

Lesson 18: Acts 12:1-24 The Power of God, the Power of Man, and Angels

Introduction

Context of the Christian Worldview

God's power; man's power. The two stories in Acts 12 give us a chance to consider this irrational, continuous struggle of human powerholders wagging their finger back and forth in God's face. I have an enduring memory of sitting in my in-laws' house on the floor, telling my three-year old daughter, "Come to daddy." She was in trouble. "Come to Daddy." Hesitation. "Come to Daddy." She turned away and refused to come. I walked over, picked her up, brought her to me. "When Daddy says come, you come. Let's try again." I got up, but her back where she was, sat back down in my place, and said, "Come to Daddy." She turned toward me face on, looked me in the eye and stomped both feet in place. The battle of the wills was on. It doesn't matter how incongruous the power differential was but there was a will there that was not going to submit.

God's power; man's power. There is no comparison between the two. Still, man plants both feet, wags his finger and turns to his own plans. And he gets away with it. And not only will God allow him to turn his own way, God will allow men and women to interfere with Him, to oppress, to harm His own people involved in the spread of His own Kingdom.

Here is one of the difficult things about being a Christian. You have submitted yourselves into the hands of God who has ultimate power, who loves you deeply and yet, who will allow you to suffer. Our faith asserts the absolute supremacy of God in all matters while also recognizing that God may allow evil people to do us harm. Our good and all-powerful Father often chooses not to step in and protect us. We really do look to the end of life and to the end of this age for justice to be sorted out. And that's a tough reality to learn to live with. It is a major aspect of spiritual maturity - persistence in our belief in the goodness of God and in our trust in his love even when He allows pain and suffering to come at the hands of evil people.

The more powerful party does not always win. Though we probably need to redefine what we mean about winning. What does it mean to win in opposition to God?

The pair of stories in Acts chapter 12 set up for us the contrast between divine power and human power. In these stories, we see both God's willingness to allow evil to cause pain, and we see God stepping in to protect. The first story is about an angel sent by God to rescue Peter from execution. But the story begins with the death of James, the brother of John, the close friend of Peter. There is victory and defeat in the same story.

In North Carolina, when a hurricane or tornado comes through, it is not unusual for a person interviewed on television to give thanks that God is good. God is good! My house was saved! God is good! Our church was protected! God is good! And that is the right response, isn't it? God is good. But then there is this strange juxtaposition as you look around at all the destruction, at all that. There is this one house standing and all the houses are destroyed. Or this one church made it, but the other one is flooded or burnt down. What does that mean for those people? Is God still good? My house didn't make it. Is God good? My church has burned down. Is God good? Or are we saying that those people deserved it, or that church deserved it? You know, they were bad, they deserved it. God is good. No, of course not! That's not what the person meant when they said that. They are just so grateful that God has protected them. And it's okay to say that God is good, He protected me. As long as we're clear that God is not just good when he protects us. God is good all the time, when He protects and when He does not protect.

Here are four points of faith before we get into these two stories.

(1) God is always, by far, without comparison, more powerful than any man, woman or nation. Human power does not compare. (2) God at times allows human power to carry out human will even when that will does damage to God's people and their service of Him. (3) Even when we suffer, whether by natural disaster or human will, God is good, and God's love endures. (4) In the final day, justice will be accomplished and those who have trusted in Christ as their Savior will be whole and will flourish.

I am not planning to argue those beliefs in this lesson. This is not the place for it. I did want to make a statement of the Christian worldview to serve as context as we consider these two stories.

We assume in our first story that Peter proclaimed God as persistently good. God was good for Peter when James died, and God was good when Peter was freed from prison, and he did not die. The two are not the same emotionally. The church grieved over the loss of James, and God is good. The church rejoiced over the protection of Peter, and God is good.

My personal experience, our personal experiences are not the barometer for the character of God. He allows the best, men like James, to suffer and die by the sword. And He works actively in our lives to protect and provide. Both are true. Human authority does, at times, win battles against the people of God. But there is an end to all things. God never loses in the end. Bet on God for the long game.

