

Introduction

1. I love stories—both real and imagined—that have simple plots that are easy to follow
2. I never saw the TV series **Lost** which was broadcast between 2004-10
  - a. However, I remember many of my co-workers were hooked and every week after it was broadcast, I'd hear about it at work the next day; it was like an addiction for many
  - b. It lasted for six seasons, was nominated for over 54 awards, won something like 10, including best network television show five different times
  - c. However, one of the things I often heard was that it was complicated and hard to follow with the mysterious back story, the plot twists, the flashbacks, forward flashes, and even something called a flash-sideways
  - d. I also remember the controversy and major disappointment by many after the final two-hour episode failed to resolve so many of the questions people had—believe it or not, it's still debated today and the most recent article I saw trying to explain the ending was published just last year!
  - e. Well, a few months ago I came across it on Amazon Prime and decided to make it my go-to series while I do my nightly stretching and I just watched the final episode a few weeks ago
  - f. Let me just say, my head still hurts; I'm still confused; I am personally "lost" myself; and I should have listened to Dave Mahlin when he said the final would leave me without answers
3. As I said initially, I much prefer stories and events with simple plots and today's passage is about as simple as it gets:
  - a. Dude attacks the Church by killing James and arresting Peter
  - b. The Lord rescues Peter
  - c. The Lord kills the dude

A. King Herod attacks the Church (READ 12:1-4)

1. Who was Herod?
  - a. His official name was Herod Agrippa I and he was king of Judea from AD 41 to 44
  - b. He was the grandson of Herod the Great, who was king of Judea when Jesus was born and the one who ordered the massacre of all the male babies two years and younger in and around Bethlehem
  - c. He was Jewish and well-liked by the Jews:
    - 1) He was known for his public displays of piety and commitment to the OT Law, including bringing his own sacrifices to the Temple and reading of the Law in the synagogues; but most of it was for show because when he was outside Jerusalem his lifestyle was no different than any other Roman
    - 2) He was also well-liked by the Jews for his skills in mediation between the Romans and the Jews and for advancing Jewish policies—one example was when the Roman Emperor Caligula decided he was a god and ordered that statues of himself be put up in all the religious temples, including Jewish synagogues and even the Temple in Jerusalem; Herod was able to convince him not to proceed
    - 3) He was essentially a cunning and masterful politician which accounted for his swift rise to power and his popularity

2. When we meet Herod in our passage today, we learn that he has picked up where Saul left off: persecuting the Church:
  - a. He arrested some of the Christians from the Church in Jerusalem and Luke informs us that his purpose was **“to mistreat [or harm] them”**
  - b. One of those he arrested was James, the brother of John, whom he **“put to death with the sword”** (a form of Roman execution)
  - c. When he saw how much it **“pleased the Jews”** he proceeded to arrest Peter as well
  - d. His plan was to kill him, but he wanted to wait until after Passover, so he had Peter confined to prison:
    - 1) This was purely a political move on Herod’s part
    - 2) During the week between the feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover, Jerusalem was overwhelmed with visitors
    - 3) Had Herod executed Peter in the midst of such a massive celebration, it likely would have gone unnoticed by anyone other than the Church
    - 4) He preferred to make Peter’s execution a grand spectacle and gain himself some political capital among the Jews
    - 5) So, he planned to wait until after the festival was done so he could **“bring him out before the people”**
3. Takeaways:
  - a. Government sponsored persecution of believers has been a part of the Church’s history since the beginning:
    - 1) Most of the persecution we see against the Church in the book of Acts comes from the Jewish leaders, and subsequently the Jewish populace
    - 2) However, here we see it coming from the highest-ranking government official in Judea
    - 3) Unfortunately, Herod’s persecution of believers was simply a foreshadowing of the kind of government sponsored persecution that the Church has faced throughout its history, and will continue to face until Christ returns:
      - a) The Roman Empire persecuted Christians for the first 300 years
      - b) Then it was the Persian Empire followed by the Byzantine Empire who systematically persecuted Christians up through the Middle Ages
      - c) In the early 1600s, Christianity was outlawed in Japan and for the next 200 years Christians had to meet secretly to worship
      - d) It was similar in China in the 1700s when they banned Christianity for almost a century
      - e) The Church has faced the same thing throughout modern history from the governments of many European countries, the former Soviet Union, China, North Korea, and a host of Muslim countries
      - f) We’ve been fortunate here in the U.S., but things are changing and we’re in the midst of a battle:
        - We have local governments that have passed laws restricting the rights of Christian business owners to operate their businesses based on their faith
        - We have a current federal administration that is bent on forcing Christian organizations, schools and businesses to conform to unbiblical practices and policies, removing long standing religious exemptions, and even threatening them with sanctions if they don’t comply

- Fortunately, we have some states that have pushed back and passed laws attempting to preserve our religious liberties, but we have a federal government pushing back against these laws
- b. We see something else in this passage, and that's the political motivation that sometimes underlies government sponsored persecution:
- 1) Herod was pious which means that the religious convictions and practices he publicly subscribed to were simply a means to maintain his support among the Jews
  - 2) As such, it was unlikely that he went after believers for religious reasons
  - 3) Rather, Luke makes it clear that his motivation in persecuting believers was that it pleased the largest segment of the population (the Jews); it was a political move to appease the masses
  - 4) Do you think any of the plans or laws we see being crafted today that seem specifically targeted at Christian organizations, churches, schools and businesses (especially related to the LGBTQ agenda) have a political motivation? I'll leave that for you to decide

