

Let's open our Bibles tonight, as we continue through the study of the book of Acts, to chapter 12:12.

Tonight we are coming to the end of Peter's ministry as far as the book of Acts is concerned, and we'll not only end tonight with Peter, but we'll pick up with Paul. The last few chapters that we have gone through have been really that mixture of Paul's beginnings and where he went, and Peter's ministry on the road, and then kind of back and forth as God sent Barnabas to Antioch in Syria about 300 miles to the north. So we ended last week with Paul being picked up by Barnabas after a ministry there for a time. Paul is brought to the church there, where he pastors for a year, teaching the people. There's a prophet there named Agabus, who warned that there was a famine coming in Jerusalem. And, as a result, this mostly-Gentile church sends help to the poor saints in Jerusalem. And that was where we ended in chapter 11.

So we step back again to meet with Peter. We've talked a lot about Peter's growth in the Lord - from a Jew who was very prejudiced against everyone else and how God, by His Son, delivered Peter from it. And the church began to learn that God loved everyone, wanted everyone saved. And the church in Jerusalem was going to struggle with that for a while. But we will see Peter one more time (at the meeting in chapter 15 - about the salvation of the Gentiles), and then Peter will just kind of disappear from the scene.

Last time, we looked at the increase of persecution that began to arise against the church. But this time, it came mostly from Rome. King Herod had targeted the leadership of the early church. He arrested and killed James. He saw that it pleased the people - the Jews. He was interested in Judaism. He, oftentimes, would show up to offer sacrifices. We talked about this Herod last time. So, he arrested Peter, intending to put him to death as well, to curry favor with the folks that he was overseeing; and Peter was put in prison through the Passover time - the Feast of Unleavened Bread. We talked about how he was chained up. It was almost about as severe as you could - two soldiers in the cell with you, chained to your wrists and arms; two more standing outside watching over you. Meanwhile, the church gathered together for a week to pray. They were frightened, no doubt,

with the severity of Herod's turning against the church. The death of James was certainly fresh on their minds (James, the brother of John). And so they spent the week, according to verse 5, praying for Peter to get out of jail. The night before he was to be executed, the church was still meeting well into the night. We would expect to find Peter, that night, pacing, maybe. This was the night before he was to be killed in the morning. We looked at it last week, in the first eleven verses, that Peter was not only asleep, he was sound asleep. In fact, when the angel showed up, it said a light shined in the cell. But that didn't wake Peter. And neither did an angel standing next to him. But the angel gave him a good kick, and he woke up. And miraculously, the chains fell off, the door opened, and Peter was able to walk out - not sure if he was awake or asleep or dreaming. But he finally found himself out in the street. The angel disappears (verse 10 of chapter 12), and Peter is left by himself.

We talked last week a lot (if you weren't with us, I hope you can go back and listen to the study) about the mixture you find in the Scriptures between the ordinary and the extraordinary and how God oftentimes works like this. He will do what you cannot. He won't necessarily do what you can. And it applies almost to everything that God sets before us. For example, you go and share your faith, but God saves, you don't. You pray, but God heals. You cry out to the Lord and step out in faith, and it's the Lord that opens the doors. But you can write that across your Bible. You should do what you can; God will always do what you cannot. But He rarely does what you can. When He does that, there's a specific reason for it. And so we talked about that mixture last time, and, like I said, we ended up last week (verse 11) with Peter outside, alone, out on the streets, no doubt needing to get away from the prison gates.

And so tonight we'd like to go down through verse 25 (to the end of the chapter) and just kind of take a look at God's last words to us through Peter and what we might learn from him. I love Peter's life. I mean, I pray to be used like Peter. He's an amazing guy. We've entitled the message tonight, "Weak Saints and Their Strong God." But there are some important lessons to learn.

So let's start back in verse 10, just to kind of get the context. We read this, "When they" (this is Peter and the angel) "were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. And when Peter had come to himself, he

said, 'Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from' " (notice) " 'the expectation of the Jewish people.' " (They looked forward to the death of this man of God.)

