

# The death of Herod

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**Littlebourne - 26th March 2023 - Acts 12:20-25**

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Today's passage follows on from what we read about last week. Herod, who was introduced at the beginning of the chapter, we saw killed James and arrested Peter, seeking to kill him too.

After Peter was led out of the prison by an angel, Herod is clearly not pleased. We know that Roman law held that losing a prisoner was a serious offence - the one that lost the prisoner would get the penalty that the prisoner was awaiting, in this case death.

Verse 19 then tells us that Herod went from Judea, probably from Jerusalem where he usually lived in his palace, to Ceasarea, which was the Roman administrative capital for the region.

The Herod in question is Herod Agrippa I, who ruled over all Judea. There are four Herods mentioned in scripture, which we know from other sources to be different people, ruling over varying amounts of territory:

- Herod the Great - the Herod that wanted to kill all the infant boys when Jesus was born. He ruled all Judea.
- Herod Antipas - who, like his other brothers, inherited a quarter of his father's kingdom. He's referred to as Herod the tetrarch, meaning ruler of a quarter, who ruled Galilee. He was the Herod that went up against John the Baptist, and who Jesus was sent to by Pilate the night he was arrested.
- Herod Agrippa I - nephew of Antipas, this Herod was able, as friend of the Roman emperor Caligula, to gain all the territory of his grandfather Herod the Great, and rule all Judea. This is the Herod we're looking at today.
- Herod Agrippa II - the son of Agrippa I, this is the King Agrippa that we see near the end of Acts, who Paul presents his case to.

## v20

*20 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.*

Now Herod has a falling out with the people of the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. Herod didn't rule over Tyre or Sidon - they were their own self-governing cities 20-30 miles from his territory. These were trading cities, not food producing areas. They were reliant on the food production of other places, which they traded for and their sea trade made them well off, provided they could continue trading for food.

Caesarea, where Herod has travelled to, is also a coastal trading city, so maybe there was some rivalry between these different cities that also contributed to this situation. Herod might have wanted the food exports of his kingdom to go through his port, rather than the others, possibly.

Whatever it is that has happened, the people of Tyre and Sidon are certainly somewhat desperate, as they go to the King's trusted personal servant to curry favour. They want to put in a good word for themselves, to persuade the King to change his mind over whatever it is that is causing friction.

## v21-22

*21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. 22 And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!"*

Herod at this stage was at the height of his power. He's not just got a big territory that Rome has granted him, but he's holding sway over the self-governing cities nearby too.

Josephus, Jewish historian through whom we know about Herod and the Jewish/Roman wars that would happen later in the run up to AD 70, tell us about this occasion ([Josephus Antiquities, Book 19, Chapter 8, Section 2](#)):

*Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea; which was formerly called Strato's tower. And there he exhibited shews, in honour of Cesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety. At which festival a great multitude was gotten together, of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province. On the second day*

*of which shews, he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful; and came into the theatre early in the morning. At which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflexion of the suns rays upon it, shone out after a surprizing manner: and was so resplendent as to spread an horror over those that looked intently upon him. And presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another; (though not for his good;) that “He was a God.” And they added, “Be thou merciful to us. For although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.” Upon this the King did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery.*

Archeology of the theatre in Ceasarea tells us that the crowd seats would have faced west, so the sun would have come up behind the crowd and reflected off Herod's silver clothing. I'm sure that the crowd also knew that flattery was a way to get what they wanted from Herod.

## v23

*23 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.*

Herod accepts the praise of the crowd, he does not give God the glory, and he is struck down because of this. Josephus continues and tells us what happened:

*[Continued from before: ...Upon this the King did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery.] But as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl, sitting on a certain rope, over his head: and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him: and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly; and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, “I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life: while providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me. And I who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what providence allots, as it pleases God. For we have by no means lived ill: but in a splendid and happy manner.” When he said this, his pain was become violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace: and the rumour went abroad every where that he would certainly die in a little time. But the multitude presently sat in sackcloth, with their wives and children; after the law of their country; and besought God for the King's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the King rested in an high chamber: and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground, he could not himself forbear weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his*

*belly, for five days, he departed this life. Being in the fifty fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign.*

Whilst Josephus doesn't tell us that an angel was involved, or that the reason for Herod's death was his not giving God the glory, the two accounts do match up.

It's not clear exactly what is meant that Herod was 'eaten by worms', but given that Herod is said to have had pains in his belly for days before his death, it's possible that intestinal worms were involved. Not to go into detail, but apparently there are instances of intestinal worms that can kill you and it's a painful death.

And it's an angel that strikes down Herod - this is not merely natural causes, it's supernaturally caused. Now it may have appeared after the fact that there was a natural explanation - an autopsy may have found some explanation for what happened to him, a cause of death. But even if it could be explained naturally, it's ultimately God's doing.

The word angel - ἄγγελος in Greek - means a messenger. (Compare the word εὐαγγέλιον / gospel / good news). The angel is a messenger, an agent of God - last week we saw an angel acting as an agent of mercy, springing Peter from prison. This time, the angel enacts God's judgement.

This is not the first time in scripture that God strikes down those that oppose Him. The flood, wiping out all but a few in Genesis 6-8. Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), destroyed by God. The Egyptians, Pharaoh in particular, faced God's justice and judgement in the 10 plagues. Eventually, he and his army were destroyed in the Red Sea, at God's hand, as He let go of the water.

