

Acts

Part 32 – “The Word of God Increased”

Acts 12

The Herodian kings were despicable characters. Herod the Great, in seeking to have the Messiah killed, ordered the murder of the infant boys in Judea. His grandson, a conniving politician like his predecessors, sought to curry favor with the Jews by persecuting Christians. He had James, one of the sons of

James and Peter were part of Jesus’ inner circle of disciples along with John. They both witnessed the transfiguration (Luke 9) as well as other miracles. Of the twelve apostles, James is the first martyr. Peter, on the other hand is miraculously freed from prison. We may wonder why it is that one was freed while another was put to death. But such is the mystery of God’s providence.

Whatever the particulars of God’s will, we know for sure that He wins in the end. His purposes will never be overturned by the willing or wickedness of men. Opposition to the gospel will ultimately be thwarted and, just as in the days of Peter and James, the Word of God will increase and multiply.

Main Idea: God will not allow his church to fail or his gospel to be silenced no matter how great the opposition.

Providence means that “God is completely in charge of his world. His hand may be hidden, but his rule is absolute.” (J.I. Packer)

“God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions” (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.11).

1. The Providence of God and the Church’s servants (Vv. 1-11).

Luke provides the dual accounts of James’ execution and Peter’s deliverance. Both apostles were seized and imprisoned. But only Peter was miraculously rescued. We are left to wonder why this is. It will require faith to draw out the necessary implications, to resolve once again that God is sovereign, that God knows what He’s doing, that God is in control, that He knows the end from the beginning, that He makes no mistake, that all things have been ordered according to the counsel of His own will—even the beheading of James. God took him home to be with Himself but left Peter behind for purposes that are known to Him, and were not spelled out to the disciples or to us.

“Deep in unfathomable mines; With never failing skill; He treasures all His bright designs; And works His sovereign will.” – William Cowper

2. The Providence of God and the Church’s prayers (Vv. 5-17).

The early church began praying together as soon as the Lord ascended to heaven (1:14) for both the kingdom of God in general and for specific matters (e.g. the replacement of Judas among the 12, 1:24). In 2:42 we read that prayer was a part of the life and work of the church.



They prayed in times of trial and persecution (4:29) and over the choice of the first six deacons (6:6). And as the narrative proceeds from here, we will find only more of the same: prayer as Paul and Barnabas are sent away for missionary work, etc.

The early Christians lived together the life of prayer. Jesus had just ascended to the Right Hand of God and, before he left the world, had promised to hear them just as he had heard them when he was with them in the flesh.

These Christians had no doubt about the sovereignty of God -- they expressed their certainty of his absolute rule often in their prayers -- their prayer in 4:24 began, "Sovereign Lord..." This conviction, however, had not made them fatalists. They believed prayer was indispensable even though they knew that some of their requests had not been granted.

3. The Providence of God and the Church's enemies (Vv. 20-23).

God's enemies will face God's judgment. Herod Agrippa died after less than five years on the throne. Luke's account matches the historical record. Agrippa was stricken by some sort of intestinal disorder or parasite, that is, "worms" (not uncommon in that day). Luke links Herod's death directly to his receiving glory that belongs only to God. But just as in the case of his servants (James and Peter), God does not treat all of his enemies the same. Some are struck down swiftly. Others are left to exercise their wicked designs. But at no time are they able to act as agents liberated from the sovereign hand of God.

4. The Providence of God and Church's mission (Vs. 24-25).

The continued persecution of the church, the execution of James, and the departure of Peter from Jerusalem could not stop the advance of the Word of God. Indeed, we may infer that it was through the wicked actions of God's enemies that God "increased and multiplied" his Word.

Notice that the increase of "the Word" is used synonymously with the growth of the church, the advance of the gospel, the increase of converts, etc. Because faith comes by hearing, the success of the church's mission depends upon the advance of God's Word.

"The martyrs were bound, imprisoned, scourged, racked, burnt, rent, butchered...and they multiplied."
- Augustine

Questions for Discussion:

Read and discuss *Westminster Confession of Faith* 5.1.

Why does God not guard all of his followers from suffering and persecution?

What is God's ultimate purpose?

Why is it right for God to be "jealous" for his glory?

Why should Christians pray?

What do verses 13-16 tell us about the church's prayer?

How does Luke compare Herod's end with the mission of the church?

Why is it so important for God's people to advance God's Word around the world?