"So," verse 12, "when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying." Peter, when he arrives out in the street, realizes God had delivered him. Herod wanted him dead. The people, especially the Jews at the time, wanted him dead as well. But he, waking up, realizes what God has done, and he has to make a choice. Now, he has to do what God won't do. He has to decide where is he going to go. He decides to go to the church, the place of meeting, the main place in town. Now you remember, when Stephen was killed, most of the church left town. So this is another group - the fruit of the disciples all staying in town. Mary had a home there. She was the mother of John Mark and Barnabas' sister, if you will. And John Mark will figure prominently in the next couple of weeks. He was about twelve years old when Jesus died. He is now probably in his mid- to late-twenties, if you will. But, like I said, he'll show up in the next couple of chapters when he tries to go out with Paul and his uncle to ministry. We find this Mary, though, very active in the early church, and she hosted a home Bible study in her home. This was a pretty dangerous time to go to Bible study in somebody's house. Remember verse 1. Herod is interested in currying favor with the Jews. He has to oversee them from Judea all the way to Galilee. He was given such authority and oversight. And so, as he is put in that position, he finds himself wanting to make deals politically, and killing church members seemed to be a pretty good way to go to get favor with them. So I'm not sure how many people would go to church if you knew tonight the Romans were waiting outside to maybe kill you. Maybe you would have watched it online like some of you tonight. (Pastor Jack points to the camera) (Laughing) For no good reason, but you're home. It would have been a huge decision. In fact, I would suspect, as you read through this, that you would read that there was a small crowd, but that isn't the weight of the early church. In fact, we read in verse 12 there were "many gathered together praying." They'd been there, according to verse 5, all week. They had great fervency. They were in distress. One of their own, James - a prominent leader, had been killed. And now they're talking about killing Peter. So, "God, deliver Peter." And it's the night before, and it's late into the night, and it's the eleventh hour, and this is a last-ditch effort to hear from God. They needed a miracle, and they needed it now. But they hadn't given up. Right? I mean, God does sometimes wait till the last moment, but God oftentimes does His best work then. I think about the little baby

that David birthed with Bathsheba, and the LORD, through the prophet, had said that the baby was going to die. But David wasn't just taking that on face value. While he breathed and had life, he was praying. And you find David (there in 2 Samuel 12) just crying out, "Who knows if the LORD was going to be gracious to me and allow the child to live?" But when he was dead, David got up, stopped fasting, started eating, and just accepted God's decision. But, up until that time, "Do it, LORD. Do it now. The time is short."

And so here're a bunch of saints in a house in Jerusalem, at a very dangerous time, staying well up in the middle of the night, interceding for their brother Peter who'd been in jail for a week. And they were up long after the prison and the prisoners had gone to sleep. It's a marvelous kind of picture of the love of God amongst the church. I don't know how many people you'd stay up all night for to pray. You'd hope the list was long. I don't know that it is. But they came to prayer meeting at the last minute to cry out to God for the needs of a brother, and it required personal sacrifice and personal time. And I don't know what it is about prayer and getting people to pray. I think sometimes either people don't believe God answers prayer or it's not that important or they're not convinced of it or they don't care. I don't know. But these people cared, and they were devout in their commitment to the Lord, and they took it as it wasn't somebody else's problem, it was their own. So Peter gets out of prison, and, "I gotta go to the church. I gotta go to the saints. I gotta gather with the people."

I might have caught the last Greyhound bus out of town. But not Peter. He's going to first go minister to the people he loved.

So, we read in verse 13 that, "As Peter," (when he arrives there at the house) "knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer." Inside, they are praying for his release. Outside, he's released. I suspect, although I can't tell you with certainty, that the knock at the gate alarmed everyone. It's the middle of the night. Herod's on the warpath. The tension in town is thick. They're hunting Christians. They've killed some, they're going to kill others. And I could imagine that they thought this was the Roman secret police at the door. The church meeting was well known to everyone; so was the place. I don't know if everyone just, "Ssssh. Don't say nothin'." Or maybe people ran to the back door, or maybe they just ducked under a table. I don't know. But someone said to Rhoda, "Hey, why don't you go see who it is." I don't know how low you have to be on the totem pole (Laughing) to be the sacrificial lamb. "Rhoda will answer the

door." And so they send her. While the brave ones in the meeting hide and peek through the curtains, she heads for the door. Rhoda. Her name means rose. And she has great faith, and God honors her, I think, by mentioning her by name. She's singled out in the crowd.