Context of Acts Part III

We have two stories here in chapter 12. This has been our pattern in this third part of Acts. We had the pair of stories with Peter healing in Lydda and Joppa. Then we had the pair of stories with Peter witnessing to Cornelius and then defending that witness. Then we had the pair of stories in Antioch with the growth of the church and that church's response to famine. And now we have a pair of stories about Herod. This is our last pair of stories. This is going to conclude the third part of Acts.

These stories help accentuate the second of two big picture themes for this third part of Acts. First, we consider how the Gospel freed Christianity from Jewish social isolationism. Peter went into Cornelius' household. Gentiles are declared clean by God through faith in Jesus apart from obedience to Old Covenant code. This truth freed Christianity to interact with all peoples around. There is no social isolationism like there was in the Old Covenant, under Judaism. Second, we also noted how the Gospel freed Christianity from administrative centralism. The early Christian Church was not controlled by a new priesthood in one central place like Jerusalem. Antioch was planted and developed in partnership with Jerusalem. Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem, but not to exert administrative control, reporting back to the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Now in Acts 12, we further recognize not only is the Christian Church not to be controlled by a centralized priesthood, it is also not to be controlled by the political administration of human government. Herod is that representation of human power through representation of human government.

Human government always wants to control the Church. That's a theme through history. And it goes badly. The Church of Jesus Christ must be free to act according to the values of Scripture under the authority of God. It cannot submit to the authority of everchanging human politics. Christianity doesn't really work well when it's depending on the power of government or the power of man. Christianity bears fruit through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 12, Herod wants to appease the state-sponsored religion by executing leaders of this flourishing, grass-roots Christian movement. He does not have the wisdom of Gamaliel that we saw earlier. You know, just leave them alone and we'll see if they're of God or not. He moves his hand against God, and it goes badly for him. He misreads what he sees as an early victory against James. He has a chance to learn and repent. He does not take it.

I've titled this lesson, "The Power of God, The Power of Man, And Angels." That's because in our first story, God exerts his power through an angel. He uses a mediator to come and rescue Peter. We have seen angels show up in Acts, but we have not talked about them yet. So, this is our chance. We've also seen the name of Herod show up before, and we haven't talked about the Herods. So, we'll take our chance there, too. In the first story, considering the power of God, I am going to address also the role of angels. And in the second story, considering the power of man, I will address the Herodian dynasty. Overall, we're looking at the resistance of the Gospel to centralized administrative control, specifically of the governmental type. We have already looked at the priesthood. Now, this is government that would control.

Peter Released from Prison (12:1-19)

Our first story is in Acts 12:1-19.

¹ Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. ² And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. ³ When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. ⁵ So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. ⁶ On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. ⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. ⁸ And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." ⁹ And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. ¹¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." ¹² And when he realized *this*, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. ¹³ When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel." ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened *the door*, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place. ¹⁸ Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers *as to* what could have become of Peter. ¹⁹ When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away *to execution*. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.

The Report

This is not first report of a Christian dying for his faith, but it is the first report of one of the twelve Apostles being put to death for his belief in Jesus. The traditional record has all the Apostles except for John eventually dying for their witness. Why James and not Peter? As Jesus told Peter at the end

of the Gospel of John, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me.” God has a race marked out for each one of us. We do not judge the goodness of God in comparison with the races other people must run. We fix our eyes on Jesus and follow Him on the path He has for us. Peter’s race is not yet done. James has reached the finish line.

Peter does get caught up in a political game. I don’t think Herod’s primary concern is the elimination of Christianity. Herod’s primary concern has to do with his own political position. Herod favors the status quo of traditional Judaism. The Jewish historian Josephus paints Herod as positive in his support and practice of the Jewish faith. So, there’s good relation there. The power of Herod and the power of the priesthood are connected. The Roman government had designated Herod as the authority who had the right to appoint the Jewish high priest. This does not mean that Herod’s designs are always appreciated and promoted by the Sanhedrin. The Herodians had their opponents. At this moment, Herod desires to build good will with the Jewish leadership. And good will is political capital. You want it when you can get it. So, executing James brought about that positive response. And Herod wants more. So, he arrests Peter, planning to make a spectacle of him before the people after Passover, at the end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. When you read the story, you can see how serious Herod is about making sure Peter doesn’t escape. He has got four squads of soldiers set to guard him. And he is in prison, and he is between two soldiers, and he’s bound with two chains, and there’s guards on the door, and there’s another guard on the next door. It makes you think that, okay, Herod’s aware of what happened in chapter 5 when all the Apostles were in prison and an angel at that point came and they were let out of prison. And Herod’s not going to let that happen here. He’s got Peter secured. There’s no way this guy is escaping.

