

State Oppression = Multiplying Word

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[0 : 0 0] Well, do you take your Bibles and let's turn together to Acts chapter 12. Acts chapter 12, page 920, if you have one of the church visitors' Bibles.

And we're going to read together pretty much the whole chapter. About that time, Herod the King laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.

He killed James, the brother of John, with a sword. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of unleavened bread.

when he'd seized him he put him in prison delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him intending after the passover to bring him out to the people so peter was kept in prison but earnest prayer for him was made to god by the church now when herod was about to bring him out on that very night peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains and centuries before the door regarding the prison and behold an angel of the lord stood next to him and a light shone in the cell he struck peter on the side and woke him saying get up quickly and the chains fell off his hands and the angel said to him dress yourself put on your sandals and he did so and he said to him wrap your cloak around you follow me he went out and followed him didn't know what was being done by the angel was real but thought he was seeing a vision when they passed the first and the second guard they came to the iron gate leading into the city it opened for them of its own accord and they went out and went along the street and immediately the angel left him when peter came to himself he said now i am sure that the lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of herod and from all that the jewish people were expecting when he realized this he went to the house of mary the mother of john whose other name was mark where many were gathered together and were praying and when he knocked at the door of the gate where a servant girl named ron roda came to answer recognizing peter's voice in her joy she didn't even open the gate but ran in and reported that peter was standing at the gate they said to her you're out of your mind but she kept insisting that it was so and they kept saying it's his angel but peter continued knocking and when they opened they saw him and were amazed but motioning to them with his hand to be silent he described to them how the lord had brought him out of the prison and he said tell these things to james and to the brothers and then he departed and went to another place now when day came there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of peter and after herod's search for him and didn't find him he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death and he went down from judea to caesarea to spend time there now herod was angry with the people of tyre and sidon and they came to him with one accord and having persuaded blastus the king's chamberlain they asked for peace because their country depended on the king's country for food on a point today herod put on his royal robes took his seat upon the throne and delivered an oration to them and the people were shouting the voice of a god not a man immediately an angel of the lord struck him down because he did not give god the glory and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last but the word of god increased and multiplied amen may god bless to us his word well please do have acts chapter 12 open in front of you as we spend a few moments together looking at this and we couldn't have a better passage tonight after what isaac has shared with us my title for the

evening state oppression equals multiplying words and isaac has given the most vivid illustration hasn't he of that reality so this is a word for us this evening so please do have it open in front of us now it's not a thing to say isn't it but those in authority those who govern they wield considerable power and it's power that ought to be used for the promotion of what is right and good and the restraint of what is wrong and evil but of course frequently that is not what those in authority do look back through history look around the world today look at india today and you see governments authorities dictatorships rule harshly and in particular work to make life difficult for the christian church sometimes indeed often there is outright persecution and we've heard that tonight and since the very beginning the church has faced persecution and it continues to do so today it will do until the very end we feel here in glasgow in scotland today the attitude of the authorities to the christian church is certainly not as favorable as it once was increasingly christian morality is seen as not only a bit dated but dangerous how do we think about that how do we feel about it how ought we to think about it how ought we to feel about it we just heard this evening from isaac and the very real and present threats to the church in india the very real opposition from the government itself from the threat of hindu nationalism this is not an issue restricted to the early days of the church in acts chapter 12 this is live this is today so how do we counsel our brothers and sisters in india how do we counsel other christians around the world for whom the authorities at present are a real danger and threat to their lives how do we prepare ourselves for what may come 10 years 20 years 30 years down the line here and this passage it brings great comfort to the church in every age because this passage as well as showing us the limits of human power the limits of human authorities also shows us the unlimited power of god the one that we serve look again at the very end of our passage the last part of verse 34 23 and verse 24 which i think sums up the big message of the passage look what it says herod was eaten by worms and breathed as last but the word of god increased and multiplied herod the one who shows himself to be firmly against the lord and his church who does his level best to intimidate and frighten the church to stop it in his tracks finds himself for sure that at every turn and is struck down dead in the middle of his pomp and ceremony and the church the progress of the gospel is unhindered the word of god increased and multiplied in the face of herod's efforts to destroy it john stott