Verse 14, "When she recognized Peter's voice," (I suspect she said, "Who is it?") "because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate." Now that's excited. "I asked who it was, and it was Peter. Oh, man, he's here! This is like the coolest thing ever. Good news!" And she forgets to open the gate. "God has answered our prayers. God has responded to us. He's alive, he's out of jail. How awesome. I'm so excited!" And then you read, in verse 15, "But they said to her, 'You are beside yourself!' Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, 'It is his angel.' Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished." The reaction of the prayer warriors is recorded by the Holy Spirit almost, I think, with tongue in cheek, a sense of humor. But it gives you a remarkable insight into the spiritual maturity and weakness of the greatest of saints in the 1st century. Twelve years or so, fifteen years, after the resurrection, these are the guys in Jerusalem - the first generation, the ones that were the closest to all of the action. And here we find them praying and convinced God would listen and gathering together at the risk of their own lives. But still, here, they came for love, but though they came for a week, they came in weakness. Rhoda says, "Peter's outside," and everyone said, "Rosie, you're nuts! It's really late. Maybe you're mistaken." "No, no, no. I know Peter's voice. That's Peter! I should go get the door. I forgot." "No, no, no. Don't open the door. It's a trick. Maybe it's not him at all." "Who could it be?" "I think it's an angel." "Well, why would an angel knock?" (Laughing) "And why would you somehow come to the conclusion it was an angel but not Peter? How does that fit in to why you're there in the first place?"

Bad theology mixed with unbelief sure left a full room of confused saints. These men and women of prayer would simply not be convinced that the prayers that they had been praying endlessly - for a week - had actually been heard and acted upon by the God that they came to serve. That's remarkable, isn't it? And I don't know how long this discussion went on, as Peter's just, "I gotta get out of here!" Waiting outside. They couldn't believe Peter had been released. In fact, believing there was an angel that sounded like Peter was easier to swallow than the miracle of God getting him out. Talk about great faith at a prayer meeting. And I wrote in my Bible years ago, "Is this the standard measure of faith that will be necessary to

move God's hand?" Or, if you will, is this what a legendary faith of a mustard seed looks like? Because it seems to me that, besides the poor girl who answered the door because she drew the shortest straw, no one else was buying it at all.

Is this the kind of faith God is looking for from you that would move mountains? Something to consider. It's an amazing response, isn't it? The answer to their prayer meeting was standing outside the door, but they didn't have enough faith to let him in. God could get Peter out of a maximum security jail. Peter couldn't get himself into a prayer meeting being held in his honor. Think about that. It's a sad day when the most surprised people at the work of God are the church. "He did what? I can't believe it!" "Why not?" "Well, I've just never seen it!" Good point. Even in the most fervent prayer meetings that are attended by the most spiritually-committed, there are always those who pray from a weakness of faith with doubt and unbelief. They're just not sure. I suspect if we could pray with the confidence that should have been found here, we'd see a lot more people at prayer meetings. But it almost reminds me of that poor father with his demon-possessed boy at the base of the Mount of Transfiguration; brought his boy to the disciples, they didn't help him at all, couldn't help him. And Matthew 17 records one of the things that Jesus said, and there were quite a few things, but one of them was, "Lord, help me in my unbelief. I want to believe You. I want my son delivered. But, man, I'm having a lot of trouble between here and there. If You could just help me. If You could just speak to me." Obviously these saints in Jerusalem believed God could answer prayer or they wouldn't have been up at 2:00 in the morning, praying, and they wouldn't have been there every night for a week, praying.