Peter is in prison because Herod is waiting for his moment. There is urgency because that moment comes at the end of the week. We’ve got one week. The church is praying fervently for Peter. You can imagine, during this normally festive week, bands of believers gathered in various homes, and they’re not rejoicing. They are still grieving the loss of James and they are praying worriedly that Peter might follow. They had certainly also prayed for James. You cannot imagine that they didn’t. And God did not answer that request. So, they don’t know what’s God going to do with Peter. Prayer does not guarantee an outcome. God’s will guarantee the outcome. Prayer is a means by which we submit to the will of God. We do ask for things, and prayer may be a factor God uses as He is executing His plans. It may be God’s will that if His people pray, then He will act in particular way. He may have decided that in advance. You know, if my people don’t care, I’m not going to do it, but if my people do pray, I’m going to do it. We cannot see the mind of God and all the different factors that go into the wisdom of His plans. We know prayer matters. We know we are told to pray. We also know prayer does not control God. We trust His decision. God did not choose to answer the prayers asking Him to set James free. He didn’t do that. He is going to choose to answer the prayers to release Peter.

While those believers are gathered for prayer, God sends an angel as a means of exerting His power. The angel sets Peter free, and Peter shows up at the prayer meeting. You can imagine Luke smiling as he is writing down this part of the story. I expect it was told over and over for years. You know, how they were meeting at Mark’s house. “You know Mark. His Greek name is John. He struggled early in ministry but was taken under Barnaba’ wing and eventually became close to Peter. He is the one that wrote the Gospel of Mark. While we were at his house. Well, not his house. His mother’s house. And she had some wealth. It was a nice house. It had an outer court, like a house of the high priest, and there was this gate to the outer court. Well, Rhoda, Mark’s mother’s servant girl went to answer the door, and when she heard Peter’s voice, she got so excited she turned right around and ran into the house, announcing with joy Peter’s arrival. And we are all sitting there praying for Peter. And then

she comes running in. And - can you believe it? Well, no. We didn't believe it. We thought maybe it was Peter's angel or something weird going on. Then we went to the door and, lo and behold. It was Peter! It was the best prayer meeting ever I've ever been to in my life." You can imagine the storytelling that goes on after that.

Peter did not stick around. His life was in danger, so he went into hiding. When he says, "Report these things to James," he is speaking of James the elder. We know that James, the brother of John, has been executed. We will meet James the elder at the Jerusalem council in chapter 15. So, Herod cannot find Peter. And finally, he has to give up. He leaves Judea, thwarted in his plans for extra favor after the Passover. And he returns to Caesarea, his home base as the administrative center of the province.

Angels

All right. Back to the angel. This is not the first angelic escape from prison. An angel opened the prison door in chapter 5 freeing all the Apostles, and they immediately continue proclaiming Jesus in the Temple. An angel spoke to Philip, giving him orders from God that led him to the Ethiopian eunuch. An angel appeared to Cornelius, telling him to send for Peter to come proclaim the Good News. And angel will strike Herod dead in our next story. And an angel will appear to Paul in Acts 27, reassuring him in the middle of a shipwreck that he and all the sailors would be saved.

With all these references to angels in the Biblical text, how are we supposed to understand the role of angels in our own spiritual life? This is another one of those Biblical narrative questions. Should we take these reports of angels in Acts as merely descriptive or as also prescriptive? Should we simply accept that angels show up at unique moments in salvation history or should we be looking for angels in our own walk with God? Should we be asking for messages from angels?

Let's start with Acts and then consider the rest of the New Testament.

