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GOD IS SOVERIGN IN MISSIONS

Acts 12

INTRODUCTION:

We see again great enmity existing between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. A great struggle between the Disciples of Christ and Satan.

And we note how the serpent carries on his battle.

What form does he assume. Does he come in the form of a serpent or in a supernatural appearance. No, he comes in the form of a man - and by man he works. We will discover in this chapter how this enemy of ours works. On the one hand, we see the servants of God empowered by the Holy Spirit. They are preaching Christ everywhere. On the other hand, we see the challenge of Satan. The Apostles had their ups and downs - and in certain places they preached the Gospel. They had been to the Gentiles. And they had remained true to Christ.

Something of the heroism of foreign missions takes bravery. And it takes a great idea that a person is created of God and that he needs to be redeemed and he needs God in his life - to shape and to mold his life. And to fill his life. And this is one of the challenges we witness in the infant church. That was not rocked in the cradle of ease nor nursed in the lap of luxury. It had early to face the baptism of persecution.

Thomas A. Kempis said man purposes but God disposes. If you substitute Satan for man, the truth is the same. Satan purposes or designs to defeat God's redemptive purpose. But God disposes his efforts to carry forward his intended goal. And that is why the challenge of God is sovereign in missions.

There are really two things in this chapter that ought to be kept in mind.
First, Satan's power - V. 1-4. Second, Sovereign power - V. 5-25.

I. SATAN'S POWER - V. 1-4

First, Herod vexed the church. V. 1. Civil power was used here to launch a season of persecution. Herod was a member of the Edomite family and it was seen here that up until this time he had not bothered the Christian movement. But he took all restraint off his conscience. And this text means that he deliberately stretched them forth to persecute the church.

He began with some of the members of the congregation. Some of them that were not so well known.

However, in spite of his church, it led him to seek the leaders. Some of the Apostles. And he began vexing them. That is, not only, vexing but afflicting them. Imprisoning them. Charging them heavy fines. And he proceeded on to greater cruelties. He was a politician. And he was attempting for political purposes to retain Jewish power.

The persecution here came from Herod the king. He wanted to please the Jews and to be popular with them. He wanted to make an example of some of their leaders. And in doing so, he pleased the Jews and hated the Christians.

Second, he murdered James - V. 2. Now real persecution broke out here, by King Herod. As he beheaded James. Who had witnessed the transfiguration. And a brief count of his death is given in just one sentence. He was slain by the sword. He was one of the choice Disciples who witnessed the transfiguration. His preaching had been powerful. He had stirred the people. It seems that the Scripture is being

fulfilled. The Disciples were asked to sit - one on the right hand and one on the left. Jesus told them that they did not know what they were asking. And little did they know that to drink of his cup was to suffer much. Mark 10:38.

Now why did God not deliver James, who was a good man and a useful servant. The same type of question comes to us so many times. We go to a home where death has suddenly struck and someone will ask or say - my loved one was a good and useful person. Why did God take him and permit others to live, who are worth nothing to the world. This is a question that we will never be able to answer. But we do know this, that God makes no mistakes.

When he allows a sad thing to happen - it is all for the best. Someday you will understand the meaning of it all. We must leave the whole question in the loving hands of our heavenly father. As the Scripture directs - all things work together for good to them that love God. Rom. 8:28.

When James' mother ask that he be allowed to sit at Christ's right hand, you remember that the Lord said can you drink of the cup that I drink of. James said, that he was able. That he did not know what it meant. Now he knows, that the cup was a cup of suffering. And it was a bitter drink. As the sword separates his life and his spirit goes off to Heaven. He had the joy of meeting Jesus - he was one of the first Apostles to get to Heaven. And I imagine that reunion was something with Jesus. James' brother, John, lived to be over a 100 years old. But you know it doesn't matter if you live 50 years or a 100 years - what really matters is this - are you filling your life with service to God. What kind of place does God have in it.

When the Jews heard that James was dead - they rejoiced greatly and they praised

Herod, James' murderer.

And when Herod heard this, he said if they liked that so much - I'll give them something more. I'll become more popular with them - what price people would pay for popularity. Even today there are people who shut off their convictions, give way to sin, to get a little popularity. There are people today who will walk hand in hand with the world, and never search their conscience - just to be popular.

Let's take a minute to look at King Herod. The first of the New Testament Herod's is Herod the Great. He was in power from about 41 BC - 1 BC. He is the Herod of Matthew 2. Who was in power when Jesus was born - to receive the wisemen from the East. And who put to death the children.

