

EXECUTION, ESCAPE, EATEN BY WORMS

Acts 12

Leo Douma

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When I was in my first church, I was called at 2am to the hospital. Things had gone very wrong for a newly born baby of a church family. The father had called me to ask if it was alright to remove the child from life support. When I arrived, the baby was placed in his mother's arms. The parents were told they had about five minutes to get to know their son before he died. So together we begged God for life. But if not, we would bow to his will. Then we waited for his final breath. It never came. He is still a strong healthy man today. The doctors were dumbfounded. Medically, he should have died. God had acted miraculously in response to prayer. You can imagine that we were all in awe of God. Later that week I was talking on the phone with a colleague. Excitedly I told him what God had done. Then he told me his story. A baby had been born to a family in his church, quite prematurely. They too had prayed for life. But the baby died. After the phone conversation I sat stunned. I was even more in awe of God because I saw the sovereign power of God. His was right to give life and take life. His was right to determine. That's what we see in Acts 12. One apostle's life is saved. The other dies.

The context here from Acts 11 is that the gospel had been spreading remarkably. The Greek speaking Jews had witnessed in Antioch and many people were converted. Barnabas had gone up from Jerusalem to check out the new group in Antioch. Then with Paul set about a great new work. Things had been going well for the spread of the gospel. Now something terrible strikes, completely unexpected. Life can be like that. All is well, when bombs go off. Someone is struck down by illness or accident. And everyone is knocked for a six. That's what we see here. (Acts 12:1-5) *"It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also."*

What a shock for the church in Jerusalem. With Saul gone they had enjoyed peace. Now, James, one of the apostles was taken by King Herod and murdered. When James was first arrested the church would not have been too disturbed. The apostles had been imprisoned before. In Acts 4 & 5 we see the disciples in gaol and then released. But this time James was beheaded. This was 'James the brother of John', the two 'sons of thunder'. Their mother had asked Jesus that they sit at his right and left in his

kingdom. Jesus had made it clear that they would drink from the cup he would drink from. In other words, they would suffer as he did. James was the first of the apostles to die, John was the last. We are left wondering, though, why did James have to die? Peter was miraculously saved, but James was not. Why? It is certainly not the case that God fumbled with James. As if 'I hadn't seen that one coming'. Nor that God was powerless to stop things. As we will see he dealt strongly with Herod. God in his wisdom has a use and a message through each of his people. Sometimes the most powerful witness comes from those martyred for the faith. History has shown the church has grown most rapidly under persecution. God in his sovereign grace and power says to one person 'You will witness for me through your death'. To another 'You will witness for me through your life.' As our confession says, *"I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful saviour Jesus Christ."* In other words, 'Here I am Lord, what is your will for me? How can I serve you for the gospel to be spread?'

What James' death did was to stir the church to prayer. With James dead, and Herod seeing it pleased the Jews, Peter would be next to die. So, the church *"...was earnestly praying"*. All the thousands of Christians in Jerusalem were begging God to stop Herod. That is what crisis does. It drives us to our knees. Kings and governments have the power of armed force. The church has the power of the Word of God and prayer. Which is the more powerful? (Acts 12:6-11). Peter was very securely guarded *"...by four squads of four soldiers"*. He was chained between two soldiers and the others were the sentries. Yet an angel simply stepped in, removed the chains and away they went. Peter had not expected it. He was fast asleep the night before his trial and execution. That shows us his trust in God. He was ready to die for the gospel. In many parts of the world persecution and suffering are par for the course for sharing the gospel. Jesus had predicted how Peter would die, so it seems he was ready to go. He wasn't thinking of being saved from this prison. The angel had to tell him everything 'Get up, put on your clothes, put on your shoes, put on your coat, follow me'.

It was not until Peter was down the road on his own, he realised it was not a dream. Acts 12:12-17. *"When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" "You're out of your mind," they told her."* Peter didn't expect to be out of prison. But nor were those praying for him to be released. His presence at the home of Mary was so unpredicted. It must have been a lovely big home close to the centre of Jerusalem to have all the people gathered for prayer. There was Peter knocking at the door. The servant girl Rhoda, in her shock, left him there as

she told everyone it was Peter. Now, isn't it striking? All the people had gathered for earnest prayer to God. For what? For Peter to be saved. Yet, there he is in answer to their prayer, and they don't believe it. They even insisted poor Rhoda she was out of her mind.

