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God's Word, Victorious Acts 12:18-25

Intro: In his commentary on the Book of Acts, Warren Wiersbe draws some parallels between the events of ch12 and a passage of OT scripture quoted by Peter in his 1st epistle ([1 Peter 3:12](#)) It says, "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." Peter is quoting from [Ps 34:15-16](#) but the passage neatly summarizes what God is doing in [ch12](#). The chapter opens with a new wave of persecution against the church. James was arrested by Herod and summarily executed. This had to have been a devastating blow to the church. James wasn't the first believer to lose his life for the sake of the Gospel but he was the first Apostle to be martyred. If any in the church assumed the Apostles had a special dispensation of protection from God, they were wrong. Then Peter was arrested and was expected to be executed as well.

While the outlook seems bleak, it soon became clear to the church that God was oblivious to Herod's actions. In fact, as the passage from [Ps 34](#) states, God sees His people in the midst of their trials. It would have been easy for the church to think it was all over, now that the "real" authorities had gotten involved but that was not the case at all. It may have seemed like King Herod had the upper hand but it became readily apparent that it was the King in heaven who was in control, not the king on earth. When we are going through the trials of life, it is important for us to always remember that our Father's eye is constantly on the fire and His hand is on the thermostat. He sees what we are going through, He knows why we are going through it and He is ready to come to our rescue when the desired result has been achieved in our lives.

The next section of [ch12 \(5-17\)](#) explicitly drives home the truth that God hears the prayers of His people. Last time we discussed not only the importance of prayer but also the nature of effective prayer. The church was praying exactly as they should be: directly (to God); corporately; earnestly; specifically. But, although their prayers were proper and effective, they were offered without stellar faith. How do we know? Because, when the answer to their prayers was standing at the door, they refused to believe it - to even

consider it! This does provide us with a humorous contrast between the power of God's working and the futility of man's efforts. "God could get Peter out of prison but Peter couldn't get himself into a prayer meeting" (WW) If God is willing to graciously honor earnest prayers offered from the weakest of faith, how much more could He do for us if only we would trust Him more?

The last phrase of Peter's quote is "but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." This truth is no less assured than the first 2; is no less encouraging; no less accurate but, I must admit, it's much more ominous. This ominous truth brings us to the last section of ch12 and the unseemly demise of King Herod. In fact, the story of Herod's death brings us to the end of the 2nd section of the Book of Acts. Now, Herod was just another secular king in a long line of tyrants that show up in Scripture, why should his death be so remarkable? He was just a man right? The story of his death could've been inserted in any inconspicuous place in Acts, or not at all. But it does make it into the Book and doesn't show up just anywhere. It appears right as Luke concludes the 2nd section. It is a fitting end to part 2 and prepares the way for part 3 and it does so because of who Herod is (ultimate human authority in the region) and what he did (brought official, blatant opposition to God, His will and His Word).

Who is Herod? I don't want to get too far into the weeds with a boring history lesson but there are 5 different Herod's mentioned in the NT and they all were related – they were part of the same dynasty.

1. Herod the Great is the first and most prominent king in this dynasty. He ruled Palestine when Jesus was born. A ruthless man, he exterminated all potential rivals to his throne (1 wife, several sons). He was the king who met with the wise men and then ordered the murder of the babies in Bethlehem under 2 years of age.

2. Herod Archelaus was his son and the worst of his descendants. Archelaus was so bad, the Jews complained to the emperor about him and he was removed from office. He's mentioned only once in the NT (Mt 2:22).

3. Herod Antipas (reigned in Galilee after Archelaus was removed. He is the Herod who killed John the Baptist and had a cameo appearance at the trial of Jesus. He was eventually banished to Gaul. in A.D. 39

4. Herod Agrippa I is the one who appears in [ch12](#).

5. Herod Agrippa II was his son. This is the Herod Paul will appear before and made his defense later in [ch25-26](#).

As a king, duly appointed by the Roman Emperor and backed by all the might and power of Rome, Herod Agrippa I represents the limits of power this world has to offer. Yes, he does possess and wield real power, just as Pilate did in the trial of Jesus. But, it's not the fact that these men had power, power that was actually given to them by God, it's how they used the power they had. Did they use it in such a way as to honor the God that had granted them their power and position or did they wield that power to their own benefit and to the detriment of God's will and plan? Clearly, it's the latter and [ch12](#) chronicles how God brought Herod to his ignominious end. Let's read our text...

18-19 – no small stir – one of the great understatements of the Bible. Herod, as a king and member of a royal family, was used to getting his way; I'll even venture to say that he insisted on it. So, you can just imagine how furious he became when he realized his prized prisoner had escaped. Of course, Herod was clueless as to how Peter had escaped, as were Peter's guards and the warden but that didn't really matter. If he had been told the truth of Peter's miraculous escape, he wouldn't have believed it or had been any less angry. I'll bet the "examination" of the guards involved little more than identifying those who were responsible for Peter and passing judgment on them.

