

20. The Unchained Melody of the Gospel

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] It's all about, not the unchanged melody, as the sheet says, but the unchained melody of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first puzzle for us today, I guess, in looking at this chapter, is to ask the question, why is this chapter here? Not just why is it here at all, but why is it here, as it were, interrupting the flow of Luke's story that we saw last time, showed us that the initiative from the early church had moved from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Verse 30, the last verse of chapter 11, tells us that Peter and Barnabas were heading off from Antioch to Jerusalem on their mission of aid. And if you look at the very last verse of chapter 12, verse 25, you'll see it tells us they returned from Jerusalem, having completed that particular service.

So we have this chapter about Peter and Herod stuck in between there, of two verses that seem to go together. So what's it doing there? Well, the answer lies in keeping our eye on the big picture of the story that Luke is unfolding to us.

The program for his book is set out back in chapter 1, verse 8, you'll remember, where he repeats to us Jesus Christ's own words about his mission, that it was to begin first in Jerusalem, then it was to go to all Judea and Samaria, and then finally into all the world.

[1 : 36] If you look back to chapter 9, verse 31, you'll see one of Luke's little marker statements that sums up the completion of stage 2 of that plan. He tells us there that the church was multiplying all around Judea and Samaria.

The church throughout all Judea and Samaria had peace and was being built up, and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it was multiplied. And he's just told us about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus there, and the scene is being set, therefore, for the last great stage, stage 3, the mission into all the world, when, as Paul the Apostle, Saul of Tarsus will assume the mantle of the chief apostle to the Gentiles.

Now, that great missionary expansion begins in earnest in Acts chapter 13, with Paul and Barnabas going off on their first missionary journey. And this whole section in between, verse 32 of chapter 9, right to the end of chapter 12, is what prepares the way for that final stage.

And what Luke is showing us is that the march of this gospel, the plan and the program of Jesus, cannot ever be stopped.

It can't be bound by anything. The word of Christ is truly the unchained melody that's going to become the song of all the nations of the world.

[3 : 06] No earthly power will ever be able to stop that. Not ever. Not religious powers and authorities, nor state powers or authorities. And in these chapters that we've been looking at, you see Luke shows us the gospel breaking out from the boundaries, first of all, of the ethnic and national religious markers.

We saw that in chapter 10 and 11, didn't we? With Peter going to the household of Cornelius, the Gentile. And then after that, great numbers going wholesale to the Gentiles in the city of Antioch. The gospel can't be bound as though it were to be some national or merely ethnic religion. And in fact, we read that the Christians were first called Christians in Antioch among Gentiles.

That just showed that this is a faith that could never be kept among a people simply of one race or one background or one ethnic origin. And now in chapter 12 here, you see Luke is telling us just as plainly that this gospel can never be silenced or fettered or held back either by any state power or control.

The gospel very clearly doesn't need the power of the state or any state or any national institution for that matter to advance it. And nor can any power of any state ever stop it or crush it.

[4 : 31] Not ever. Now that is a message of great relevance and importance for us today in the 21st century, isn't it? Probably the two biggest threats to the march of the gospel of Jesus Christ today comes from, on the one hand, the power of what we might call ethnic or national religions.

For example, Islam, where to convert to another faith is seen as a denial of your family, of your birthright, of your nationality, of your ethnic group.

And on the other hand, there is a great threat also from the powers in secular states to try and silence and to eradicate the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we've seen that in the last 50 or 60 years or so, particularly in the communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe and other places. But we're seeing it ever more today even in the so-called free Western world, in our post-Christian secularist societies.

These are great threats to the gospel of Jesus today. But no, says God, gospel people, the real church of Jesus Christ, need not fear ever the opposition of any earthly powers that are aligned against it.

[5 : 50] God's kingdom cannot be stopped, not by anyone or by anything and not anywhere. That doesn't mean, though, of course, that there will not be suffering for God's people.

