

Acts 12 - God rules, OK!

As you heard this chapter being read were you struck by the unfairness of life? James one of the apostles is killed. James, one of the closest of Jesus' friends – he was one of the three close ones to Jesus – is executed. And Peter escapes. And then all Herod's guards get the chop. What's going on?

But it's also a great rescue story isn't it? And the Bible is full of them. God rescuing people.

And then there's a third thing. You remember our little phrase from the Quizworkx guys last week – The message of the risen King Jesus cannot be stopped. Well today's story is also about someone who tries to stop the followers of the risen King Jesus.

Now if you've been here the last few weeks you might have picked up in the book of Acts this idea that **Jesus** is being put forward as **king of the world**. Right from the start of the book, we're told after his resurrection he's the one who now **rules over every nation** at the right hand of the father.

And through the book of Acts we've seen him time after time like a **stage director calling the shots** from **just off stage**. Orchestrating the action in a way that **shows** he's **Lord and master** as he claims; who judges the **living and the dead**.

And yet you might well be saying week by week, well if **that's really the case**, why when I trust Jesus is **my life... so stuffed?** Why are things around me... **so broken?**

I mean if Jesus is **really in charge**, and I've put my faith in him and I live for him, **why is it still so hard?** Why does so much **bad stuff happen?** Why **am I sick?** Why such **huge problems with my kids?** How can it be that **my friend dies** and my **dog dies** and **my car needs \$2632** in repairs **the same day?** Why is it as a Christian that I'm **still so tempted**; that I'm still so **selfish** and **hard to live with**; that I'm still so easily **addicted to the things that are bad for me?** Why is it that when we pray for a loved one who has cancer that they don't recover and they die. If **Jesus really... is king?**

They're good questions. And you don't get an easy answer **here in Acts**. It's a tension that runs back **right to the start**.

Because the reality is that the **kingdom of king Jesus** is actually pushing forward in a **war zone**. As Christians we're living in **hostile territory** in all kinds of ways.

If you've become a Christian because of the promise of **prosperity**, an easy life and a **constant party**, if Jesus is like your **good luck charm** for **this life... think again**. It's a **battle out there**.

Later on Paul puts it this way in Ephesians chapter 6... He says **get your armour on**. Be **ready for attack** because the **devil** is **scheming**. Read his words, vs. 11: *Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

These are strong words aren't they? Paul's saying **get ready for a battle**. This is a struggle against the **devil's schemes**. There are **rulers and authorities of this dark world** who are against us, and there are **spiritual forces** you don't even **imagine against us as well**.

Which would be kind of scary if we didn't have the **armour to put on** and we weren't **confident** we're on the side where **death isn't fatal**.

The problem is from our point of view you just can't make simplistic equations like **pray more** and your boss will **pay more**. Or **live well and things will go well**. It's **messy**.

But the one thing we're going to see here in Acts chapter 12 is that things don't always have to **go well** for things to **be well**. Because however it **looks like it's going**, as you read through the chapter you can still see from just off stage... no matter how **strong the powers look** that are against us... there's still a plan still being worked out, one step at a time.

The second half of Acts 11, the **message is spreading**. And it's spreading, will you notice, **because of the persecution that started with Stephen**. A Christian stoned. The gospel **spreads**. First just to Jews, but then to Samaritans, and even foreigners, Gentiles as well.

See the words in Verse 21 of chapter 11? “*And the **Lord's hand was with them**, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.*”

And then in v.24. Barnabas comes up from Jerusalem. *And a **great number of people**, verse 24, are **brought to the Lord**.*

The **kingdom of Jesus**, it's spreading like a **bushfire**. And nobody, it seems, can **put it out**.

Although you'll notice, **Herod...** is about to give it a try.

King Herod Agrippa has taken the throne after his uncle, the **Herod** who tried **Jesus**. The Jews **hate** Herod Agrippa, but like any good politician he's found **one way to keep them on side**. They **hate Christians more**. And so when he **persecutes Christians**, the **Jews love it**.

It's about this time, 12 verse 1, that **king Herod** arrests some who belonged to the church, intending to **persecute them**. In fact, he takes it one step further and has **James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword**.

And when he sees how pleased the Jews are, verse 3, he seizes **Peter also**.

Now **stop right there**. See, don't just **read past that!** This is **James the brother of John**, one of the guys Jesus called from the fishing boat on the beach. Been with Jesus **all the way**; one of the sons of Zebedee, who left **everything behind** to follow Jesus.

And now he's **dead** at the **whim of Herod**. And you might be saying to yourself, **if Jesus is king**, how come he doesn't **stop this other king - Herod** - before it's **too late for James?**

I mean, surely it would be better if the world **worked that way** wouldn't it? Here's **James the brother of John**; he's been faithful, he's been an **apostle there in Jerusalem**. And now he's **dead for it**.

