

Day 7 : Acts 12:20-25 – Herod's Death

Prayerfully read: Isaiah 14

Understanding

Secular history records that Herod died in AD 44 – so it is now well over a decade since the resurrection of Christ. Secular history also records a number of the other details which Luke refers to. Herod had placed an economic embargo on Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia – and now maybe they were beginning to feel the effects of the famine. But through the use of Herod's near servant Blastus, they regained his favour. Herod took the opportunity from a festival in Caesarea to announce his good intentions to them again. The Roman historian Josephus records that Herod was struck with severe abdominal pains and carried into the palace, where he took five days to die.

Luke's point is very simple. Herod had “stretched out his hand” (12:1) to persecute the church, and had appointed Peter to die. However, God had another plan – God also stretched out his hand and Peter was freed, but Herod was struck down. Herod had acted as if he were a god, and now received such praise - but the true God intervened to judge his pride, and show who really ruled. What Satan had intended for evil, God had overturned for good – and the result was not that the church was destroyed, but instead that “the word of God grew and multiplied” (v24). This is an interesting way of speaking about the progress of God's saving work: all of God's saving work is carried out through his word – for God's kingdom to go forward, his word must go forward; you cannot have one without the other.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The progress of God's kingdom does not depend on the plans of politicians, but on the intervention of God. We must not despair because Christianity is not popular – but turn to God in prayer.
- All of God's work is done through God's word.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- How does this passage help us to think rightly about how God's kingdom advances, and what hinders it, and what doesn't hinder it? How does it help us to think rightly about the place of prayer, and political manoeuvring?
- What does it mean to “give the glory to God” (v23)? In what ways and in what situations can we do this so as to honour our Lord?

The Acts Of The Apostles

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 9 (Chapter 11:1-12:25)

Grace Church Belper

<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk>

(For previous weeks' notes, visit
<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk/readingnotes.php>)

Day 1 : Acts 11:1-18 – Peter Reports Back

Prayerfully read (above and): Luke 3:1-22

Understanding

This is the first record of a controversy in the church – though one that was quickly settled. However, it will give us a hint over what is to come, in chapter 15.

Those “of the circumcision” (v2) must be those who insisted particularly strongly on circumcision – or came to do so at a later time in the controversy. It cannot just be those who were circumcised, because that was everybody – the church was entirely Jewish at this point.

It is interesting to note that the church felt the liberty to question Peter; and Peter did not merely insist on his own authority as an apostle, but gave a reasoned answer. Those who heard his answer recognised the clear hand of God in what had happened – and when they heard that, they were content; indeed the “glorified God” (v18). They too could see that this was God's doing – he was now granting life-giving repentance to the Gentiles also.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The expansion of the church is under God's sovereign hand. It was always his purpose that non-Jews also should be saved – and without having to become Jews first. There is only one gospel for the whole world – which proclaims that Jesus Christ is both Lord and Saviour, and demands that all of its hearers repent and believe – nothing more. All who trust in Christ are saved, and must be allowed into the church.
- Repentance is God's gift (2 Timothy 2:25), just as faith is (Ephesians 2:8). Nobody can repent or believe, unless God in his mercy changes their heart and grants them the ability to do so. In our own natural state, we can only continue to rebel and resist God. If we believe, it is because God has performed a gracious miracle in us!

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Do we really believe that all believers everywhere have the same spiritual privileges and rights before God? That there is no hierarchy in the church? How should this belief affect your behaviour towards different believers? Towards different acts of service in the church?
- Do you repent? Repentance is not just a one-off act, but is to be repeated daily. Do you have a contrite heart which mourns over sin? If you do, then you can also rejoice – for such a heart pleases God (Ps. 51:17).

Day 6 : Acts 12:5-19 – Peter Freed (2)

Prayerfully read: James 5

Understanding

The account of how Peter was re-united with the church is a little amusing. The servant-girl, Rhoda, is so excited to hear his voice, that she rushes in to tell the church and forgets to open the gate (v13) – leaving Peter to carry on knocking whilst she tries to convince the church (v16). The church itself was making constant prayer to God for Peter to be freed (v5) – but when Rhoda comes in to tell them that Peter is freed, they insist that she is losing her mind (v15). It is not certain what they meant by saying “it is his angel” - maybe this refers to a Jewish belief that each person had an angel appointed to watch over them (a belief which cannot be shown from the Bible), or they believed that Peter was already dead and that Rhoda was seeing a vision – we cannot tell.