Herod the Great was married 10 times. Of his family, we see many times in the New Testament they appear.

First, Herod Philip, the first. He was the first husband of Herodias. Who was responsible for the death of John the Baptist. He is mentioned under the name of Philip. Matthew 14:3, Mark 6:17, Luke 3:19. He was the father of Salome.

Second Herod Antipas. He was the ruler of Galilee and Peraea. He was the second husband of Herodias. And consented to the death of John the Baptist.

He was also the Herod whom Pilate sent Jesus to trial. Luke 23:7.

Third, Herod Archelaus. He was ruler of Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea. He was a thoroughly bad ruler. And was deposed and banished. Matt. 2:22.

Fourth, Herod Philip II. He was the founder of Caesarea Phillipi. Which was named after him. Luke 3:1.

Fifth, Herod the Great and another son called Aristobulus.

He was murdered by his own father. But he had a son called Herod the Agrippa. This is the Herod of our present passage - Acts 2.

Sixth, to complete the list, we may note that the Herod Agrippa was the father of Agrippa II. Before whom Paul was examined - and made a famous speech in Acts 25 and 26.

Bernice, who appears with him.

Drusilla who was the wife of Felix, the governor.

When Paul was tried.

From the family history, it is seen that Herod Agrippa of this chapter, was a direct descendent of the Maccabees. He had been educated in Rome and he had cultivated the good graces of the Jewish people. And kept the law of the Jewish observances and for these reasons - he was popular with the people.

It is no doubt that he was further popular with the Orthodox Jews when he decided to take steps to attack the Christians and the church leaders.

James was a victim of Herod's scheme to win popularity.

Third, he pleased the crowd - V. 3. He had beheaded James and he proceeded further to vex the church. Saying that he was going to put Peter in prison.

Now those people who give way to one bold step in a sinful way, give Satan the advantage against them. Satan will tempt them in another way.

Herod was doing - what he was doing for popularity. He says, I'll give you some more if this would make him look better in the eyes of the people.

He did this because he saw that it pleased the Jews. They took pleasure in this persecution. And so for political reasons, Herod set out to lay hold on Peter.

Perhaps he expected to make a spectacle of him. James may have been a private death in the prison.

Now the next time, he would not deprive the masters of seeing the next execution. He would do this after the passover. This was also due to the fact that he did not want to run the risk of ancient custom. Which demanded that they release a criminal. Therefore Peter was going to be the criminal.

Fourth, Peter put in prison. V. 4 - When he had apprehended him, he had him locked up.

You know our Baptist forefathers, led by Roger Williams, and others - who stood for separation of church and state. Sometimes preachers were whipped, even put in jail in Chesterfield County. And Patrick Henry, living 50 miles away, came to the courthouse and roared out - for preaching the Gospel of God. Great God. And it wasn't long before the first amendment of the Constitution read - Congress shall make no laws respecting the establishment of religion, etc.

But our text here carries us back to the tragic day of persecution. The slaying of Peter would have been a great loss to the church, at this stage.

Remember, this is Peter, who was called from the fishing boat. Was with his Lord at the transfiguration, stood on the day of Pentecost and preached, and gave an invitation that lasted ^{LONGER} than his sermon.

Herod made sure that he would not get away. Four soldiers at a time to guard him - 16 altogether. The death sentence awaited. The only thing delayed the death to Peter was, that Herod would respect the observance of the passover. It was in the day of unleaven bread. These soldiers guarded him day and night. Each 3 hours. Normally a prisoner was chained by his right hand to his guard's left hand. But Peter was chained by both hands. To a guard on each side of him - while two remaining soldiers on duty kept watch of the door. Precautions could go no further. Peter did escape. The law said if the criminal escaped, the guard would suffer the penalty the prisoner was to suffer.

And now at this point, let us turn from Satan's power to another facet of this remarkable chapter.

II. SOVERIGN POWER

First, prayer. V. 5. Now when word reached the Christians, Peter was kept in prison. But prayer was made without ceasing by the church. They called a prayer meeting at Mary's house. They did not pray for a few minutes - but the Bible says they prayed without ceasing.

The church was simple and they were on their knees - united in intercession for their beloved Disciple.

Against this force of Herod and all of his forces, and Satan's forces were powerless.

It would have been much easier for Herod to have tried to control the winds of the Heavens. Than to try to bring the prayers of these people to naught. Mighty is the power of Satan - but he cannot prevent our prayers.

As someone has well said, Satan has never developed an anti-prayer missile.