[8 : 50] summarizes it this way the chapter opens with james dead peter in prison and herod triumphing it closes with herod dead peter free and the word of god triumphing acts is a book which displays for us in the most vivid terms it displays for us the unstoppable spread of the gospel luke has shown us time and time again through his account that nothing is able to stop the word of god nothing is able to stop what god has determined to do the lord is building his church and nothing nothing whatsoever can stop it not even according to chapter 12 not even the authorities not even the power of the state can stop the increase of the word of god so this is a chapter to encourage you and i to encourage isaac and glory as they go back to india as they feel the real pressure from the authorities we feel it too you can ask for a better illustration of this passage than what isaac has shared the lord has preserved the work in india despite fierce opposition from the government it's also a timely chapter in the unfolding narrative of the book of acts but you may wonder why it's here at all it seems to get in the way of the story doesn't it look at the very end of chapter 11 and verse 30 remember things are taking place in antioch and the brothers there in antioch have sent a gift and they did it verse 30 they did it so sending it to the elders by the hand of barnabas and saul now look on to the very end of chapter 12 so skip over most of herod and peter's story and look to the very last verse verse 25 and barnabas and saul returned from jerusalem when they completed their service bringing with them john whose other name was mark so you could remove the rest of chapter 12 and not skip a beat in terms of the narrative about the church up there in antioch from the end of chapter 11 to the start of chapter 13 you could take chapter 12 out and not miss a beat in the story why interrupt it why break that story with the goings on here in jerusalem with herod and peter luke isn't doing it to keep a chronological count look at the very start of chapter 12 he says about that time so it was around the same it wasn't chronological it was just around the same sort of time so why mention this incident at this point well i think luke places this account here in order to remind us the readers of the realities of a growing gospel movement the realities that a growing gospel church faces remember much of the earlier chapters and acts the early church was established in jerusalem there was lots of opposition persecution alongside great growth huge growth but lots of opposition and then we began to see the gospel breaking out this continued to grow from jerusalem just as the lord said it would and go into judea and samaria and breaking into gentile territory we saw that last time in antioch it's going to the ends of the earth and the focus from chapter 13 onward is the apostle paul he goes on his missionary journeys

deeper and deeper into the gentile world taking the gospel further and further and this reminder here in chapter 12 of the real opposition but ultimate success of the gospel that prepares us for what is to come in chapter 13 and onwards yes terrible persecution may come will come even from the full power of the state but it cannot stop the gospel that's why this chapter is here and you see that again and again don't you with the apostle paul great growth lots of opposition well we'll look at this in two stages this chapter as we get into the details so firstly looking at verses 1 to 19 we see that earthly rulers will ultimately be defeated in their attempt to destroy Christ's church herod the king here verse 1 he sought to deal a heavy blow on the early church in

Jerusalem by targeting two of its key leaders now herod had quite a pedigree when it came to opposing the lord and his people his grandfather was herod the great remember he was the one responsible for the deaths of all the young males in Bethlehem and the surrounding areas in the bid to kill the baby lord jesus that was this herod's grandfather and then his uncle was herod the tetrarch of galilee he was the one who had john the baptist beheaded so not only did this herod king herod here did he have a visceral hatred of the lord jesus and his people running through his veins but it also served his political ends to seek to destroy the church you see herod as a puppet king to the roman empire he needed to do all that he could to carry favor with the jews in jerusalem and one way to do that was to dismantle the growing christian community just look at the response that herod gets once he is seen to james the brother of john look at verse three he saw that it pleased the jews great thought herod to himself i'm on the right track here i'll proceed and arrest peter as well this was a very deliberate carefully targeted campaign of herod's to destroy the church to strike fear into the hearts of the young christians across the city and i'm sure that he succeeded in doing just that can you imagine how it would have felt to be a follower of jesus then yes you've heard the lord jesus and his teaching about suffering for him you've heard about taking up your cross daily you've seen the public execution of stephen back in chapter eight you've seen friends of yours scatter for fear of their lives and you've begun to find your feet again only for herod the king to take and behead one of your key leaders james he's gone imagine how that would have felt terrifying and the next thing you hear is that he's taken peter too he's been thrown into prison under the titus of security four squads of soldiers guarding just one man waiting for the passover to be complete so that he can be brought out to the people and given the fate of james it seems more than likely that herod intends to bring him out to the people not in order to try him but to execute him things look very bleak indeed don't they by the end of verse four if you're a christian living in jerusalem you're fearing for your life the full power of the state with its prisons and arm guards and execution squads it's pretty intimidating and frightening isn't it what chance has the church got in the face of that what chance do christians across the globe today have in the face of state authorities that are determined to destroy them we'll look at verse five peter was kept in prison but earnest prayer was made for him to god by the church and that seems to an outsider such a pathetic response doesn't it a prayer meeting really in response

to the authorities and all their power their swords you wield prayer but what a power it is we pray not some impotent god but to the sovereign lord of all creation and i wonder the content of their prayers were not told but likely it took a very similar shape to the one uttered by the Jerusalem church back in chapter four and the prayer meeting then it comes after great pressure exerted by the authorities on the church and an arrest of Peter just flick back to chapter four just a few pages to see what the church was praying back then page 912 verse 23 so Peter's been dragged in front of the authorities totally humiliated but verse 23 when they were released they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them and when they heard it they lifted their voices together to God and said sovereign