So it wasn't that they didn't believe in what they were doing, but their expectations of God were extremely low, and their reaction, I think, showed it. They were afraid to entertain too much hope lest that hope, in the morning, would have been dashed. And it is almost like Rhoda's simple faith lit up the room filled with very weak and doubtful saints. I think you just have to peruse your Bible and just be around as a Christian for a little while before you begin to grab hold of promises about prayer. It's the greatest privilege that we're given. Just go through the gospels. "Ask and it shall be given you. Seek, you'll find. Knock, it shall be opened" (Matthew 7:7, Luke 11:9). Those aren't arbitrary words that don't mean much. Those are the promises of God that mean everything! Jesus said (in John 15:16), "You didn't choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you." I mean, there's a pretty big open door

that says, "Come, I'd like to have you be a part of what I'm doing, and seek Me." "Until now you have asked nothing in My name," he would write in John 16:24. "Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full." All of the promises made by God to His own - to the disciples, to the saints - never promised, by the way, to the group at large, not to the multitudes, but identified as promises to the disciples. The only ones that can hang on to those promises are those who are walking with God. "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. Whoever doesn't pick up his cross and follow Me can't be My disciple. But if you'll be My disciple, then ask what you want." (Matthew 16:14, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23). Line yourself up.

We are warned in the Scriptures of the dangers of coming to prayer with questionable purposes or heart desires that don't line up with the will of God. James (4:3) wrote that we have not because we ask amiss, wanting to consume what we're asking for on our own pleasure or on our own desires, if you will. God protects you from fleshly wishes. He ignores requests that really don't line up with His will. It's going to be a hard sell for you to say, "God, I need a Porsche to bring people to church." (Laughing) He might give you a bus. Will that do?

But yet, on the other hand, if we pray according to His will, He hears us. There's that great verse in 1 John 5:14. It says this, "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him." So the key part of prayer is bringing you to the place where you want what God wants, which is why the Old Testament says, "Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). Because when you walk with God, now you're going to want what He wants. You're going to be much more in tune with the will of God.

And certainly these saints, in showing up - in just showing up in love, in hoping against hope, having very little faith, found enough faith to please the Lord to act. God responded to whatever little you find there. And it doesn't look like much. But I suspect, in the Lord's eyes, this is all that He's used to finding. Just hanging on. Prayer, ultimately, is to conform your heart to the will of God so that you can line up with Him and be dependent upon Him. "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6-7). So, there has to be a faith. But, like I said, if I look to define faith in this

story that God sets before us to learn from, I don't find much of it. I find a willingness to be there and a general belief that God responds to prayer; and they're doing the right thing in the right way with a lot of personal sacrifice. But let's face it. Everyone's surprised that Peter's standing at the door. Everyone. And that interests me a lot because it seems to me just a small, very small, seed - a grain of a mustard seed - is all that God is looking for. Jesus, when He spoke to the disciples about why they couldn't cast this demon out from this little boy, said, "This kind goes out only by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21, Mark 9:29). Now these boys had come back from their trip and had used Jesus' name, and His name had been sufficient. But the real work of God in the lives - fasting and prayer - He wasn't talking about some ritual; He was just talking about a life that's surrendered to Him. And if you're living that kind of life, then God can use you. But you're powerless without it. And they tried....."I prayed on the road like this. It worked there, it doesn't work now. What happened?" And Jesus said to them in Matthew 17:20, "It's because of your unbelief. If you had just the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to the mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it'll move, and nothing will be impossible for you." And I read that, and then I look at these guys and say, "Man, that is a small seed." Yet God honors their prayer.

Obviously, and apparently, the first step to finding God's sufficiency is to try to do what He tells you do to, even if you're bad at it. Are you praying in faith? "I don't know. I'm praying." You believe in God? And there're a lot of these faith teachers, and they just beat you to death, make you guilty. "If you just had faith, you could live in a mansion like I do!" Really? Is that what we want? Is that what God wants? So much pressure put on us that emphasizes the amount of faith that produces, oftentimes, guilt and hopelessness. When I get to this portion, I read what God wants, and I'm encouraged all the more that these saints - with pureness and simplicity, and they've been around for more than a dozen years, some of them - had still not gotten to the point that they could really believe God could actually get Peter out of jail, even with all the miracles that they saw early on in the book of Acts. But God honors their prayer. These clowns on TV that tell you you have to have a great amount of faith, I ain't buyin' it. What they want is your money. I would say don't send it to them. Send them a note that says, "If you have enough faith, you don't need me." (Laughing) Or, "You take out your own miracle wallet and use it." (Laughing)

So, I'm encouraged by reading the story just because I know that God will meet me more than halfway. Because He met them 95% of the way. They were there. That

was about it. Right? So even our faith to be saved, the Bible tells us, is given to us as a gift, not of ourselves (Ephesians 2:8). So you can grow in faith, certainly, by the Word of God. But God is only looking for a step towards Him. And the people in Mary's house this week step towards Him. So don't put too much pressure on yourself. Right? They came with great love and extremely low expectation that seemed to lower itself as the week went by. If it was low on Monday, it was really low on Sunday. And yet God answered.