Individual believers won't always be rescued or saved from the trials that they face, just as we see here in verse 2 of chapter 12 with James, who was beheaded by Herod.

But what it does mean is that despite that, no amount of persecution will ever extinguish the church of Jesus Christ. No religious suppression, no theological confusion or even rank sin, even within the visible church, and certainly no state-sponsored persecution or religious persecution from outside the church will ever be able to extinguish it.

And that's the message of this chapter. The church of Jesus Christ will dance on the grave of every human institution that dares to stand against it.

And the gospel of Jesus Christ will always, in the end, trample down those who seek to trample it down and to trample God's people down. God's people may be put in chains, but the word of Christ is the unchained and the unchainable melody that will be, in the end, the song of every nation.

[7 : 20] That's the message of this glorious chapter here before us today. I want to look at it in a little more detail because there are many salutary things as well as great encouragements for us to learn from it.

So look first at verses 1 to 5. It teaches us all about the workmen of God, the workmen of God, who will always be persecuted by the power of Christ's enemies on earth.

These verses tell a story of persecution met by prayer, the prayer of Christ's church. Look at verse 1. Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church and he killed James, the brother of John.

We read on and see he wanted to do the same thing to Peter because it gave him such a boost in the opinion polls among the Jews. Brutal religious discrimination with all the force of the power of the state.

Just the sort of thing that we've been reading about if you get the Barnabas Fund news or the Release International newspaper that came in this week. But there's nothing new about that. It's been there right since the beginning.

[8 : 29] That's what Luke's telling us. Now for this king Herod, of course, it was in the blood. This Herod is the grandson of Herod the Great, you remember, who tried everything he could to murder the infant Jesus when he was born and who massacred all those babies in Bethlehem.

He was the nephew of Herod Antipas who was the one who killed John the Baptist, you remember, and put his head on a plate. So it was in the blood of Herod to seek to oppose God's people and his kingdom.

It's no accident, by the way. He had Edomite blood in him, did this Herod, a descendant of Esau. If you read all the way through the history of the Old Testament, you'll see that the Edomites were persistent opposers of the people of God.

That sometimes happens. You have dynasties, it seems, of people who love to exploit and to persecute God's people. Well, Herod was a typical self-serving despot.

The Jews actually despised him. He had a Jewish grandmother, but he grew up in Rome and he was a contemporary of the emperors Caligula and Claudius.

[9 : 39] They knew him and they advanced him by granting him large territories in Syria and in Palestine and he ruled over these under Rome. The Jews didn't like him, but of course, like any

ruler, they want the favor of their people and he discovered that killing Christians seemed to do the trick with his people.

So he allied himself with the Jewish religious establishment by killing James. James, the brother of John, remember, one of the three closest associates of Jesus Christ and he would have done the same to one of those other three, Peter, if he'd had a chance for round two, as it were, at the end of the Passover.

A great finale to the Jewish feast. A real boost for Herod's standing. Very strange alliances, aren't there, sometimes, against God's workmen, just as they were against Jesus Christ himself.

Do you remember back in Acts chapter 4, the early church recognized the prophecy in Psalm 2 speaking about that. The people who ally themselves together against God and his anointed one, Herod and Pilate and Gentiles and Jews, all together, conspire to put Christ to death.

And here's the same pattern going on. And so it is today, isn't it? Strange alliances often of people who have nothing else in common. Way out secularists on the one hand and sometimes artists, religious fundamentalists on the other.

[11:06] Absolutely nothing in common except their common hatred of the church of Jesus Christ. And so here is a real brutal persecution against God's workmen.

And don't underestimate the pain, the very real pain for the church of Jesus Christ to lose James, the brother of John, one of the twelve. And these many others upon whom he laid violent hands, many in their Christian family taken out and brutally murdered.

How would we feel if that happened here? You came to church next Sunday and you discovered a dozen of your friends in the congregation, people in your own house group, had not only been thrown in prison but had been brutally murdered.