And **now it's Peter's turn**.

Now for Peter, this has got to be **déjà vu**. Verse 3 says it's the **feast of unleavened bread**. Which is exactly when they **arrested Jesus** some years before and Peter **stood in the courtyard** and **denied he even knew him**, and ran away.

There's no running this time. And as it turns out, **he's not optimistic at all** about the way it's going to play out.

He knows what happened to James. And Peter's expecting the same. Because he knows that when you preach the **kingdom of Jesus** there are all sorts of **other kingdoms pushing back**. Sometimes violently, like the Kingdom of **Herod**.

Peter knows how it played out the last time he was here.

They unjustly **accused** Jesus. They **killed** Jesus. And **God raised him**, which is ultimately **Peter's hope**. And it's a **good one**.

As for his current circumstances, **not so sure**.

Verse 4, **sixteen** guards dedicated to making sure he doesn't escape. Four at a time. Two chained to him. Two more at the door.

And a certain date with **death** first thing in the morning. **Where's King Jesus?**

Now you might in Peter's shoes be **in despair** at this point. But instead of lying awake **worrying... Peter goes to sleep**.

But notice something else. That while Peter's asleep in prison, **other people are praying**. Earnestly, verse 5, but apparently **not very hopefully**. Had they prayed for James? Probably. Look what happened to him. Yeah, we'll pray, but what are Peter's chances?

But what do you even **ask for** at a time like this when everything seems **hopeless**?

Anyway, Peter's asleep between the guards, verse 7: And suddenly in the cell **a bright light**; an **angel** poking Peter in the ribs telling him to **wake up**. **Peter thinks he's dreaming**.

The chains fall. The angel says, **get dressed** and **follow me**.

Now you've got to realise, if you're sitting there thinking, how come this sort of thing never happens to **me** when I'm in prison... it's not as if it happens to **Peter** every day either. And if you read verse 9, you'll see even as Peter's heading out the prison gates, he's thinking, **if I pinch myself I'll wake up**.

Read it in verse 9: Peter followed him out of the prison, but he **had no idea** that what the angel was doing was **really happening**; he thought he was seeing a vision. And it's only when they're past the guards, out the **miraculous self opening gate** and up the street to the city that Peter's **suddenly alone** and he realises **it really happened**. And he's **cold** and it's **dark** and he's **free**.

And look what he says. See, Peter's looking at the **big picture**. The **clash of kingdoms** behind the scenes. And Verse 11, he says this; ***Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches, and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.***

It's not going how the **Jews and Herod anticipated**. Look, be honest, it's not going how **Peter was anticipating either**. Nor the **prayer group at the house**.

But this is a battle between two kings. **The Lord Jesus** and King Herod.

And **the Lord Jesus** does just what he wants just **when he wants**, at every step of the way. And unlikely or not, **Peter is free**.

And now we come to the funny bit in the story

Verse 13, he's knocking on the door; and **Rhoda the servant girl** goes to answer.

It's, "Knock knock, who's there?" "**Peter.**" "**No it's not**, Peter's in jail."

Rhoda runs back to the room without even **opening the door**, saying It's **Peter**.

And **nobody believes it**. Here are all these faithful Christians praying earnestly for hours for Peter's **freedom** and God answers, and the answer is **yes**.

And they say to Rhoda, **you're out of your mind**. They're **praying**. But in the light of what's happened with James, it's not a **hopeful** kind of prayer, nor a **confident victorious "name it and claim it prayer,"** or Peter wouldn't still be out there in the cold.

Now I **know** that there are lots of very spiritual people who tell us that when we pray we're meant to pray with absolute 110% confidence that God's going to answer the way you want him to. And if we **don't have confidence** like that, God won't give us what we want. In fact, they'll say **we get it** in proportion to how much we **believe it**.

You reckon? We've got in front of us here a **great reminder** that **God answers prayer when and how he wants**, and it's **not up to how hard we turn the tap**. If I only **believed more**, God would have saved him. **Rubbish**.

Peter didn't **anticipate** he was going to be rescued and the prayer meeting guys didn't either. But **the Lord Jesus answers their prayers anyway**, in a most incredible way that's sent a message through the **centuries**, that it's **he who determines** your hours and your days; and he'll say **yes or no** according to **his kingdom purposes**.

And **nothing's going to stop the spread of his kingdom**.

Persecution's going to spread his kingdom. **So is this**. But not because their prayers were more **confident**. Jesus is happy to use the weakest most **faithless most faltering prayer** for his purposes. And when the time is right, he **says yes to it**.