Look at verse 16. It says, "Now Peter continued knocking" as (verse 15) Rhoda, inside, "continued insisting." She kept insisting, he continued knocking. It's a great picture, isn't it? And finally, they collectively went to answer the door together, and when they saw Peter, "they were astonished." "*Existemi*." It's exactly what that word means in Greek - stone-eyed. It blew their minds. This is the Greek version of, "It blew our minds, man." This is where Raul gets his language, right here. (Laughing)

Now notice verse 17, "But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, 'Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren.' And he departed and went to another place." I suspect, because of what we read, that everyone started talking at once. "Peter! Peter!" And you know there's some guy in the back going, "I knew it was Peter. I knew he was going to get out. I believed God. I don't know about these other people, but I was right there with you." You know how that goes. So, everyone starts talking, and, "What happened?" and, "Me and Rosie were the only two that really believed you. Praise the Lord. How awesome is this!" And Peter goes, "Sssh. Could you just be quiet? I've been twenty minutes outside. I gotta go." He shares with them how God had delivered him. He thanks them for praying. He asked them to go see James, the half-brother of Jesus, the pastor of the church in Jerusalem, and tell them about what the Lord had done. Now James hadn't come to believe in Christ until after the resurrection. He is the most Jewish guy in the 1st century presentation, if you will, of God's work with the church. He maintained many relationships with the Jews in Jerusalem. There was a tremendous amount of fear. Remember Peter (in the Galatian letter) actually moved away from eating with Gentiles when some of the men from James came (Galatians 2:12). They were the most legalistic, not necessarily freed, guys. They came around but not immediately. Right? They didn't find that freedom in Christ so quickly. History tells us that Annas, remember Annas, killed James in 62 A.D., according to history.

So, here's what we read of Peter. He leaves and goes somewhere else. Good idea. Get out of Dodge. Get away because you know that Herod is going to wake up in the morning and go on the warpath. And, like I said, we will not see Peter any more until we get to Acts 15. He'll attend the conference meeting. "What do we do with Gentile salvations?" And Peter, having been through it all and been healed of his prejudices, is able to speak with great authority. God had used him to speak to the Jews, to the Gentiles, and he even went and checked up with Philip - to those who were the Samaritans, kind of the Hellenists, all kind of on the fence and mixed together and all. So Peter had lots of things to say. He'll be mentioned in 1 Corinthians 9:5, but that's pretty much the extent of it. You don't find Peter anywhere else.

Now, a couple of things to say. You won't find Peter - there's no record in the Bible that Peter ever went to Rome or that he was kept in the Mamertine Prison where Paul was kept in Rome. I mentioned that to you when we took our group last year to the "Footsteps of Paul." When we arrived in Rome, we got to hear all of the Catholic legends. I call them legends. I grew up as a Catholic. I'm not discriminating. They're just wrong in these regards. I'm thankful for the Catholic church in preaching the right Jesus. They just bury Him under so many other things. But the first thing you're going to hear everywhere is that Peter came to Rome. Because if he didn't come to Rome, there's no first pope. And there's no record of Peter going there. They will tell you that Paul might not have been kept in the prison in Rome, but Peter certainly was. And I did a lot of these things. "Time out. Aaaaah!" (Pastor Jack makes a buzzer sound) "Wrong. That's not in the Bible." And then they didn't look at me with favor at all. (Laughing) But even Paul, who wrote the letter to the Romans, and said hello to just about everyone he knew (personally or not), never said hello to Peter, which he certainly would have done at the end of the book of Romans. Suffice it to say, for now, God had plans for Peter. We don't know what they were. There's a lot of extra-biblical information. We could give that to you if you like. But at best, it's conjecture, and there's not enough to fill in the gaps. So the Lord moved him along. He busted him out of prison to send him into anonymity. Isn't that interesting? After all that he had done in the early church, he goes into hiding. He just kind of disappears from the scene.