Don't underestimate the pain. In the upper room, remember Jesus warned his disciples, in the world you will have tribulation. And so it was.

And so it is still, the workmen of God still face the same kind of persecution of the state today in many parts of the world. I was just reading the Barnabas Fund newsletter yesterday.

[12:16] It was telling us about Chinese missionaries who were imprisoned in Luotian County just for holding church meetings that hadn't had official government approval. Thrown in prison.

I was reading about a man called Mogos Semere, a 25-year-old man in Eritrea. He was about to get married when he was thrown in prison simply for the crime of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. And he was told if you renounce Jesus and renounce your faith publicly, you can get out of prison and you can go ahead with your wedding. He wasn't prepared to do that and he was kept in prison. After a few years he got pneumonia and was very, very ill. And again, he was told if you renounce the faith publicly, turn your back on Jesus Christ, you can have antibiotics and you can be made well. But he wouldn't do that.

And so his fever continued and he died. Real people, real loved ones, friends, brothers, family of Christians just like us in the world today, just the same as Peter and James then.

[13:25] Friends, that's a reminder, isn't it, that the shadow of the cross is always over the path of our Christian walk. That's what being a Christian is, Jesus said. It's about taking up our cross and following in the way of Jesus in this world and that way was the way of pain and of persecution.

It's hard for us in the West who have grown up over this last century or so to understand these things. Because actually we've lived in a very unusual and highly privileged time in the history of the world, largely free from this kind of state persecution that we're seeing here.

Parts of Eastern Europe, as we've said, have seen it. Some parts still see it today. I had a letter just this week also from friends who are serving Christ in Italy and they were speaking of the great degree of prejudice and persecution there is against evangelical Christians in Italy because of the power of the Church of Rome.

We've not known that in this land, although if you read the stuff that comes from the Christian Institute every week, you will be seeing that increasingly more and more we are catching up with the heavy hand of the state seeking to lash out against Christianity more and more.

Even newspaper columnists are beginning to write about it. Yes, the power of Christ's enemies on earth is very real and can be very intimidating. And it certainly was for Peter.

[14:55] Look at verse 4. Four squadrons of soldiers just to guard this one man no less. See, the weapons of the world are very strong. They're very powerful. What about the weapons of the Church in response?

Verse 5. Well, just prayer. It's very feeble, isn't it? All we can do is pray. How often have you heard that or said that as a kind of admission of hopelessness or impotence? All we can do is pray. It really means nothing more than we can do nothing but hope vainly sometimes.

Well, indeed, as Paul said in his later letter to the Corinthian church, we are not waging war according to the flesh. Our weapons of warfare are not of the flesh. But, says Paul, they do have divine power to destroy strongholds nonetheless.

And this church here in Acts chapter 12 seemed to know that much better than we do today. So they prayed earnestly, says Luke. By the way, that's the same word that Luke uses of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

[16:04] Earnestly, agonizingly. So they prayed earnestly. It can't have been presumptuously, can it? They must have also been praying like Jesus, yet not our will but yours.

But I think we must assume that they prayed as was their custom in such situations. Luke doesn't repeat in detail here what they prayed for exactly, but he expects us to remember just a few chapters back in chapter 4 where he does spell it out, where in very similar circumstances after persecution and imprisonment, they prayed earnestly but not primarily for their personal safety.

Rather, they prayed for spirit-endued power in the midst of trial so that they would go on speaking and witnessing for the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you remember? Look upon their threats, they said, and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with boldness.

Acts 4, verse 29. So no doubt, that's what they were praying here to. Quite foreign to us, isn't it? But not again to some Christians in other parts of the world.

I remember reading of the Chinese Christian leader who said to people in the West, don't pray to end our persecution, but pray for us that we would have stronger backs to endure it and to bear fruit in it for the Lord Jesus.

[17:29] Real persecution and real pain for God's workmen met by real prayer for the work of God to go on. And that prayer, you see, is a prayer that God always answers.