He was mighty in Pharaoh. But the oppressed ones prayed. And their cry entered the ears of the Lord God, and their struggle for deliverance came at last.

The Devil was mighty as he set up an image and commanded the people to worship it. But the prayers of the people were answered.

The church needs so many things today. Did you know the best way to get them was by prayer. Here are two opposing forces - the hand of Herod with all the power of the Roman government behind it. And the little group of praying people at Mary's house.

I wonder what we would have done under similar circumstances. Probably you would have wired the governor, or called a senator, or someone to use their influence. Somebody that had high authority. But this little prayer group called upon the one who had more power than all the governments of the world.

The church needs many things today - but we need to come to prayer. If all of our people came together in one spirit, God would provide every need.

Now we notice that God didn't answer immediately when they first came together. The day passed and it was into the night. The faith of these Christians was being tested. They prayed without ceasing. They hung on to God. Hold on to God. If he does not answer - do not give up. Keep on praying.

When some missionaries went to inland China, 75 years ago - some of the natives called them foreign devils. The next day they had posters put up - saying they were giving them 10 days to leave. Those Christians united in prayer and God's protection was given.

A man visiting a home that was indifferent said, I'll have to go now - it is time for our prayer meeting on Wednesday evening. Prayer meeting said one of the members of the family. I hope you will grow up sometime and stop such foolish things.

And yet, if serious trouble would come to that indifferent heart - and come it will, they would want somebody to pray. Christians ought to get everything out of the way if your prayers are going to go up to God. And they prayed for one thing - Peter's release from prison.

I want to stop here for just a moment and give you something to think about. One of the saddest features of church life in modern times, is the decline of the prayer meeting. In many areas and in many churches it is virtually extinct. It was one of the most honorable of all the institutions in the early church. They witnessed, they organized their prayer meetings.

You look at the background of this prayer meeting that we are talking about tonight. Peter had been ceased - thrown in a dungeon. James had already been put to death by the sword. From Herod's point of view, Peter was one Christian most worth destroying. From the church's point of view, he was one leader that was most worth praying for and saving. And they gathered in the home of Mary.

These believers in Christ could do only one thing. Get in a Godly home, get on their knees, and pray to almighty God. Two contending parties, a handful of Christians, without political power and Rome against them.

The purpose of the prayer meeting, they met to pray. They didn't come together for a dynamic group discussion. They came together simply to pray. In church work, the hardest task of all is to get Christian people into some group primarily for prayer. This is one of the spiritual weaknesses. This is one of the ineffectual reasons of the present time. Some people don't mind talking about prayer or discussing it. But in the world at large, as well as in the church - we could have revival.

People invite people to all sorts of meetings. But this is something that young people can take part in, adults can take part in, elderly can take part in. If you remember that old Negro spiritual - it's me, Oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer. Lord, (teach us to pray.) I preached a series of sermons some time ago on The Lord's Prayer. The most challenging thing - and one of the most helpful things, that we have thought about.

Second, real security - V. 6. Then Herod, with all of his power - was powerless to destroy the peace of this righteous man. Peter was asleep. Think of this peace. Here is a prison - dark, filthy cell. Chained between two soldiers, two watching him. And then think of these 16 soldiers watching him from time to time. It was during the night. Peter must have been aware of his danger. He knew about the death of James - yet he sleeps. The dungeon, irons, the chains. Could not steal away his security - the real security.

Man to ch - go sleep - ask Peter for prayer help
"Now I lay me down to sleep"

Sleep is one of the choicest gifts of God. It is a great restorer. It helps us in times of sorrow - in times of care. It gives us new energy. And Peter was as comfortable as if he had been in one of the beds in the palace.

You remember, Peter had an approving conscience. Now a condemned conscience would have kept him awake. Peter knew that he was right - that he was doing the right kind of work. And there was no alarm in his heart.

Peter was at the point, as the American Baptist Publication Society had a seal one time, illustrates. It was an ox standing between a plow and an altar. The symbol meant the ox was ready to serve in pulling the plow. Or he was ready to die on the altar and be sacrificed. It was even so with Peter. I think Peter left everything in the hands of God.

Psalm 121:4 -

Third, the able assistance brought deliverance.

V. 7 - The angels of the Lord came down upon him and a light shined in the prison. And Peter felt someone touch him and tell him to rise very quickly.

Now Satan was powerless to prevent the visiting angel. The Bible says that angels came and ministered to his spirit. And I suppose in this story here, that we find more said about angels than anywhere else in the Bible.

Notice with which the angel was able to work - and do his work. Here were the prisons massive walls, there were the gates. The Roman soldiers and the chains. This was no problem for the angel.