When Rhoda keeps on insisting, they figure Peter's already dead, and it's his angel at the door, his spirit. But, verse 16, they finally get around to opening the door. And it's really him. And it says they're **astonished**. Even more so when they've heard how it happened.

But after he sends a few messages, Peter's still not taking any chances. Notice in v.17 he doesn't even visit James So he goes off into hiding.

So the spotlight moves back onto the great King Herod who's set himself up as an opponent of the **Lord Jesus**. Herod - the **man who thinks he's a God**.

Interesting, isn't it? When Peter came into the house of Cornelius last week, Cornelius **falls at his feet**. And Peter says, **don't bow to me, I'm only a man**. Peter wants all the honour to **go to Jesus** Who's **much more than a man**.

Well, Herod's the **opposite**. Here he is in Cesarea, he's **holding court** in **all his glory**. Royal robes, **royal throne**, **royal decree**. This day has gone down in history. Literally. Because the Jewish historian Josephus gives us more details. He says that the **robes** Herod's wearing are woven from pure silver in delicate patterns. He's shining brightly.

I'd say he looked like Liberace, but nobody remembers who that is. Or Elvis at his finest.

In the early morning sunlight, **Herod looks spectacular**, glowing on the throne in front of this huge crowd of subjects who are calling out in verse 22, "**this is the voice of a God, not a man.**" Which is **exactly** what Herod wants to hear. And exactly what he **thinks of himself** as he stamps out the disciples of Jesus.

If there's going to be a **God man** to be worshipped, it's going to be **king Herod**, not Jesus of Nazareth. And yet at the **height of Herod's glory... king Jesus** steps in and says... **enough's enough**. Verse 23: *Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to **God**, an angel of the Lord **struck him down**, and he was eaten by worms; and died.*

Power and glory. Gone. And you know what? Verse 24: But the **word of God** [the **gospel... the message of Jesus**] continued to **spread and flourish**.

The Kingdom of Herod over. The Kingdom of Jesus **grows on**. Not stopped by **prison**. Not stopped by **the sword... still spreading even today**.

You know, you might want to ask **why James is taken** and **why Peter is spared**. We've got **lots of questions**. My guess is that Peter and the prayer group and Luke as he writes, they've got **exactly the same questions**. And yet still keeping on trusting that in the midst of the battle, **Jesus is king** and a king worth **trusting**.

See, the problem is there's one model that says **faith is believing hard enough that everything will go your way**. And that if you **do**, it **will**.

Whereas biblical faith is actually saying, **I'm going to trust Jesus whichever way it goes**. Good times and bad, with our hope in the **resurrection** that puts everything in perspective and not in the **test results** or what we think should happen.

The main thing is that the news of the **risen Jesus** keeps on spreading and growing because **that's** where our hope is whichever way the sword falls, whether Peter or James.

And our place is to **pray and trust**. The Old Testament story of Job, he's lost his family, he's lost his fortune, he's lost everything. His friends say, **curse God and die**. And Job says, **no thanks, I'll keep trusting**. He says these famous words, Job 13:15: *Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.*

Or Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3. The King's about to throw them in the **incinerator** because they won't **bow down to his idols**. And they say, vs. 17: *If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your Gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.*

That's **faith**. We'll trust him if he does. We'll trust him if he doesn't. That's the nature of the world we live in this side of the New Creation. God can rescue and will rescue. But let's keep the perspective that the greatest rescue story, the ultimate rescue, is the rescue from sin – Jesus dying on the cross to rescue us. Life will be better if we're rescued from sickness, from loneliness, from losing a job. But ultimately, all those things will pass away. What will last will be whether we're in God's family or not. Jesus wants to welcome us to the great feast with him – will we accept him as king?

We serve a king who has risen, who has conquered death. Yes, we may not understand everything that happens. But he **is King!! Herod: dead. Jesus: still living.**

As all around us in a fallen world the **battle goes on.**

Friend, if this week's a particularly tough time for you, if you've been hit in ways that are too many and too tough to even keep going, **keep trusting**. Keep your hope at the **resurrection** where it belongs and on the long race. Because the one thing Satan wants you to do is **give up**.

The reason you've been given a church family is specifically so that at a time like this, **you don't** give up. Don't walk through your tough times on your own. Grab a brother or sister and share the tough things.

And if things are going well for you, keep it in perspective. Jesus is king. And his kingdom is **growing**; in a world that by and large **still hates him as much as ever**. In a world where sometimes things will go wrong. In a world where we're most of all called to keep **spreading the word** as he stands in the wings making sure the **gospel keeps growing** just the way he wants it. We can trust the risen king Jesus.