A prayer for his work to go on. And that's the message of verses 6 to 17. They teach us about the work of God, which will always be preserved despite the prisons of Christ's enemies here on earth. These verses tell us a story of preservation met with perplexity from Christ's people. Look at verses 6 to 11. They really do tell of amazing happenings, don't they?

On the very night before his execution, Peter's snatched away from under Herod's very nose by an angel, just like that. God intervenes in effortless power to show he really is truly sovereign over the affairs of men.

And that he is going to preserve his church and preserve his work in answer to their prayers. In this instance in particular, by rescuing Peter to complete safety. Now the overwhelming impression of these verses is of God's effortless power to sweep aside all such puny attempts to hinder his work.

[18:51] Isn't that so? It's a living illustration of Paul's words in 2 Timothy 2:9 that you can chain up God's workmen but the word of God is not bound. Notice how Luke emphasizes the real earthly power that is arrayed against God's work here.

Look at verse 4. Four squads of soldiers. Or verse 6. Two soldiers guarding him as he slept. One on the right and one on the left. Two chains. Two sentries at the doors of the prison.

Verse 10. A first guard and a second guard and a great iron gate finally to stop anybody getting out to the city. This is a maximum security prison.

It's not like Wandsworth jail that Ronnie Biggs hopped over the wall on a step ladder with. Although he's not finding it so easy to hop out this time apparently. The Home Secretary is keeping him in. This is a prison tougher than Alcatraz.

That's the point Luke's making here. There's real power arrayed against this servant of God. But there's no tunneling away for months with a broken spoon.

[19:58] There's no scaling over huge walls with ropes made from bed sheets. There's no helicopter coming in daringly to rescue him from the parade ground. No. Just an angel poking him in the ribs for his servant saying wake up Peter.

Come on follow me. It's astonishing isn't it from start to finish. It's astonishing that right at the start the night before his execution Peter's fast asleep.

Not worried at all apparently. Would you be fast asleep the night before your execution? Seems that he had a very different perspective on life to most of us today.

Then there's the effortlessness of it. The calmness of it all. Isn't it extraordinary? Verse 8. Get dressed calmly. Puts his shoes on. Wraps himself up in his duffel coat. Wanders off after the angel. It's so calm. It's so anodyne. Verse 9 says Peter thinks he's still just enjoying a lovely dream. Until he discovers himself all alone in the street.

[20 : 58] Verse 11. And he wakes up to the reality. The Lord really has sent an angel and rescued me. And you see what Luke is telling us here is that the spiritual weapons of war that we have, prayer, these things really do have the power to destroy earthly strongholds.

that the prayer of God's people answered by God really does affect the real world, the physical realm of our flesh and blood. And that's because Jesus Christ is Lord of the real world here and now as well as being Lord of the world to come.

And he's active always in this world to preserve his work until he comes to reign forever. You see we don't see that so often but the veil between this world and the world to come is as thin as gossamer.

And there is a whole realm unseen by us where God's heavenly servants are at work influencing and impacting this world all the time.

It's invisible to us, it's hidden from our eyes most of the time but it is there. Remember the book of Daniel. It's one of the places you see it so clearly.

[22 : 16] It's a book where we see things being played out as it were on two stages. There's the earthly stage showing us what's going on earth with kings and nations and God's people but we also see behind the scenes to the heavenly stage what's going on in the heavenly realm where God's angels, his watchers in the heavens are at work and they're seeing everything that's done and they're doing God's will and they're doing his bidding on behalf of his people on earth.

My friends, there is really nothing outlandish about this idea of God's angels being at work. We mustn't think of it as a sort of thing like fairies or the kind of nonsense that you see on Christmas cards of little floating choir boys in the sky singing cherubs and things like that.

That's far from the Bible's understanding of angels. Yes, there are cherubim and seraphim but in the Bible these are fearsome, mighty, powerful, spiritual beings working for God as mighty warriors. And when you're reading the scriptures of encounters with God's angels, it's far from a pleasing experience. It's not amusing, it's not comfortable, people fall on their faces in fear. Just read the book of Daniel or read the book of Judges and when Gideon met the angel, plenty others.

