals Jesus as “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” **God’s Word created and maintains all that has been made.** When God speaks, atoms form and bond into molecules, split and rebound with cataclysmic energy...at His command. By sheer fiat sub-atomic particles appear from nowhere...and from nothing. At His word they snap-to and assemble into atoms. Molecules bond and arrange themselves into foundational elements, like a cosmic marching band at his whistle. When He sings they dance, stretching and spinning, leaping and clashing in perfect poetry, weak forces and strong forces oscillate until every heavenly body bursts forth in a wash of luminous splendor...at His word, who is the Son. Every molecule, every cell, every atom, every proton, every electron, is the echo of His voice. The space between them and the energy which keeps them from flying apart does so because he *is speaking*. You are wearing clothes consisting of the voice of God. You are sitting on a chair resonating with the voice of God. You, yourself, are held together by God’s aria, the harmony of Father, Son, and Spirit. Every atom awaits its cue in fervent expectation and at His word it dances. And the Son is over all, because all things were made through Him, for He is the eternal Word of God. The Spirit says that it is the gospel that is the power of God for salvation to all who believe (Rom 1:16). This means that all we need to rely upon is God’s message to transform the hearts of the people who hear it and believe it. The

Spirit of God moves upon the waters by the Word of God, effectively producing life from non-life. **The gospel is the only thing that the Spirit uses to raise the dead to life, and as such it must be the only thing which the Church relies upon to do so.** We do not entertain people into the kingdom of God. We cannot raise a dead heart by showing the world how great the Church is. We cannot love people into the kingdom of God. Should we love people, then?! Absolutely! But because they have value as God's image-bearers whom He loves, not because by loving them we will somehow create life in their hearts from non-life. Only God's Word has the effective power to do that. We love them best by speaking God's Word to them as the means which will make them flourish in every meaningful way.

God's Word is unstoppable. It cannot be constrained or constricted by the wiles or the wickedness of any man. It cannot be crushed or castrated by the virulence or violence of any government or power or court. They may behead for a moment, but the Word of God fills the earth and heavens with the glory of God and will always fulfill the purpose for which God has spoken it. Let us entrust ourselves to it, our worldview, our values, our knowledge of good and right and true and beneficial, for

“Every Scripture is breathed out by God and effective for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

The Word of God is effective because it is inherently powerful to produce what God intends it to produce, for it comes from His very life-giving breath. Many messages we hear and to which we give a great deal of attention are not effective. They are actually useless, truth be told. Most of what we hear on the radio or on Spotify are powerless to produce life consistent with the breath of God. Most of what we watch on television is useless. I don't mean that they cannot move us, but to what end? The stories are useless for real and lasting life; they accomplish nothing of eternal value. They are idlers of the heart, temporal, distracting us for a moment, and maybe with good and virtuous things, but they will go the way of Herod, worm-eaten and struck down because they have not given the glory to God for the beauty by which they express the very story they use to deny Him.

But the Word of God is effective. It is powerful. It is transformative. We need to be taught and it teaches us – about God, about our world, about hope, the restoration of what we all know is clearly broken and in need of redemption. We need to be corrected – and it corrects us, showing us the way of righteousness and of flourishing life in loving submission to the Father through Son by the Holy Spirit. We need to be trained to walk in this – and it trains us. We need to be built up, and it builds us. One could say that the Herods were great builders, but compared to the gospel, only one house is still standing and still growing and still multiplying – the household of God built by the Word of God.

God's Word is unstoppable to create life and make it flourish. It is this life, this multiplying and increasing life, which Luke discloses to us as the blessing of God in the midst of persecution. In fact, these two words which he has chosen to use here are the same words that God inspired Moses to use to describe the blessing of God upon the Israelites when they were living in a land which was not their home. They were strangers in Egypt, and God had promised their father Abraham that they would possess a different land and be fruitful and multiply. Yet, even though they were not yet home, and even though they were in a foreign land, under foreign leaders who did not know God, and foreign values and idols and godless worldviews, they increased and multiplied. The Scripture says,

“The Israelites, however, were fruitful, increasing and multiplying, and became exceedingly strong, and the land multiplied them...”

And the Pharaoh who arose did not know Joseph or His God, so in fear he set out to crush them, to oppress them, to slow their growth. But,

“the more the Egyptians oppressed them, the more they multiplied and spread abroad. So the Egyptians hated the people of God.”

So Pharaoh sought to cut them off at the root and commanded that the children of the Israelites be killed by the attendants of their births. Yet, God spoke...

“But the midwives feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt told them; they let the boys live...God dwelt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong.”

The abortive violence of Pharaoh could not keep back what God had ordained to come to pass. The 400 years promised to Abraham by God's Word would not be restrained. The people multiplied and increased, and God led them out through a mediator, out of slavery, through the waters of death as the mediator made a way, and into the Promised Land.

In the same way, **the Word of God increases and multiplies when the enemies of the cross oppress and seek to abort it.** The more they squeeze, the greater God shows His glory in the power of His Word, and the greater it multiplies and increases. God's Word flourishes in the soil that is watered in the blood of the martyrs, producing life in many and increasing and multiplying the Kingdom of God as it is proclaimed amidst the violence. God's Word is powerful and effective and unstoppable.

Pharaoh died, Herod died. And the Word of God grew and flourished and increased life.