The most powerful way for us as Christians to deal with our difficulties is through prayer. Yet, if we are honest, so often when we pray, we are not really expecting much. We seem too often to be trusting more in the power of money. Or who we know. Or our own abilities. But when life hits us hard, we know none of those things are of any use. Then we are left on our knees before God. But will he really listen? Will God act? Why was Peter saved when James had been killed? Was it not through the earnest prayer of the whole church? Somewhere between 5000-12,000 Christians in Jerusalem, gathered in their homes and pleaded with God? Was not God moved to act miraculously? Too often we don't pray because we assume God has it all in his will any way. Or we think nothing will really happen. I confess that when I prayed over that baby in the hospital, I did not expect him to be healed. We wanted it. We did not expect it. How well are we going in praying for family and friends to come to faith? I suspect it's not always strong or consistent. Why? Well it's not what we are used to. And I wonder if we really expect any change. We may have prayed often but nothing has happened yet. So, we lose hope and give up. God is the awesome creator of the universe. He is Lord of all, has he not the power? Our prayers to him are listened to. Does not God as father desire our good? We must pray, because no one is saved unless God's Spirit changes them. The forces and powers of the world can be very strong. But they are nothing compared to that of God.

Look with me as we read further. (Acts 12:18-19) *"In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed."* King Herod saw himself as a powerful man. He had put James to death at his political whim. A wave of the arm and it was done. Herod fed on his own power and self-importance. It was all he cared about. He persecuted the Christians simply because it made the Jews happy. It had them cheering for Herod. Sixteen soldiers were killed by the whim of this king. He didn't believe their story that God had acted powerfully. So, he assumed they had been incompetent and had them executed. No regard for others, for life, for justice by this man. If you feel a sense of dislike for him it's no wonder. This Herod was known as Herod Agrippa. He was the grandson of the King Herod that ruled when Jesus was born. He was the one who had all the children below two years killed in Bethlehem. Herod Agrippa's own father had been killed by the first King Herod. He was paranoid about retaining his power. So, he had

most of his family killed in case they would try to take his throne. Herod Agrippa had grown up in Rome. He was close friends with two men who eventually became emperors of Rome. That's how he got his position. He grew up spoiled and got his position through mates. He was part Edomite, so not naturally loved by the Jews he ruled over. This man enjoyed his power and abused it. He thought his power was absolute. He thought he could bully and persecute God's people, take life at his whim. But he was about to learn a terrible lesson. (Acts 12:20-23).

"Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to spread and flourish."

Tyre and Sidon were part of Phoenicia and like Caesarea were coastal cities. They were very dependent on the grain provided from Galilee, which was the breadbasket of the area. Here again we see Herod had the upper hand. He had complete power over these people. Without his support and the grain, they were lost. Herod knew that all too well. So, he dressed in all his royal robes, to emphasize his power. One commentator says his royal robes had silver thread through it. It had the result that he shone brilliantly in the sun. He lectured the people and harangued them. The crowd went along with it. Whatever it took to keep him onside to get their grain. They flattered him *"This is the voice of god not man"*. Herod, the ego maniac he was, accepted that as true. He basked in his power. He received the flattery of the crowd. And was struck down by God. *"He was eaten by worms and died"*. Apparently stomach worms were common in those days. They form a tight ball and block the stomach. It's an excruciatingly painful way to die. The message that stands out clearly here is you can't mess around with God and win. There is only one Lord of Lords and King of Kings. And his will, will be done. Notice how this section ends *"But...but the word of God continued to increase and spread."* Herod tried to take on God, as a god, and lost. Herod persecuted the church, but the word of God 'increased and spread'.

The God we worship is the Almighty Lord of all, whose power is beyond comprehension. Why is it, then, that the church so often cringes into a holy huddle and doesn't witness in the power of the Spirit? Here in Acts, we see it time and again that the church is persecuted. Each time God steps in and the gospel spreads even further

and faster. Acts says the mission is unstoppable. The God who acted then is the same Lord of all today. The mission is still the same. It's the call on all the peoples of all the nations to experience God's grace through Jesus. Through prayer and the power of God there is nothing that can stop that mission. Even if God calls on someone to give their life for his cause, even that is a powerful witness. It is an enormous statement about the wonder and Lordship of Jesus if there is a willingness to die for him. Claiming 'all of life for Christ', in God's power, does not mean we strut in the street and demand response. Jesus himself said very clearly, *"...the world's leaders love to lord it over others. Not so with you. Whoever wants to be first among you must be the least, the servant of others"*. Too often fundamentalism, whether Christian or Muslim, wants to claim a kingdom for God by power, by violence, by any means to achieve an end. But Jesus would say no. The means is the end. We must be completely humble and gentle, as Jesus was, in our witness. Otherwise our very methods deny the message we bear. Our strength comes through humble dependence on God. It must come through prayer. Through deep love and compassion for others. Through an obedient lifestyle to God. In the very way we live at home, at work, on the footy field, we should reflect the life of Jesus. That's our witness for him. That's how the word of God increases and is spread.