Well, verse 18 (the next morning), "Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that

they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there." Imagine if you were one of these guards having to explain to a crazy man like Herod how you went to sleep with a prisoner chained to you, and you woke up, and he was gone. He was just gone. And no one saw where he went, but he's nowhere to be found. Chains hanging that had once been held. Doors bolted and locked and yet Peter is gone. And these soldiers were in big trouble because even Roman law would say you lose a prisoner, you take the punishment that they were in jail to get. So, since Peter was slated to die, so were these four soldiers who were on duty that night. They were all put to death. And Herod was not a guy to show you much mercy. So, Herod had to be told. I'm sure that they scoured the prison before they ever went to tell him. The words "no small stir" might be the understatement of the year. You can just find these guys panicked. He grills the soldiers. He comes to the conclusion that I think any of you would come to. "It had to have been an inside job. And I don't know who the guilty party is, but you can't just vanish into thin air from a maximum security prison with four guards around you." And so Herod has no bounds to his fury, and he demands all these four men are killed. And then he leaves in disgust to the Roman port city of Caesarea, where Philip lives now, where Cornelius' household was, where a town was beginning to hear the gospel. And he was walking into a place where there were people in the streets preaching Christ. He was angry. He wanted to curry favor from the Jews. This was working out perfectly, and this had all undermined his plans. And so he goes to Caesarea to stay. The word "*diatribo*" means to rub away. It's almost like the word for diatribe. But it means to get it out of his system. "I'm just going to go down there and forget the whole thing. I'm just gonna chill on the beach." It's a beautiful city, and certainly he was in a foul mood and ready to make anyone who crossed him pay dearly. He was a powerful, powerful man.

We read in verse 20, "Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country." So, in this foul mood, there was a problem between his rulership in Rome over Israel and the people to the north. Tyre and Sidon are up the coast - they're in the southern Lebanon area today. They were dependent upon Herod for food imports. They bribed, it seems, or at least curried help from, a guy who was a close servant of Herod to get an audience with him because they were hungry. Whatever this guy needed to hear, "We're going to tell him because we need to eat." There was a lot of humble pie here, but at least you have something to eat even if it's humble pie. In Caesarea, there is an

amphitheater that Herod had built. It still stands there today. In our Israel trip, we usually stay in Netanya or in Tel Aviv the first night, and we start our tour, actually, at this amphitheater in Caesarea along the coast. It is a place that is used for concerts and theater outside. It's beautiful. It's right on the Mediterranean Sea. It is magnificent, kind of protected, and it hasn't been, really, restored; it has just been kept. You can see a lot of Herod's city - underwater, right off the coast - still sitting there today. But the meeting took place between these folks from Tyre and Sidon and Herod in the hopes that they could curry favor from him.

We read, in verse 21, "So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, 'The voice of a god and not of a man!' " Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote that this meeting took place on August 1, 44 A.D. (now those are his numbers), during the celebration of Claudius Caesar's reign. Josephus goes on to describe the outfit that Herod wore, which was a robe of silver threads that kind of glistened in the Mediterranean sun. I think he would have made Elton John envious. He came out just shining. And then he sits down, he gives them a long-winded, stupid, political speech. "I'm the authority, you're not." Everybody, "Oh," (Pastor Jack is clapping) "this is like a god is speaking to us. This is not the voice of a man!" And, you know, Herod is feeling better by the minute. He's just eating all of this stuff up. We don't know the contents of what he says. We do know it was designed to assert his power and his authority. The people needed bread, and so they responded with unbridled flattery, and Herod enjoyed it immensely. I once read somewhere that flattery was like chewing gum. It tastes good for a while, but don't swallow it. It comes with a lot of strings attached, certainly. And at least for the moment, Herod felt better about how his life had been going.