Maybe the most similar instance is Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel 4 we read that King Nebuchadnezzar was struck down, not to death but to great humiliation for a time, because of his pride and sin. Herod likewise suffered humiliation at God's hand - hardly the noble death he might have hoped for.

Herod is struck down because he 'did not give God the glory'. He instead took it for himself. In his pride, he accepted the praise of the people, that is really due to God, for himself. This is the culmination of things we see in chapter 12 - he has killed James, and attempted to kill Peter. Now he has gone too far and has been struck down. God shows everyone that called Herod a god, that he was no god at all.

We see a huge contrast in Herod's actions to Saul and Barnabas' actions in chapter 14. In chapter 14, the people of Lystra try to worship Saul and Barnabas, so they respond (verse 14-17):

*14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: 15 "Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. 16 In the past, he let all nations go their own way. 17 Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."*

Saul and Barnabas make clear, as soon as they get wind that they are being called gods, that they are no such thing. They immediately turn this attention they are getting to the true God. This is what Herod should have done, but his pride stood in the way.

And notice in contrast to Herod, who held back the crops from those dependent on him, Paul says the true God shows kindness in rain and crops and plenty of food in their seasons and this testifies to His glory.

In so many of these situations of God's justice on display, we see also His mercy at work. In the midst of the flood, an ark. When the Egyptian army is destroyed, it's also God's mercy on the Israelites. When Nebuchadnezzar is afflicted and humiliated, it's God's way of turning that proud King around - God mercifully ends the affliction, though Nebuchadnezzar doesn't deserve it. Here, we see that Herod's death was also the mercy shown in the protection of the church. This kind of earthly judgement is not something God does lightly, He is patient with His enemies. It seems that these occasions are done with greater purpose than just the justice these people deserve, but God's purpose in building up His people too.

## **v24**

*24 But the word of God increased and multiplied.*

Just as we've seen throughout Acts, in spite of the opposition, in spite of persecution, the gospel spreads, and the church grows.

## v25

*25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.*

Barnabas and Saul have completed their work in Jerusalem. Their mission to Jerusalem was to deliver the famine relief that we read about at the end of chapter 11 (v27-30):

*27 Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). 29 So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. 30 And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.*

They've been to Jerusalem, they've done what they came to do, now they return. As we'll see in the next chapter, God has plans for them to go much further to take the gospel to places it has not yet reached.

They take with them John Mark, who we believe wrote the gospel of Mark. From what we've read, we can see the Mark had dealings with Peter, and the church in Jerusalem, which accounts for why Mark's gospel comes across as being Peter's account of things often. Now Mark goes off with Saul and Barnabas to help them in spreading the gospel, and will stay with them as they travel to Cyprus.

## Conclusion

In the events of Acts 12 we've seen that God protects His church. The result of everything that has happened is that the word of God increased and flourished. Most obviously, God has struck down one of the early church's enemies - he has taken out Herod who was persecuting the church.

But sometimes we can't clearly see the workings of God for good - it's maybe not obvious how James' death was for good. Why did Peter need to spend a night in Prison? But in these events, we can see that the church in Jerusalem was focused on God because of these events - verse 5 tells us that earnest prayer was made for Peter, verse 12 says that many were gathered and praying. In the famine aid brought by Saul and Barnabas, collected because of prophecy that God had given, we see that this showed that God was with the church, in providing for their future needs.

Throughout scripture we see that in times of suffering and persecution, God is not absent, but rather uses such things for His glory and the good of His people. The Israelites multiplied despite the conditions they lived under in Egypt and their deliverance was all the more glorious because of it. The disciples were scattered as Jesus was taken to the cross, but God turned it all around and took these flaky, scared, weak disciples and made Apostles of them. The varied events of chapter 12 all served to show God's glory and serve the spread of the gospel.

Whether it's allowing the suffering of His servants, like James, delivering them supernaturally, like Peter, or cutting off His enemies directly, like Herod, God is firmly in control and directing events for His glory. Throughout scripture, it's when things look most dire, that God has worked things to turn around for good. The clearest example of course is the central event of all - the death and resurrection of Christ. Just when it looked like it was all over and Jesus' mission had failed, it's revealed to be the plan all along and more glorious than those that witnessed it could imagine.

God's way of renewing things is by resurrection - the old must die first, it has to be killed off for the new to flourish.

We might think, not unreasonably, that today things are going in the wrong direction, that the church is in many ways falling apart and being divided. Obvious sin and doctrinal error is creeping in, it's hard to see how in a country like ours how the church will grow.

Of course, we're not facing the problems of those in Jerusalem in the early church - famine and persecution to the point of death. Things aren't that bad, but they're not good. I think it's a strong possibility that God is really just separating the wheat and the chaff, He's drawing the boundaries so that the old can be killed off and through His resurrection power, the church will grow into new life. Has there ever been a time in history that the church wasn't in some way dying off, failing? I think that's because that's how God brings us to life!

Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 28:

*“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

All authority is given to Him. Given He is in charge, the mission of God will succeed. God always defeats His enemies, without fail.

We should be very aware that we should give all the glory to God - in the midst of our sufferings, in a world that looks to be turning from God, as our church and many others are small in number and much of the visible church is turning from God - God is in control and all the glory belongs to Him.