Now the Bible is very clear, the New Testament is clear. God's angels are very real, they're powerful, they're terrifying. And yet, Hebrews 1 verse 14 tells us that these mighty angels of God are ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.

[24 : 03] Powerful, mighty beings who are there to serve the people of God on earth. And in this case, one of these great angels of God intervened to save Peter for his vital role in the church at Jerusalem.

And so thereby to preserve the work of God in a crucial time in its history. Peter was clearly still vital to that work. And God was able, as he is able, to preserve those that he needs for his work on earth against all earthly powers, against all earthly prisons raid against his people.

And God is still at work just like that today. I remember also reading about a Chinese church leader reciting of how he walked out of a prison, quite literally in exactly the same way as Peter did here, with chains falling off and walking between guards.

Sounds extraordinary to us. But here it is, right here, in Acts chapter 12. And yet we are left perplexed, aren't we, with questions?

Why was Peter rescued from death like this and James wasn't? Was it that the church didn't pray enough for James? Weren't they earnest enough in their prayer for James and they learned better for Peter?

[25 : 25] Was it that? Or was Peter more important than James to Jesus? Or was he more important than all those other believers who were martyred?

Of course not. Nothing of that at all. James wasn't any less important than Peter or Stephen, the first martyr, or any of the other nameless ones that Herod killed.

But somehow God knew that the preservation of his work at that crucial time in history required that Peter be kept alive. But that James, like Stephen, could be spared.

One wise writer has put it this way. We can only bow in humble submission before the sovereignty of God in this and acknowledge that his ways are past finding out. And there is great comfort in

God's sovereign providence, however mysterious it must be for us.

Remember my father used to often say, a man is immortal until his work for God is done. And Peter's work here wasn't yet done clearly.

[26 : 39] And so God rescued him with effortless power in answer to the church's prayer just as he has done in many situations and circumstances since.

While for James, beloved friend of Jesus, one of his closest three, one of his inner three disciples, it seems his work was done on earth. And therefore the Lord called him home to be with him.

That should be a great comfort to us too, shouldn't it? When a loved one, a beloved life's partner, maybe a relative, a friend, when somebody is called home to glory in a way that seems to us to be so untimely, so wrong, when it seems to us as though God hasn't answered our prayer for their healing or for their saving.

It's not ever that the powers of darkness have somehow stolen a march over God and beaten him in this case, not at all. Never.

Look how effortlessly God can sweep aside all his enemies when his desire is to rescue. Rather, for reasons that we may never fathom, his will seems to be to have his loved one in his nearer presence.

[27 : 55] Maybe Jesus just loved James so much that he wanted him to be with him there and then, now, forever, in glory. Maybe that is so sometimes still with loved ones of ours that for strange and inexplicable reasons, the Lord takes away seemingly in their prime.

Maybe he just longs for them to be with him. That should be a comfort for us, shouldn't it? God is never outplayed by his enemy. But sometimes the risen Christ does intervene in extraordinary ways, when his work is under threat, to preserve it and to prosper it and to protect it from all earthly enemies.

And when he does, sometimes that too leaves us perplexed in the sense that we're so surprised that he does it that we can hardly believe that it's true. And that's what happened here, isn't it?

Verses 12 to 17, they tell of a kind of hilarious pantomime farce.

I'm sure we're supposed to laugh as we read these verses. We're supposed to laugh at the church here and I guess also to laugh at ourselves. Because aren't we so often just the same in the church today when we're faced with God's wonderful exploits on our behalf?

When we see his answers to our prayers and we're so surprised we can hardly believe it's true. It's so true to life, isn't it, this story? When you look at these verses 12 to 17, you see there's so much detail there with personal names and places and so on.