The execution of guards responsible for losing a prisoner was customary in that day. In fact, Roman law required it. If a guard's prisoner escaped, the guard was given the penalty due the prisoner – in this case, the penalty was death. We can see here what Herod's true intentions were for Peter. This practice is alluded to in 2 other instances mentioned in the Book of Acts ([16:27](#); [27:42](#)). Of course, this law didn't strictly apply in Herod's jurisdiction so he was not forced to execute the guards but, Herod being a Herod, he did it anyway. This is the character of the man who had his sights set on destroying the church.

20-23 – In [Acts 20:35](#), Paul delivers the oft quoted truth that: "it is more

blessed to give than to receive.” You here this sentiment bandied about quite a bit around Christmas time but it is more than just sentiment – it is biblical truth. If Herod Agrippa I himself was here to day, he would affirm the truthfulness of this statement. As our text describes, Herod gives a speech to the people of Tyre and Sidon, a group of people who were anxious to please him. Then, Herod receives 2 very things: overstated and undeserved praise from the representatives of Tyre and Sidon and divine judgment from the God he refused to glorify. Truly, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

The people of Tyre and Sidon depended on Herod’s jurisdiction for food and they had somehow displeased Herod and were now in danger of losing that assistance. So, as politicians are inclined to do, they bribed Blastus, a trusted official, who then convinced Herod to meet with their delegation. It’s good to know that not much has changed in politics in over 2000 yrs. But, this did provide the proud and self-indulged Herod with an opportunity to flaunt his glory and authority before the delegation and a chance for the delegates to win Herod over with some well-placed flattery.

Josephus, the Roman historian, tells us this event took place during a festival held in honor of Claudius Caesar and Herod wore a beautiful silver garment for the occasion. We don’t know what Herod said in his speech but we know he said it just to impress the people and it did! They played on his immense ego and declared him to be a god and Herod loved every minute of it, at least for a little while. Now, it’s just human nature to look to a political leader as a deliverer or messiah. We see it all the time in America, someone declares their candidacy for some office, they deliver their platform, people rally around the cause and get them elected and then the disappointment sets in. We tend to forget that we are fallen beings electing other fallen beings to positions of power over us. Sure, it’s the best system of government ever devised in the history of the planet but it’s not perfect and our leaders are not gods.

Well, Herod let the praise go to his head, or maybe it went to his stomach? Regardless, the manner of Herod’s death was appropriate to his spiritual state: he was corrupt from the inside out. Herod grew up in Rome where he became close friends with Gaius Caligula, who would later become Emperor of Rome. This was not a great honor. Caligula turned out to be shockingly corrupt even in a shockingly corrupt age and, as they say, “Birds of a

feather...” To make matters worse, Herod was half Jewish. History tells us that he even took part in some of the temple ceremonies, like publicly reading the law on certain occasions. So, he wasn’t unaware of the God of Israel, the true God. And yet, here he is, willfully, selfishly, foolishly receiving praise that actually belonged to God, for it was God’s power that had placed Herod in that position of authority. This entire scene was nothing but unabashed idolatry.

Herod immediately contracted some disgusting and very painful affliction in his bowels and, after suffering greatly for 5 days, Josephus says, “he departed this life.” The contrast between Herod and the church is unmistakable. Herod believed he had the upper hand against the church but God revealed who’s really in charge. Instead of Peter being taken out by Herod, Herod was taken out by Peter’s God! It could be that the same angel who delivered Peter also visited Herod that day. That gives a whole new meaning to “Touched by an Angel.” I don’t want to see that show!

Herod openly fought against God. He killed James but didn’t succeed in defeating God’s plan. He arrested Peter and intended to kill him but the earnestly praying church saw God rescue Peter and his work continued. God judged a blaspheming Herod and blessed an obedient church. The early church had no political clout or friends in high places to pull strings for them. But, they were able to go boldly to the highest throne of all, the throne of grace. They were a praying people because they knew God could solve their problems. His throne is higher than Herod’s and His power supersedes Herod’s in every category and in every way. They just took their case to the Lord and left it with Him.

But, this account is more than just a contrast between Herod and the church or Herod and God. It’s more than just a “cautionary tale” of the dangers of taking God’s glory for one’s self. It is that, but it’s also much more than that. This story also serves to provide a contrast with the 2 verses that ends this 2nd section of the Book of Acts

24-25 – These 2 verses lay the groundwork for the missionary expansion of the church, revealed in **ch13**. But, what ch12 shows us is that, although Herod brought the most blatantly destructive persecution against the church so far, he wasn’t just opposed to the church’s existence – he was opposed to the church’s purpose: carrying the Gospel to the entire world. Herod was

opposed to the expansion of the Gospel and as king, he was the one most strategically placed to effectively oppose the Gospel's progress. But, despite his power and best efforts, the Gospel prospers!