Peter, having been miraculously delivered, did not endanger himself by remaining in that place (v17). Though God is sovereign and able to deliver us from the most hopeless situations, yet we should not put him to the test by failing to make use of the ordinary means which he provides for us to take care of ourselves.

The “James” who the church was to tell (v17) is of course not the already executed James brother of John (v2), but James the half-brother of Jesus.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- God is far more able and willing to answer many of our prayers than we are, because of our weak faith and unspiritual mindedness, to ask them. If we would but continue to fervently ask for things from him, we would be most surprised at how much progress we might make.
- Though God is absolutely sovereign and may do anything he pleases, what normally pleases him is to use ordinary means. If we would trust God, then we should not neglect to use means, but instead use them fully, praying that God will bless them.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Do you continue in prayer? Are there things you began seeking the Lord for, but gave up? Are there things you should resume praying for?
- How should what we have learnt about God's sovereignty and means affect our Christian life? What are the means God has given for growth and encouragement – and are you using them?

Day 5 : Acts 12:5-19 – Peter Freed

Prayerfully read: Acts 4

Understanding

This passage introduces us to John Mark (v12), a new figure in the book who will later accompany Paul and Barnabas in missionary work.

The church responded to this persecution in the only way it knew how – and the way which is truly effective: prayer. Luke notes that the church's prayer was “continual” (v5). Indeed, when Peter was miraculously freed, he knew where to find the church – gathered together praying!

The penalty for a Roman soldier who lost his prisoner was that he would face the prisoner's sentence in his place. This explains why Peter was under such heavy guard (12:4, 6) – the soldiers' lives depended upon it. Peter's delivery, though, was clearly miraculous – how could a man free himself from being chained to two soldiers in his sleep, leave a locked prison, go past two guard posts, and pass through a locked iron gate? Herod, though, did not trouble himself to see the hand of God in this and turn from his evil way: he instead carried out the sentence and had the guards put to death (12:19).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- True prayer must be both fervent and ongoing. Praying in such a way is a sign that we truly believe that God hears us and is willing to grant us our requests – that we are not merely “going through the motions”, to keep our consciences quiet or in a spirit of unbelief. God knows what we need before we ask it, but his appointed way in which to bring the blessing which he desires to bring to his people is through having them ask for it. When we ask God for things, our faith is exercised and strengthened, and we are taught to be aware of and depend on the unseen and not the seen things.
- God is well able to deliver us from any trouble. But his will is not always the same – James was killed (v2), but Peter was spared.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- How does your praying measure up to the Biblical standard? Is there anything you need to change?
- Do you know what it means to bow before God's “strange” providence? In one case he delivers, in another, he does not – he is God. This is something that should cause us to worship, and bow before him.

Day 2 : Acts 11:19-26 – Barnabas and Saul

Prayerfully read: 1 Peter 1

Understanding

Luke now tells us what was going on away from Judea. Phoenicia was north and west of Judea; Antioch further north still in Syria, and the isle of Cyprus our north and west in the Mediterranean. Many believers had been scattered here because of the persecution mentioned in 8:1.

Most of those who were scattered preached the gospel only to Jews, not yet fully understanding the Lord's purpose. Some, though, spoke also to Greek speakers (here called Hellenists), with great effect.

This passage significantly develops the story of Acts. We begin to see how the church became to be dominated by Gentiles (not Jews), and no longer centred in Jerusalem. It tells us how Barnabas came to be a prominent figure alongside the apostles; and it re-introduces Paul, who will become the prominent missionary to the Gentile world.