Silently he entered the prison. He touched Peter and the chains fell off. There was no struggle - no effort. God's great agent was working silently.

This angel was doing to this man what he could not do himself. At the same time, Peter was commanded to do for himself what he could do.

V. 8 - Look what the angel told him to do. Gird himself, put your shoes on. Now Peter could not break chains that bound him. He could not get out of the grasp of the guards that held him.

But notice here that the angels will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. But God expects us to do something.

D. L. Moody had a meeting once. A man said we need \$5,000 for something. And at the same time - the man said, let's pray for the Lord to send us this money. Moody said, why should we bother and worry the Lord with this. Let us give it ourselves. He started an offering and soon all they needed had come in.

We need a lot of things in the church. In our building, and in our work. Every church does. Now God is not going to drop it down out of the skies - because God knows what you can do.

V. 9 - The angel requested him to follow and he did follow.

V. 10 - Here is the most mysterious thing, when they were past the first and the second ward, they came to the iron gate. It opened on its own accord and in a moment Peter found himself out on the street.

V. 11 - Peter is amazed at this mystery - that he is now set free. That he has been delivered. Peter seems to be abandoned by men and forgotten by God. And nothing in this world could have gotten him out of that dark dungeon. The soldiers were chained or either struck with a deep sleep and became his bed men. The angel aroused Peter from his slumber and the chains fell off of his hands. He was ordered to follow and put on his clothes, and was led to safety. It was very much like the Red Sea before Israel--it opened to them by an invisible power. The visible mystery - Isa. 61:1-2 - the power of God. Even the iron gates opened and closed shut after they passed through. Peter did not seem to know it was an angel that delivered him. And did not fully realize that he was out of prison until the angel was gone. And he collected himself and made his way to the house of prayer.

The mystery of it. Why did God permit James to be slain and Peter delivered. Why did he allow Herod to arrest James and slay him. And then arrest Peter and deliver him out of prison. There is no answer. If we think for a moment, we too have seen James slain when we thought that he should have been spared. We have seen men with fire and enthusiasm removed quickly, why did God permit it. But the mystery of God's government is something beyond our understanding. It reveals that if God could have delivered Peter - he could have delivered James. There is real comfort in that. But we have to wait for the mystery.

There are three things that take place in the mystery of God's sovereign power here.

First, the answer to prayer. These people have seen their human responsibility - praying earnestly without ceasing. With agony. And it was a real prayer. Therefore, our battle against the enemies of the church can best be fought with this reference. Peter's trial gave them time for prayer. Whereas James was hurried off so suddenly and there was no time for prayer. They were particular in their prayers. They remembered Stephen, and they remembered James. If this would happen to their beloved friend.

Another thing to note, it was the very night of his execution. Also, this added to the mystery of God's sovereign power. It was the very night before Herod planned to put him to death. They had tried to get Peter released from prison, through normal channels. But God comes in, Deut. 32:36, when Isaac is bound upon the altar and the knife is in the hand ready to slay - the Lord will provide.

He was bound with chains and locked between two soldiers. No visible way of escape. Then there was just one step to death. He wasn't expecting deliverance at that moment. The other mysterious thing - the angels were sent.

And the angels ministered to him. V. 12-17. Peter made his way to the house where the Christians were praying.

So it is, that when we have been delivered, we ought to seek God's house and God's people. And when God makes some great deliverance in your life - raising you up from some illness or some sickness, or helping you through some sorrow, or giving you the answer to some burden. The first place you ought to go - I think you ought to seek your presence with God's people. But more often, people are prone to go their own way. And forget how God has given deliverance. He knocked at the door and a slave girl name Rhoda came to the door. She was so glad and excited - she forgot to even open the door. She ran and told her group, that Peter was out of jail and standing outside the house.

Now he continued knocking - V. 16.

They opened up the door and thank God - and they thanked God and praised God for the answered prayer. That was a sweet and wonderful surprise.

V. 17 - It is interesting how Peter stood there and told those friends - you go now and tell these things unto James. James must have been one of the key leaders there in Jerusalem. And then the Bible says that Peter slipped away into another place. And went out to another surrounding village to finish out the night and to find a place of safety until dawn.

Fourth, judgement - V. 18-23.

V. 18 - When daybreak arrived, there was no small stir among the soldiers. What had become of Peter. That was the question that everyone was asking. What happened to this man - where is he.