[29 : 26] It's very clearly eyewitness testimony. And no doubt Luke got all this from John Mark, whose mother's house it was, verse 12 tells us. The very last verse of the chapter, verse 25, tells us how Mark became a co-worker with Paul and Barnabas and so was a travelling companion of Luke later on.

And so often God does teach us, doesn't he, by showing us the foolishness that we exhibit, by showing us how slow we are to have faith. And he makes us laugh at ourselves and so we should. Here's the newly free Peter coming to the door where he knows everybody's praying. And it says, verse 13, Rhoda comes out to meet him and in her amazing joy she just leaves him standing by the gate and runs in to tell everybody, stop praying, she says.

God's answered our prayers, Peter's here. For goodness sake, woman, sit down and be quiet.

Can't you see we're having a prayer meeting? I'm sure that's what they said to her. No, no, no, no, no, he's really here.

Peter's really here. Don't be ridiculous. Think spiritual woman. It must be his angel. But the hammering on the door just went on and on and on.

[30 : 39] Eventually in comes Peter. Shut up, he says. It's me, I'm here. It's all true. Go and tell the others.

It's heavy with irony, isn't it? You see, they believe firmly this church and the sovereignty of God over all things and so they pray to him earnestly for help and yet when he does act, they're so taken aback, they're so astounded, they can't believe it.

They believe clearly in angels. Verse 15 says that. It's his angel. They believe in angels but when angels actually get involved in the story and change their earthly situation, they're so surprised they can't believe it.

This is the New Testament church that we're all supposed to emulate and learn from. But aren't we also just like that? Praying earnestly about something?

But do we really expect God to answer? Are we so keen not to be disappointed or in our particular theological persuasion, are we so keen not to not to be triumphalistic, that we actually in the end don't really expect very much at all and wouldn't really expect God ever to answer our prayers?

[31 : 56] Isn't it true that we also so often experience God's great generosity to us, just like these believers did? Their prayer was earnest, but apparently at least in part it was unbelieving and yet the generous God of grace answered them in ways beyond anything they could ever ask or imagine.

But isn't that the God that we know in our Lord Jesus Christ? The Father of mercies, the God of all grace, he remembers that we're dust, and he gives us, even when our faith is but a grain of mustard, he gives us more than we can ever ask or imagine.

Bob was quoting C.S. Lewis the other week when he says this in one of his novels, this is the courtesy of deep heaven, that when we mean well, he takes us to have meant better than we could ever have known.

Friends, we can be confident too that when we pray in line with Christ's revealed will, when we pray that the work of his kingdom will be established, that his enemies will be overcome, that he will answer our prayers, even if those answers perplex us, even if at times they surprise us marvelously, because he has promised that the work of his church will always be preserved, despite all the prisons of Christ's enemies here on earth, his people will be vindicated, and his enemies will be laid low.

And that brings us, of course, to verses 18 to 23, about the worms of God, which will always be the penalty, says Luke here, for the proud pretension of Christ's enemies on earth.

[33 : 54] These verses tell us of man's pride met by the real punishment of God's justice. Herod played the perfect tyrant to a tee.

Verse 18 says the soldiers are in a panic with good reason. Herod demands a full search, but of course to no avail, so he vents his spleen instead on the jailers and executes them.

And then off he goes, we're told, verse 19, down to the seaside, to his holiday palace at Caesarea. I was speaking to somebody who'd just been in Israel the other day and seen the ruins of that magnificent holiday home that Herod had down by the seaside.

Well, perhaps he needed to get away from it all after all that trauma. It's quite hard being a despotic tyrant. There's all that stress involved. A tyrant's lot is not a happy one. And so it seems it continues in verse 20, even at the seaside there's still stress to endure.

Off goes his blackberry and there's news there that unfortunately he can't go to the beach today because those revolting Sidonians from Tyre are causing people. So we're told here that he was in dispute with them probably because he was in dispute with most people.

[35 : 06] But these Sidonians and folk from Tyre they had to swallow their pride. They had to come crawling to Herod. They had to come begging because we're told there that their country was economically dependent on the larger land to the south.