<p>B. The Lord rescues Peter (READ 12:5-19)</p>
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1. What we have here is very similar to what happened in Acts 5 when the Apostles were arrested and an angel supernaturally rescued them from prison
2. There are a number of things I find fascinating about these verses:
  - a. First, the Church responds exactly as it should; look at v. 5: they began to pray "**fervently**":
    - 1) This is a theme that comes up frequently in Acts; in fact, prayer is mentioned some 29 times
    - 2) What's interesting about this fact is that only 1/3 of these instances involve individual prayer; TWO THIRDS involve at least two or more people praying together, often entire groups or the Church as a whole
    - 3) This is exactly what we see here—look at verse 12
    - 4) Takeaway: I believe this is one area where the American Church struggles; it's not that we don't pray as individual Christians, but how often do we pray together?
  - b. Another thing I find fascinating is what we see in v. 6: when the angel arrives, he finds Peter sleeping!
    - 1) Remember, James had just been put to death so Peter had to at least suspect that Herod planned the same fate for him
    - 2) And this wasn't just the head-nods or a bit of dozing off; he was full on sound asleep:
      - a) 1<sup>st</sup> century prison cells were dark, damp, cold and dreary—they didn't come with skylights and windows and comfortable cots
      - b) Yet, the light that accompanied the angel wasn't enough to wake him (I have trouble sleeping when the kids leave the night light on in their bathroom)
      - c) And, it took more to wake Peter than simply calling his name:

<p>Dad waking me up every morning by tickling my ear</p>
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- The word Luke used to describe how the angel woke Peter up implies that it wasn't a gentle nudge

- It's the word often translated as "smite" or "smote" and it often implies heavy blows, often causing damage
  - Now, obviously Luke is not describing the angel delivering a body blow to Peter's side and cracking a rib
  - But, Peter was sleeping so soundly that the angel literally had to rouse him from sleep by poking him in the side
- 3) What does this tell us about Peter's sense of peace at this moment?
  - 4) Takeaway: do we exhibit the same kind of peace and confidence that Peter did when we are faced with adversity or persecution?
- c. One final thing I want to point out is the Church's initial reaction to Peter's escape:
- 1) Look back at vs. 13-15 (READ)
  - 2) When Peter shows up and the servant girl announces it to the rest of the group, they don't respond with awe or amazement—they tell he she's crazy: "**You are out of your mind!**" and insist that it couldn't be Peter and must be his angel instead
  - 3) Remember, they are right in the middle of praying for Peter!
    - This makes me wonder, What were they praying for?
    - We could assume they were praying that God would save Peter from the fate that James suffered
    - If so, why were they so reluctant to believe that God would answer their prayers by miraculously delivering Peter, especially in light of the fact that an angel had done that very thing before!
  - 4) Takeaway: are we just as reluctant to believe that God will supernaturally answer our prayers? Are we prone to not believe it when He does?

<p>C. The Lord kills Herod (READ 12:20-25)</p>
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1. At first glance, you might wonder why Luke would include these next four verses about the death of Herod:
  - a. He doesn't directly or even indirectly associate it with Peter's arrest or escape
  - b. In fact, the event takes place at a different time (about five months later according to Josephus), in a different city (Caesarea), with a different group of people (the people of Tyre and Sidon), and doesn't involve the Church at all
  - c. Essentially, the people of Tyre and Sidon had fallen out of favor with Herod who provided them with food and they came to him seeking reconciliation
  - d. He heard their plea and on the day when he began his speech to deliver his decision to them, they began to chant and repeatedly called him a god (something ascribed to Roman emperors but a no-no for a Jewish king)
  - e. And, because he refused to denounce their claims and give glory to God, an angel struck him, he was eaten by worms, and he died (Josephus also records that his death was attributed to not "rebuking the impious remarks" and that he developed severe stomach pains that lasted for five days before he died)
2. So, why would Luke include this account of Herod's death:

- a. Clearly, even though not saying so directly, Luke saw a link between Herod's death and his persecution of the Church, including the killing of James and Peter's arrest
  - b. This is supported by the way Luke ends this section with a contrasting statement; look again at verses 24-25: Herod was eaten by words and died but the Word of God continued to grow and be multiplied (24) and the Church continued on with its mission (25)
  - c. In other words, Herod was foolish enough to think he could put an end to the Church, but God responded by removing him
3. Takeaway: nothing can stand in the way of God accomplishing His redemptive plan and mission for the Church?
- a. We've seen religious leaders arrest, threaten, beat the Apostles—but it simply embolden them
  - b. We've seen them murder Stephen, but it led to the Church taking the Gospel outside Jerusalem
  - c. We've seen Saul try to wipe out the Church, but Jesus turned him into His own useful instrument to grow the Church
  - d. And we see Herod, a government official, embark on a mission to destroy God's work only to be eliminated himself
  - e. God will not let anything, or anyone, stand in His way of accomplishing His redemptive plan