Barnabas was sent to Antioch (about 450-500 miles) to see what was done. When he saw the work of God there, he realised the need for Saul's gifts to help strengthen it. At this time about 7 to 10 years have passed since Saul was sent away (for his own safety) to Tarsus – Barnabas travels there to seek him, and Saul and Barnabas together teach the church.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The gospel is for everybody – regardless of background or social status. In our day, the gospel is making considerable advances in parts of Africa, South America and China. The Lord's sovereign plan for the future of the church is known only to him – but we may know that it is planned in such a way that all the glory will be his, and no man will be able to take the praise for it. In our passage, an unplanned persecution and the exile of the chosen apostle were used by God to advance to the next stage in his pre-determined plan to advance the gospel throughout the world.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Are you bold to speak the gospel to all kinds of people? Nobody finds this easy – but if we rely on the Lord and ask him for help, he may give us surprising opportunities – and surprising blessings: trust him!
- How much do you know about the world-wide church, its opportunities and needs? Are there places you regularly pray for? If not, begin!

Day 3 : Acts 11:26-30 – Famine Relief

Prayerfully read: 2 Corinthians 8

Understanding

Verse 26 tells us where the word “Christian” came from – it was first used to describe the disciples in Antioch. Until now, they had been described as those of “The Way”, or “brethren” or “disciples”. It is unlikely that unbelieving Jews would have invented this label, as they had rejected the Christ. So either it was the people of Antioch, or the believers in particular, who coined this description.

This passage is our introduction to Agabus, who will re-appear in chapter 21. He was a prophet, which means that he was supernaturally gifted to know and reveal the mind of God in certain things. He made known that there would be a great famine: which happened in Emperor Claudius' days (who reigned in AD 41-54).

The response of the believers at Antioch was to “send relief” to the Judaeans. Though not in the same church (or even province), the believers saw themselves as united by a deep bond. Just as the church at Jerusalem looked after its poor, so now one church looked after another in a time of famine. The Gentiles knew that they had received great spiritual blessings from the Jews – and so it was a very small thing for them to send back material blessings in a time of need (1 Cor. 9:11).

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The whole church, around all the world, is one church. Every church which loves the Lord Jesus Christ and experiences the grace of God is united to every other church. Churches must therefore not only look at their own internal affairs and needs, but be quick to provide help for needy brethren in other places – even vast distances away.
- There are no prophets today: all that God wishes us to know of his mind and will is recorded for us in the Scripture. Prophets were part of the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20), not the ongoing building.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- How are you expressing your unity with other believers in different parts of the world? What can you do to take steps to do so more, if you discover that you need to? Praise and worship God that you are not alone, but part of a “great multitude... out of every nation, and kindred, people, and language” (Rev 7:9). How wonderful heaven will be!

Day 4 : Acts 12:1-4 – Persecution Again

Prayerfully read: Matthew 2, 14:1-12, Luke 23:6-12

Understanding

Luke now tells us about a new persecution that arose from Herod Agrippa I, the Gentile ruler of Judea. His uncle Herod Antipas had murdered John the Baptist and questioned Jesus; his grandfather Herod the Great had attempted to murder Jesus when he was born. Combined with the opposition of the Sadducees (chapter 4), and the Pharisees (such as Saul, 9:1), this meant that all the major political powers in Judea had joined in persecuting the church.

Whereas the previous persecution was against all believers, this one appears to have only been against the leaders. Herod killed James, John's brother (the son of Zebedee – Matthew 4:21-22). The James who we read about later in Acts is thought to be the half-brother of Christ who also wrote the letter of James.

This is the third time that Peter has been arrested. We see that Herod did it for political reasons: to keep in favour with the Jews (his rule depended on being able to control them). Like his uncle and grandfather before him, his desire for power and lack of fear of God or love for righteousness lead him to be an enemy of the work of God. The reason why he did not execute Peter during Passover would have been to avoid offending Jewish sensibilities.

Doctrines (Teachings)

- The church can be expected to face trouble from all kinds of sources, for all kinds of reasons. This is part of the Lord's will for its purification and its progress. Some oppose the church because they know and rebel against what it stands for; some oppose it because it is convenient for them to do so for their own reasons. But in all cases, the Lord has some good purpose in it, to advance his kingdom and glory.

Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- How can this passage help you to think rightly about being opposed because of the gospel, and to be ready for it?