Lord who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them who through the mouth of our father David your servant said by the Holy Spirit why did the Gentiles rage and the people's plot in vain the kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed for truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed both Herod and Pontius Pilate along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel to do whatever your hand and your plan have predestined to take place and now Lord look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness while you stretch out your hand to heal and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus well they prayed then didn't they they prayed to the

[20 : 19] Lord who alone is sovereign and they pray in the face of the kings of the earth setting themselves against the Lord and against his anointed they pray or do they pray that their word would continue to be spoken with boldness so they pray for the progress of the gospel in the face of this persecution and no doubt the believers here in chapter 12 were praying a similar prayer and their prayer wasn't a last resort for the church it's the only resort for the church and what a privilege to know that no matter what the state might seek to do no matter what the power the authority seek to exert the pressure they put on the church we pray to the one who is sovereign the one who does sit in the heavens the one who laughs at the kings of this world who briefly struts across the stage of history and are gone that's the

God we pray to that's the God they were praying to and what a wonderful answer to prayer this earnestly praying praying praying group of believers receive all the pressure and the power of Herod comes to nothing as his plans are wonderfully thwarted by the Lord his attempts to silence and squash the church are turned on their head in the most wonderful way look at verse six now when Herod was about to bring him out on that very night now when you hear those words you know something astonishing is about to unfold probably it reminds of some of those key moments in the history of God's people think about Esther chapter six we were looking at that in the autumn Mordecai destined for the gallows the very next day but that very night the king couldn't sleep everything turned on its head through the sovereign hand of the

Lord and here again in Acts chapter 12 that very night the Lord works a wonderful deliverance which from a human perspective looks totally impossible Luke's very careful here to pile up the details about the miraculous intervention that would be needed to free Peter look at all the guards the chains and it's a wonderful reminder as an aside isn't it to see Peter here in prison we're hearing this morning about his betrayal but what a wonderful reminder of God's grace Peter no longer scorning the Lord and the cross but willing to surrender to it and he's in prison again and he sat in his cell between two soldiers rather than the usual one he's got two chains on him not one and in addition there's four squads of soldiers patrolling outside and amazingly

Peter sound asleep I'm not sure I would be stuck between two Roman soldiers knowing that the following morning I was likely to be executed but Peter's asleep only to be woken by an angel of the Lord he wakes him up he tells him get up the chains fall off him out they walk Peter cannot comprehend what's going on can he look at verse nine he didn't think it was real he thought he was dreaming but on they go past the first and the second guard the door to the prison springs open and Peter finds himself a free man walking the streets and the angel departs Peter gathers himself he looks around this wasn't a dream look at verse 11 when Peter came to himself he said now I'm sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the

Jewish people were expecting it's all so effortless for the Lord isn't it there's no drama no battles an angel appears and says to Peter let's go and out they walk and we ought not to be surprised the God Peter serves is the God that you and I serve he is the sovereign Lord over the universe he can raise the dead he can spring a man out of jail in order to further his plans and his purposes nothing will stop the Lord from doing just plans nothing was going to stop the gospel going to the ends of the earth and that meant the survival of Peter if that required his miraculous release from prison then the Lord ensured it happened we ought not to be surprised that the Lord can do this sort of thing the early church they were certainly surprised weren't they they can barely believe it it's a bit of a comical exchange isn't it look at verse 12 and following

[25 : 49] Peter's gathered himself he's worked out where he is and he heads to Mary's house where there's a gathering of believers at prayer and Peter knocks on the door he must have said hello because the girl inside Rhoda she recognizes his voice she's so excited she forgets to open the door and so she runs back tells the others and the good news that the prayers have been answered you can almost imagine that young Rhoda struggling to get the words up Peter he's outside I can't believe it Rhoda don't be so ridiculous be quiet you're out of your mind no no insists Rhoda it's him it's really him meanwhile Peter's still banging away eventually they open the door and there's great joy and excitement so much so that Peter has to shush them down be quiet don't alert the authorities

I'm here listen to what's happened hear how the Lord has brought me out of prison this was all the Lord's doing look at verse 17 Peter was so clear about that wasn't he the Lord has brought him out of prison and all the details in Luke's narrative show us so clearly that the Lord delivered him from the hands of Herod Herod had been thwarted the Lord had preserved his servant Peter for the sake of his gospel it is a wonderful deliverance isn't it meanwhile verse 18 there's utter pandemonium at the prison you can imagine the terror those soldiers felt they had let Peter slip from under their noses there could only be one outcome for them verse 19 they're put to death because

Peter slipped away and Herod defeated humiliated well he dips out the limelight and heads to the holiday house in Caesarea and we'll see his ultimate fate sealed in the next section but before we move on let's just pause to consider the implications of this remarkable delivery this remarkable deliverance that Peter enjoyed for the church today and it can't be can it it can't be that God will deliver all his people from persecution at the hands of the authorities that isn't the implication here it certainly wasn't the case for James was it verse 2 he was killed and so many Christians have down through the years lost their lives to Christ Christians today are being martyred for the gospel because they love