I guess it was something like their sort of Barnett formula. That little land up in the north there. They loved their independence but when an economic crisis came and their banks failed or whatever it was they had to go south to the money bags.

So they went down to Herod and they crawled to him and asked him to help them. So we're told at any rate Herod verse 21 puts on his special royal gear no doubt he's power dressing to try and intimidate them.

And when they come to curry favor he subjects them to a great oration says verse 21. I'm sure it was a deadly boring speech as most of these political speeches are.

But they needed his money and his help so they had to flatter him. So they did. Verse 22 Oh the voice of a god not a mere man. Well of course tyrants love that sort of thing don't they?

[36 : 09] That's the kind of thing that Hitler used to get his Hitler youth to chant all about him. It's the sort of thing that Kim Il-Jong in North Korea gets all his people to chant about him isn't it? We sometimes see it on the TV and he fires a few of his rockets just to show his virility.

So Herod being a great tyrant he lapped it up. He didn't say no no no stop I'm just a king I'm just a man. He didn't say as the king of the Jews as he was as his Bible told him he must say he didn't say I'm not to elevate myself above my brethren.

Read Deuteronomy chapter 17 it's very plain. He didn't say no no no I'm to obey God only I'm just like you. No he lapped up the glory as though he were a God.

That's what I am he said to himself. I'm Lord of all I survey. I am God like in power and influence I can do anything I like to this people. My word is their command.

And like many a tyrant before and since his power had just corrupted him and deluded him. But oh dear oh dear oh dear. He's forgotten hasn't he?

[37 : 29] God's words to kings who think like that. Like the words through Daniel. That it's the most high who rules above the kingdoms of men and he gives them to who he will.

He sets up kings and he removes kings. Or through Isaiah in chapter 40. He who sits above the circle of the earth and its habits are like grass havers before him.

He brings princes to nothing and makes them rulers of the earth as emptiness. When he blows on them they wither and the tempest causes them to fall off like stubble.

Herod forgot that. But God didn't forget. No did his angels. And on that day you see the arrogant defiance in Herod's heart against God and against God's people it crossed the line.

It passed the point of no return. The point beyond which there was no longer any possibility of redemption for him. And so immediately says verse 23 the angel of the Lord struck him down.

[38 : 41] And he met his nemesis. Nemesis by nematodes as it happens in this case. He was eaten by worms as we're told. And he breathed his last. His earthly pride and pretension found its inevitable penalty in the judgment of God in an agonizing ignominious demise.

That's a matter of history by the way. You can read about it in Josephus the historian in his antiquities. He says this, even as Herod accepted the flattery he was seethed by violent internal pains and was carried into his palace where he died after five days of illness.

You know that's not unique. World history is littered with the corpses of those who have strutted the world stage at one time in defiance of God and then just as suddenly have been brought low and flooded by the power of God.

It's happened to men, it's happened to nations, it's happened to whole civilizations, tyrants, cities, cultures, one's towering world powers and then laid low in the dust of history.

Like Shelley's poem Ozymandias, King of Kings, look on me and weep, but now just in the dust and the sand of the desert. Some of those have been brought low, it has to be said, in God's grace and mercy.

[40 : 09] Do you remember Nebuchadnezzar who was humiliated through madness but at last brought to believe in the God of heaven and shown mercy? Or think of Saul of Tarsus himself, flooded in the dust on the Damascus road and yet lifted up in the mercy of God to find salvation.

Many likewise have been laid low in their pride, like Belshazzar, the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, weighed in God's balance and found wanting, like Hitler, Mussolini, or Ceausescu, or Saddam, many others.

And Herod, destroyed by the worms of God. And so also it's been friends for great empires too, from Babylon through Greece, through Rome, through the Nazi Reich, through the Marxist block of Eastern Europe in the last century, all in the dust, despite once upon a time their great hubris and arrogance in defying the God of heaven.

that's a great, great encouragement, is it not, for Christians today, and Christians in every age. It's the repeated message of the Bible that no human force can ever destroy the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ here on earth.