There have always been times in history when Christ's enemies tried to oppose the expansion of the Word of God by the sword, just as Herod did with James, and presumably would have done with Peter. The powerful say, “If you continue to preach this gospel of the exclusive authority of Jesus, we will take

away your lives.” And they did. 11 of the 12 apostles were martyred. Tradition tells us that only John survived, banished to the isle of Patmos after being boiled in oil but surviving. From there he disclosed the Spirit’s revelation of Jesus to the persecuted church. **There have been countless martyrs in the history of the Church. Those whose lives were taken from them. Yet, the Word of God has not been bound.** The more the enemies of Christ have killed his followers, the more the gospel has expanded outward like ripples in the pond, but with increasing waves as it goes outward. Hugh Latimer knew this, and told his dear friend Nicolas Ripley, as they were burned at the stake by Queen Mary on Broad Street in Oxford,

“Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man. For, we shall this day light such a candle in England as I trust by God’s grace shall never be put out.”

He was right.

Others have tried to suppress the Word of God by ridicule. They have concluded that physical persecution does not work. They don’t want to make heroes out of martyrs, so they ridicule Christianity and its heroes. They cast the Word of God as foolish, hateful, bigoted, a fairy tale that only children and the ignorant believe. Nietzsche declared that the idea of God had been killed by reason, philosophy, and naturalistic science and the age of illumination had arrived. Nietzsche died and his philosophy is dying already. The

meaninglessness of its secular existentialism could not produce life, only death. He died at 56 years old, having spent the last 11 years of his life in an insane asylum, having claimed to be many heroes of history and threatening to kill the Kaiser.

Others have used ridicule in combination with economic violence. They do not have the right to execute, but they will seek to coerce the public exclusion of Christianity as a hateful and damaging faith by seeking to economically starve its adherents for living according to it and speaking of it in the public square. Lawsuits, boycotts, and media-shaming are all increasing today. Yet, the Word of God rolls on.

Others have tried to bind the Word of God by neglect, pretending it doesn't matter anymore, and just moving on past it like it's an old pair of bellbottom jeans or a pogo stick shoved into the corner of the attic. They just want to get on with their lives...and the Word of God increases and multiplies.

Others create substitute "Christianities". Counterfeits. They say, "Well, I like the Jesus who forgives, but this blood and cross stuff is offensive to what we know to be good now. So, we don't need this business of atonement or repentance or judgment. We'll just take the beautiful things like the ethics of Jesus." This counterfeit Christianity has no power, no effectiveness, because it denies the God who speaks with authority. This type of gutted Christianity, which is no Christian gospel at all, does not have the power to transform, but

rather only to conform to the system and patterns of the world, that same self-autonomous so-called wisdom slithering in the garden with just a wiggle of an ethic of love. Without the cross, atonement, and redemption by God's sheer and utter grace, God is degloried, made into the image of "the man upstairs", knocking on the floor with a broomstick when things get loud, but never obtuse enough to infringe upon our self-destructive love of ourselves with such arrogance as to break down the door and drag us out at the cost of getting burned in our fire. Where is the electrifying love in god like that?! Where is the beauty that compels, that woos us, that reveals his significance? It is gone. And **when God is not glorified, the worms rule the day.**

Counterfeit gospels come and go, popping up and dropping out throughout history. Yet, **the true Word multiplies and increases, dividing the heart and replicating its life again and again and again** as the angel who strikes to wake up dead souls also strikes to destroy others.

Oh, my friends, let us not fall prey to these counterfeits in an effort to ease our discomfort from the world! Let us not fall for the gospel of the marketing gimmicks, those presentations which appeal to the flesh of the unsaved to try and get them to receive Christ. These efforts hide part of the Word of God, ashamed of its holy judgment, its necessary warning, its revelation of the reality of God's sovereignty and our wickedness. They don't believe that the Word of God is sufficient, so they try and impress the world by the world's means, according to the world's values, entertaining people rather than

exhorting them, seeking to bait them with the glory of man rather than undo them with the glory of God so that He can renew them in His Son for His glory.

Let us entrust ourselves completely to the Word of God to do the work, fearlessly, boldly, and without apology.

And maybe you're thinking today, "I'm not Paul. I'm no Barnabas. Speaking the Word of God to a world which hates it terrifies me!" Dear friends, you may not be a Paul or Barnabas, but do you notice the third character who travels with them to proclaim the Word? Luke includes him on purpose.

Because, maybe you're a John Mark. He ran away once, when trouble came, not even able to get dressed in his fear. He ran away again, later, when times got rough on the travels. He was not fearless. He was timid. He was fearful.

Does that sound more your speed? Then, take note. John Mark is mentioned here by Luke as alongside, equal partners in the ministry, with Saul and Barnabas. Because he kept going, he kept trying, he kept getting back on the horse that he had jumped off. And eventually, he wrote down God's very Word in a gospel proclamation of that Word which now bears his name:

"The Gospel According to Mark."

There is hope for cowards like you and me. Mount up on the back of the Word of God. You don't need to halter it or steer it, just get on and let it run. You don't need to dress it up or try and beautify it. Just proclaim it. **The**

power is in the Word, not in the preacher. The effectiveness is in the Spirit of the Word, not in the proclaimer. You don't have to apologize for it. You don't have to defend it. Like Charles Spurgeon once said,

“The Word of God can take care of itself, and will do so if we preach it, and cease defending it. See you that lion. They have caged him for his preservation; shut him up behind iron bars to secure him from his foes! See how a band of armed men have gathered together to protect the lion. What a clatter they make with their swords and spears! These mighty men are intent upon defending a lion. O fools, and slow of heart! Open that door! Let the lord of the forest come forth free. Who will dare to encounter him? What does he want with your guardian care? Let the pure gospel go forth in all its lion-like majesty, and it will soon clear its own way and ease itself of its adversaries.”

– Charles Spurgeon, *“The Lover of God’s Law Filled with Peace”* (January 1888)

As Mark recorded for us, the words of Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God:

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

Let the Lion of God’s Word out of its cage, and the Spirit of God will bring life from non-life and will make all who oppose the Son answer for themselves.

Let the Word do the work, for the Word of God is unstoppable.