V. 19 It says Herod commanded the keepers of the prison to be put to death. And he went back to Caesarea. Normally a prisoner was chained to his guards and Peter was chained to two. And these men were on duty and every precaution had been taken. They could go no further. Now the law said if a criminal escapes - his guards should suffer the same penalty as the prisoner would have suffered. And so they carried out the death penalty at the command of Herod and there was swift judgement upon these guards.

V. 20 Herod had somewhat a problem of Tyre and Sidon. And they depended upon the country he ruled in to help them in accord. So he made a decision that he was going to show his great power on a special day.

V. 21 He set aside a day that Herod would have a big celebration - it was going to be a great big feast. And Herod set this all up and made an oration.

V. 22 The people said this is the voice of ^A God - not of a man.

Herod's death was nearer than Simon Peter's. At this great commeration in Caesarea, some say that the city was crowded. And on this special day they went to the theatre. That theatre was erected by his grandfather who had murdered many innocents. And now the grandson was there who had murdered an Apostle. The stone seats rising up in a great semi-circle, tier above tier, were covered with exciting multitudes. The king came in clothed in magnificent robes. They have excavated that theatre, and today you can see the stones and the tiers - the rows of seats where the people sat. And you can see the stage right where the king came in - clothed in a magnificent robe which was silver and was costly brilliant material. They say that - on that day as the sun's rays fell upon the king, the eyes of the beholders were dazzled with the brightness which surrounded him.

The voices from the crowd exclaimed that here was something divine.

And when he spoke and made an oration to the people, they gave great shouts.

It is the voice of a God and not of a man.

I guess a good way to compare this oration would be to some of the speeches ^{extended, Harangued, speeches} that are made. People emotionally excited - thinking that he is some kind of a God or leader with unusual power.

Hitler Murderer Castro

To get the picture - a great celebration - a great feast. And Herod is just 54 years old. In the ^{Seventh} fourth year of his reign, Entered that theatre clothed with the splendor of riches. And Josephus said he saw an owl perch high over his head on a cord.

V. 23 - at that same moment, he is ceased with violent pain. And the Scripture here tells of the awful suffering of Herod. Josephus said there were five days of torture. His body was eaten by worms like a piece of rotten wood. Eaten with worms while he was alive.

God's soverign judgement was swift, complete, and payday someday had come to Herod. He was reaping what he had sown. And the worms crawled over him.

Even though Herod at that time had begun to ^{built} encompass Jerusalem with a wall, for protection - and it would have been hard for the Romans to take seige of it. But his death which happened in Caesarea, prevented him from completing it.

Fifth, the unfailing word - V. 24-25.

Now the soverign power of our God in missions - to keep it alive. It said here the word multiplied. What a reaction to the death of James, the imprisonment of Peter.

The death of Herod. Divine power brought great growth. But the word of God multiplied and the work prospered. That is, it seemed to grow everywhere. Missions movement among the Gentiles.

Herod had done his best to crush the work. But here at the same time, Barnabas and Saul were getting ready to move out into the world with missions.

This leads us to know that the opposition to power - God will ultimately defeat. Here are three men down the road - they have 300 miles before they reach Antioch. Barnabas, Paul, and Mark, Herod is dead - but the word of God is living. Thank God, that he who opens the door, shuts another. And that prayer is still one of our great resources and that angels still minister, and God's word will grow wherever it is planted in the world.

Nothing can stop the word of God

It is dangerous to oppose God's work. Prayer changes things.

God never leaves us. Angels come.

God needs every Christian in his service.

Let me close with this thought - what if Peter had said to the angels. Wait awhile. You go on and let me sleep. Or what if he had said, it is no use, there are 16 soldiers out there. And there are three armed gates - I can't get out of this prison.

Peter would never have been free.

So it is tonight, when God smites men - they ought to wake up. They ought to

turn to Christ.

There are some people who are being touched tonight who are saying - let me go on in my sin. And they will come to the end of their way lost. God expects us to do our part. Put his shoes on and his coat on. And he had to move.

God expects you to get up and confess with your mouth. And to resolve in your heart and to take action in the church. He expects you publicly to confess your sins. And take a definite stand on the side of Christ.

Remember someday the judgement will smite you as it did Herod. Your doom will then take place and Hell will await you.

James 2:13

2 James - one sweet man - fair - honest -
one no use for the Galilean - Christed, lied, stole - make #

newspaper - wrote article - negated people honest - far etc

evil farmer chopped article -

watched cotton crop - his price too good -

Took article to Editor - told you & God stung -

editor printed dishonest farmer's letter & closed

"God doesn't close his accounts in October"

Don't think judge forgot because of the delay's judgement -