No earthly power can ever triumph over the work of God. But it's a warning too, isn't it? It's a warning for our increasingly post-Christian Western world, for any society that deifies itself, that willingly and repeatedly refuses to give glory to the God of heaven, to the risen Christ, a society like that can one day cross a line beyond which there can only be nemesis.

[42 : 00] When it becomes too late, God's judgment must fall. Though it may take time for that irreversible internal rot to take its course, it's begun.

And the outcome can only be that the breath of life is eventually squeezed out of a culture and of a civilization like that. And so it's also a warning for all the world's religious institutions.

Remember that the Lord Jesus writes in very similar veins to the churches in Revelation chapter 2 and 3, and that's a warning too that we'd be well-heeded to learn today. Some of us might feel that the Church of Scotland is an institution on earth, has crossed that line of hubris and arrogant defiance of God and His Word by refusing to honour His Word, by refusing to honour His ways.

Is the worm that will consume that institution from within, has it now been unleashed in a way that's unstoppable? horrible? Or is there still time to repent, to be restored?

Pray God that might be so. And those who wear the robes of high office in our church, like Herod wore them that day, ought to well remember Herod and what happened to him that day, shouldn't they?

[43 : 17] Just as we should all remember. Here's a chapter that begins with great hubris, great defiance and opposition to the work of the living God, but it ends with nemesis and utter destruction by the worms of God.

And that's a real warning to any person, any human being who thinks that they can live in defiance of the rule of the one Lord of glory. Isn't that so? It's Jesus himself, remember, who warns above all about these worms of God.

They're not just the temporal judgment, says Jesus, he's speaking of eternal realities and truths. That those who like Herod, who will persistently refuse to bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ, they will face a judgment far worse than merely earthly demise.

Jesus called it hell, the place, he says, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. What a terrifying prospect that is. Verse 23, the angel of the Lord who had struck Peter in the side to lead him to safety, struck Herod down because he refused to give glory to God.

But, verse 24, and this is the glorious finale of the whole story, but the word of God increased and multiplied.

[44 : 48] The word of God, says Luke, will always be, always, always be progressing, despite all the apparent power of Christ's enemies on earth.

Verse 24 sums up a great story of progress and proliferation of God's gospel, doesn't it? My word, says God, shall not return to me void. It will accomplish everything that I purpose it to do.

I will build my church, says the Lord Jesus Christ, and the gates of hell, never mind the gates of prison, will never prevail against it. Nor the gates of hostile governments, nor rulers, nor the media, nor a godless culture, or even apostatizing denominations.

And that's what Luke's message is for you and me today, that the Holy Spirit has preserved all this time for us. He's saying to us, fear not, don't give up. Nothing can stop the advance of the gospel of Christ.

Nothing. Remember Peter, remember Herod, remember the angels, and remember the risen Lord Jesus who's the same yesterday, today, and forever. You can trample on Christ's workmen, yes you can, but you cannot trample out ever the work of Christ.

[46 : 05] You can abuse Christ's church, yes you can, but you can never abolish Christ's gospel. The word of God increased and multiplied.

It did then, it will do now, and it will do always. Because the gospel of Christ is the unchained melody that will be the chorus of this whole wide world.

God, aren't you glad you've joined that song already? If you haven't, isn't it time that you did too, without delay?

Maybe even today, God's angel is striking you as he struck Peter to awaken you to that great salvation. Don't resist him. Don't resist him, lest in the end you also should wait too long.

He should have to send his angel to strike you again, this time with the just rod of his judgment. Today is a day of salvation.

[47 : 14] Today, if you hear his voice, don't harden your heart. For the gospel of Jesus Christ is unstoppable. Let's pray.

Lord, encourage our hearts, we pray, with the message of your sovereign power, help us bow the knee to your lordship this day and forever for the glory of our risen savior.

Amen.