Until you get to verse 23, where you read the words, "Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God grew and multiplied." Apparently God had had enough of Herod. And, for the second time in this chapter, an angel shows up. But this guy was in charge of intestinal worms of some kind. Don't know what that calling is, but he had it. Josephus records (again, Jewish historian) that he died in five days, that he lie sick in great agony and pain for the better part of a week before he passed away. "The righteous is delivered from trouble, and it comes to the wicked instead" it says in Proverbs 11:8. So you have both pictures. You have the wicked Herod, who wants to wipe Peter out, and God delivers him. And then

you've got the wicked Herod, who's killed five people, planned on killing a sixth one, now sittin' around thinking he's God, and he finds out he's not - all at the same time. Peter would write, years later (1 Peter 3:12), "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." And I can't help but think if he wasn't looking back to this time. "I've seen that firsthand - my experiences with Herod." Not too many people got busted out of jail like Peter did. The church prays with very little faith, and God delivers Peter. Meanwhile, Herod, in his own strength, meets judgment.

Now, understand this, that at least in this time - 44 A.D. - the church has no political clout. There's no power in the church. There are some denominations today that wield a lot of power; some cults as well. But the real church, the believers in Christ, had no strings to pull, they had no one to bribe. They were really just reduced to waiting upon the Lord, so they had to go directly to the highest throne, to the throne of God. And God came to the aid of His people once and again. But here, He quickly disposes of a tyrant who had caused them great suffering; and they were in his crosshairs, but not anymore. The Lord removed him in a better part of a week.

So, if you read verse 24, it certainly is a different setting from where the chapter started. The chapter begins with the words, "Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread" (the time of the Passover). And so he wanted to wait until that had passed. You get to the end of the chapter, and you read, "But the word of God grew and multiplied." The blood of the saints was, again, the seed of the church. You know that, historically, persecution has never hindered the church. I know that you might think that it would, but ease will get you a lot more than pain. And, certainly, when all is fine, you're probably the least likely to be in church during the week, you're the least likely to be on your knees praying every night, you're the least likely to get a Bible verse that you can hang on to "because I need this." If you don't need nothin', you don't grow much. I think it was Alan Redpath who said, "Keep your chin up and your knees down." Satan always trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees.

So, God takes care of the problem, at least for the moment. But the problems aren't going away. In fact, as we start in chapter 13 with Paul and the rest, we

realize that that is so. But here, Herod is not giving glory to God. Verse 23, "He did not give glory to God." When you read the words "give glory to God," what comes to mind? What do you understand that to mean? Because if you're just looking at it and talking to someone, you might say to yourself, "Well, does He want glory for everything? Is He that insecure? Does He need a lot of stroking? Does He have a bad self-image?" No. Obviously not. We need to know Him and honor Him for our benefit because we need to clearly see His involvement in our life. That's what the people at Mary's house kind of missed - that God was using them, that He was moving through them. And of course, we need to glorify Him because He's good and gracious and faithful and so on. If not, if you don't glorify God, there're all kinds of worms that can eat away at your life. And I think it's an apt illustration. Right? What is eating you? That's what you could say to Herod. "Hey, Herod. What's eatin' you?" Self-glory was eating him. Self-destructive behavior. Seeking glory for yourself is foolish. Paul, when he told the Ephesians about walking in the Spirit, said, "And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). If I think all I have I have gotten by my own effort - by my job, by my family, by my income, by my position - then I'm forced to maintain that constantly. Right? The pressure is on me. James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning." Herod made the wrong call. Peter and the rest made the right one.

Maybe you've heard this story, and I like it. And if you ever get a chance to go to Coffee County in Alabama, you can find this town called Enterprise. Back in the late 1800's - 1895, I believe - the undisputed king of industry in the South was cotton. I mean, if you wanted to be rich, you were into cotton. But that year, in 1895, every cotton plantation (and especially hard hit was this place in Coffee County, Alabama) was wiped out by the boll weevil. It was disastrous. It broke everyone. It was the straw that broke the camel's back. In the town of Enterprise, 1895, most of the town knew the Lord, and they had a town prayer meeting to ask God what to do. "What're we gonna do? We can't survive without the cotton industry." It had blessed them for years. They said, "Lord, what do You want to do next? You do all things well." This was horrible. But they didn't fight with God. They sought to know what God wanted to do. In that prayer meeting that day was a young godly man, whom the Lord had been speaking to, whose name was George Washington Carver. And he stood up in front of the people there, and he said, "You know, I think we could make money with peanuts. And our fields will be ready for it, and there're lots of products that we can bring.