Again, the chapter opens with Herod is on a rampage: James dead, Peter in prison, Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free and the Word of God triumphing. It's always that way. The enemies of God always oppose the gospel but in spite of them, the good news spreads. Why does the gospel continue to advance while so many other messages falter and end up on the trash heap of history? Here are a few good reasons:

1) God's Word is Effective ([2 Tim 3:16-17](#)) Key term is "profitable." God's Word continues to spread because it accomplishes what needs to be accomplished. It's a practical thing. Most messages we hear and give our attention to are not useful. They're actually useless. Most of what's on TV is useless. The shows they promote do nothing but rob time that could be better spent. So is most of the news we consume. Social media? Don't get me started.

The Bible is not useless. It's effective. We need teaching and it teaches us—about God, ourselves, and the way of salvation. We need rebuking and it rebukes us—about our sin and unrighteousness. We need correction and it corrects us—showing us the way we should go, the way of blessing. We need training in righteousness, and it trains us—through daily application of its teaching. The gospel brings spiritual life out of spiritual death.

2) God's Word is Penetrating ([Heb 4:12](#)) God's Word gets through to us like no human words can. We build walls to block God out of our lives. We cover ourselves with worldly ideas to protect us against the truth of what we are, who God is, and what the future holds apart from Jesus Christ. But the Bible penetrates our defenses and shows us that we're sinners in need of salvation. When God's Word breaks through our flimsy armor, it doesn't do so to destroy or kill us, but to heal us and restore us to life, much like a surgeon's scalpel is employed.

3) God's Word is Life-Giving ([Isa 55:10-11](#)) Rain and snow fall from the sky and water the earth so it can produce fruit necessary to life, and that's how God's Word operates. It doesn't just save people from sin, it also makes them fruitful so that they can contribute to the world and be a source of

spiritual blessing in it. (Saturation)

4) God's Word is Eternal ([Mt 24:35](#)). Everything around us is temporary. People are born and die. Even the earth will be destroyed. Nothing lasts. But there's 1 thing that will not pass away: the Word of God. Nothing can stop it. Sure, there's some value in the material things we work for and acquire in this life but, important as they may seem, they'll still pass away. The only things in life that last are the invisible and these only come as God works through His Word to transform our hearts. That's why we're so anxious to teach the Word and anxious to have people believe it. It's only when they do believe it and are born again that something of lasting value comes into their lives.

Physical life is precious. We go to great lengths to preserve it. But, as true as that is, spiritual life is more valuable.

That's why Christians have been willing to give up their physical lives for the sake of what they know lies beyond. They choose to link their physical lives to the gospel, knowing that whoever builds on the foundation of Christ's teaching will never be destroyed. They know that when the floods of life come they'll be secure on that rock. Is it any wonder that a faith like that endures, increases, and spreads throughout the world?

There've been many who opposed the Gospel over the centuries. Some have tried to oppose it by the sword. Some have tried to suppress it through ridicule. Some have tried to hamper the Word through neglect while some have tried to bind it by offering counterfeits. All attempts have failed. But, although the Gospel is always moving forward, it only does so through human channels. It's why Luke concludes this section referring to Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark. The gospel is going to expand. God has decreed that it will. But He has also decreed that it will advance by human messengers. It spreads by all those Jesus appointed as witnesses in [1:8](#), that is - all believers.

You might say, "Well sure, Barnabas and Saul make great missionaries because they were Apostles." True, but they're not the only ones mentioned here. John Mark was young and inexperienced; it seems that at some point, he even abandoned the missionary call but later, Paul judged him to be useful again. John Mark was an ordinary person and as such, he represents the next generation of Christian missionaries.

Do you look to mature believers and think they're the ones responsible to carry the gospel on? They are, sure; to the best of their ability. But you're also called by the Lord to the same assignment. Will you do it? You have to because God has determined that the Gospel will increase and be spread by you, as it has in every generation of the church.

The Word of God is cannot be bound by tyrants, critics or counterfeits. But, it seems that it can be bound by His children when they neglect to invest in properly in their own lives. How can we effectively give to someone that which we don't rightly possess? To share the Word effectively, you must know it properly.

Frailty of the human condition is being brought home to us more and more as the year progresses. This church will continue to exist but we fool ourselves if we think it will continue to exist in the same form as it is now. 20 yrs from now, if the Lord tarries His coming, the makeup of this church will be completely different, it has to be, because none of us are immortal in the flesh but the Word of God is eternal. We need to be busy about investing the truth of the Word into the next generation as they will be the ones who will carry the Gospel and this congregation forward. 😊