Jesus but God can deliver his people and he will deliver his people in this world for the sake of his gospel in his plans in God's providence it was Peter not James that he required for the continued work of the gospel and God will not allow the building of his church to be hindered not by anyone not even by the powerful looking rulers of this world earthly rulers will ultimately be defeated in their attempts to destroy Christ church they will not succeed in their attempts to squash the church or stop it growing just look at the massive growth in the Chinese church just look at the outcome of this incident here look on to verse 24 but the word of God increased and multiplies so we can take great comfort great confidence that

God's church will never be destroyed we can know that he is powerful to protect and preserve his most precious treasure his church his gospel state opposition it will not crush the church the word will multiply we've seen that we've heard it tonight haven't we from Isaac great opposition great growth the authorities will not succeed in stopping the growth of the gospel well there's our first points from this passage but what of those who oppose Christ and his church what becomes of Herod well here's our second and final point earthly rulers will ultimately be destroyed in their attempts to deify self verse 20 to 23 now here in verse 20 we meet

[31 : 15] Herod at some later stage and he's in the middle of trade negotiations which seem to be frustrating in no end I think we've got an idea what that might feel like negotiating with political neighbours Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon these were self governing cities in the region of Syria to the west and north of Herod's jurisdiction they were trading partners you can see at the end of verse 20 that they depended on Herod for certain foods and I suppose they were seeking better rates on imports or something like that anyway it seems that things have come to a bit of a head and a delegation have secured an audience with Herod to make their plea and on the appointed day verse 21 Herod dressed himself in his finest royal robes and he struts in takes his seat on the throne and delivered an oration to them

I bet they were delighted and the people what were they shouting the voice of God and not a man he must have put on quite a show hasn't he for the people to be shouting that the historian Josephus also records this moment and he notes that the king's flatterers were astonished at the radiance of his silver robe when it was touched by the first rays of the rising sun and addressed him as a god crying out be gracious to us up until now we've been revered you as a human being but now we confess you to be more than mortal nature so the people were exalting Herod do you see what he was up to Herod was arrogantly asserting himself presenting himself in such grandeur and pomp that the people who were there deified him worshipped him your god and he made no effort at all to stop them he enjoyed the glory that was coming his way no doubt that was the intended effect of all his pomp and ceremony and it was this attitude this glorifying of self that brought about his downfall look at what happens next immediately an angel of the lord struck him down because he did not give god the glory he had brought glory upon himself not god that is why he struck down by an angel of the lord it was this fundamental attitude that led to his terrible actions towards the church his persecution of their leaders and he doesn't get away with it not only are his efforts to stop the church thwarted but his attempts to deify self lead only to his destruction he had forgotten hadn't he that there was a higher throne there was a greater king to whom all the kings of this earth will one day have to reckon with and that is a reality that the bible affirms over and over again isn't it we've seen in recent months some of the vivid accounts from the old testament speaking to this reality empires come and they go kings come and kings go we've seen it in the book of

Daniel we've seen it in the book of Esther the most powerful kings and kingdoms in this world will in the end turn to dust they'll amount to nothing the most powerful corporations will one day be no longer Apple Google Amazon one day will be a distant memory they will collapse the United States of America the European Union they will in the end amount to nothing in the face of the everlasting kingdom of God these are but footnotes but they do feel very real and intimidating to us at the moment don't they we feel it but from God's perspective they are in the end trivial we sung from Psalm 2 earlier the king the great king of the earth he reigns over all these kings and in the end he will have the last laugh the most powerful rulers of this day will in the end be destroyed in their attempts to deify self and defy

God they won't outlast him there is a day coming when they will have to be called to account and for Herod well Herod did not give God the glory and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last but the word of God increased and multiplied Herod despite all his power and pride could not stand in the way of the gospel no earthly ruler today can stand in the way of the gospel so let's encourage one another to take God's perspective on the very real the very frightening suffering and opposition that the church faces today it was intimidating and frightening for Peter for the early church of course it was it remains so today when the full weight of the authorities are arrayed against the church but

God is ultimately sovereign and he will not have anyone any institution stand in the way of the gospel and so we can pray confidently to that end we can pray that the gospel would grow in North India we can pray that the gospel will grow here despite opposition we can pray that with confidence because he will not have his church thwarted he will hear such prayers and he will protect his people to that end the lord is establishing his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it that is the message of acts chapter 12 well let's pray our father god would you give us courage in the face of opposition from the authorities give us the grace to withstand to stand firm when the state knocks on the door and would your gospel grow and grow so that many across this globe will call upon you as lord and savior so help us help us to be your church and to be faithful we ask in Jesus name amen