In fact, I know about three hundred products we can make with peanuts, including peanut butter." And everyone said, "Well, maybe that's the Lord speaking to us." And so the whole town turned from cotton to peanuts, and prosperity followed, and this big bumper turned out to be a tremendous blessing. So, if you go to Enterprise, Alabama today, there's a monument outside of town (as you go in) that has a boll weevil on the top. The plaque underneath it says, "In profound appreciation for the Boll Weevil and what it has done as the Herald of Prosperity. This monument was erected by the" (grateful-added by Pastor Jack) "Citizens of Enterprise, Coffee County, Alabama." All things work together for good (Romans 8:28). They gave glory to the Lord. The place thrived when the country itself, and the South, suffered greatly. But this one town said, "Let's just glorify the Lord."

This dumb guy decided to do otherwise. God wants glory. You should be giving it to Him anyway. He deserves it.

Well, we say goodbye to Peter. We say hello to Paul. We will stick with Paul from here to the end of the book of Acts. My intention is to bring you really good maps for the first and second and third missionary journeys of Paul so you can keep them in your Bibles. We'll put them on the screen. We can follow. I'll try to tell you how far he traveled, how long he stayed, where he went so that you guys'll be Acts experts. And they're looking for you in colleges just teaching Acts - Acts experts. You'll be one of those. But it is an amazing story because this place that Barnabas went to, 300 miles to the north, a place where the gospel was being preached to Gentiles about the same time that Peter was preaching at Cornelius' - this was the official one. But over here, the Lord was at work 300 miles to the north. Barnabas went north. He taught them. He encouraged them. He did what he did best. The place grew like wildfire. But he wasn't a teacher. He didn't feel like God had called him to teach. He goes to look for Paul in Tarsus. Paul has been out of the limelight for the better part of seven to ten years, completely hidden. He finds him. According to the epistles, later, Paul had been doing some speaking in really small places, without much effect, certainly without much notoriety. He finds him in Tarsus, 100 miles to the north; brings Paul back to Antioch in Syria. (And there are a lot of Antiochs in the Bible. Make sure you've got the right one. There's another one in Pisidia, a couple chapters from now.) But, in any event, that little church, for a year, was taught by Paul and Barnabas and a half a dozen other guys' names that you'll find in chapter 13:1. And they've been ministering, and it becomes the nerve center, the center - not James' church in Jerusalem (that's pretty much done). What we find of James' church in Jerusalem,

besides the legalities of preaching to the Gentiles, is we find a lot of need. Every church seems to be going to Jerusalem to help out. But the leadership, the oversight, the money, the investment, the financing, the vision all runs through this Antioch church for the next generation. And Paul's ministry successes and accomplishments are all done from this church. There'll be reported back to this church. There are people that come from this church to watch over some of the churches that are planted. Paul's strategy is very simple. He goes to the big commercial centers first. He doesn't go to a little Podunk town. You say, "Well, isn't everybody supposed to get saved?" Sure they are. But when it comes to strategy, Paul said, "Let's put a big church in a big town and then let them start to take care of all of the towns around them." And that's exactly what took place so that, in the next thirty years, twenty years, Paul will be able to say, "This gospel has gone out to all the world" (Colossians 1:6). Now we're a long way from that today, but with the Holy Spirit's help and by Him pouring out His Spirit upon us, by faith and trust in God's Word and in the preaching of it, there's a lot we can get accomplished if we will just be willing to believe Him.

Next week, we are also going to slow down a little bit. I know we've taken some of these narratives pretty quickly because they're one story. But next week we only plan to go to chapter 13:4, and I'm not even going to do verse 25 tonight because that goes with the next chapter. Whoever put chapter 13 there was wrong. Thank you very much. I'll correct that - just move it up one. Those are put in by man. It doesn't matter. But I think that it kind of brings up the thought. All right?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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