Angels in Acts

Grouping all these angelic appearances together here in Acts, it may seem like there are a lot of them, that angels appear quite often to Christians. But when we add the ones up I just mentioned, these are only six occurrences over a period of thirty years. And the appearances are all connected to major leaders in the early Church, except for that one that strikes Herod dead. But he is a king. We do not have any references of angels at work in the lives of regular believers. We just have this one unexplained comment when the people gathered praying and Rhoda comes in, and they explained the voice of Peter by saying, "It is his angel." Well, okay, now what does that mean? That is worth thinking about. What do they mean when they say it's his angel? Are there personal or guardian angels? But in the story, we just have the believers, they are searching for an explanation of this apparition of Peter's voice. We don't know if their comment comes from an accurate recognition of spiritual reality, that these believers were saying something true, we all have an angel and maybe he can speak with our voice; or was it from Jewish tradition about angels. You know, they're reaching. They're trying to figure out how to explain this weird occurrence. But it is a comment. And it is in the Bible. And we don't get explanation here. So, we are going to have to interpret that comment based on what we read elsewhere.

What are the angels doing in Acts? That's another question. Primarily, they're giving message. Angels interact with people in Acts and throughout Scripture as messengers delivering a message from God. In fact, that's what the word, "angel," or in Greek, "angelos," means. It means, "messenger." To give a report is, "apangelō." The same root is the word for Gospel, "evangel," a good message, a good news. If you take the beginning and end off the word "evangelism," you'll see the word "angel." It is the same root word, message or messenger. Angels are messengers and more. Twice here in Acts we have angels freeing Apostles from prison so that they might continue to proclaim the Good News. And we have the angel of wrath who executes Herod.

Whether or not we should expect angels to give us private messages from God or actively protect us is a question we cannot really answer from Acts. We would have to lean towards saying, “no,” I think, when we consider the rarity and uniqueness of the appearances in Acts. But maybe Acts is just silent on the issue. To consider the part angels play in our walk with God and in the life of the Church, we need to turn to the rest of the New Testament to see if we have more information; is there other revelation that can tell us about how angels operate in our walk with God. I’ll start with the Gospels and then look at the Epistles.

Angels in the Gospels

The word, “angel,” appears 54 times in the Gospels. Just over half of those uses refer to angels in Heaven or angels coming with Jesus at the end. They do not refer to angels interacting with people on earth. Twenty-five of those references do describe angels meeting with people in three different situations. The first group of appearances happen around the birth of Jesus, with appearances to Zechariah, to Mary, to Joseph, and to the Shepherds in the field. The second group shows angels ministering to Jesus; first, after the temptation in the desert at the beginning of His earthly ministry and second, during His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane at the end of His earthly ministry. The third group of references occurs after the resurrection, when angels appear to the women who came to care for Jesus’ body.

These examples affirm the number one reason in the Bible that angels interact with people. God sends angels as messengers. In the Gospels, the message is connected to the birth and resurrection of Jesus. To this very special moment of Jesus coming into the world. Angels are also shown in the Gospel to have the power to protect people and exert the power of God. We get reference to that. We don’t see it happening, but we get reference. Jesus said at his arrest,

“Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53)

Matthew emphasized more than once that Jesus will come again in power with a host of angels, thousands upon thousands. Jesus will not need them. At a word from God all things came to be and at a word from God all things can be unmade. Angels are not necessary for God to accomplish His will. Yet, in God’s wisdom, an army of angels will provide a concrete and fearful manifestation of his overwhelming power when Jesus returns to establish His Kingdom. And thinking about that, we do notice in the Gospels that though Jesus could call on a host of angels, He does not call on a host of angels. He has submitted Himself over to the power of men to be abused. He holds back His own power and I reckon God holds back the angels. They will wait and join Him when He comes again. He has not come again yet. So, the amount of times we are actually directly told about angels exerting power and protecting people like with the rescue of Peter are very, very small. We don’t really see that in the Gospels. And overall, the number of times angels interact with people in the Gospels and Acts is rare, and most often it involves delivering a message from God in a very unique situation, like the birth of Jesus, or the resurrection of Jesus.

We do recognize that the reality of the angelic world is clearly affirmed in the Gospels and Acts. At the same time, those appearances happen at extremely unique points in salvation history, leaving us still with the question of Biblical narrative, “Are these examples simply descriptive of what happened at the time of Jesus and the spread of the Church, or prescriptive about how we should live our lives as believers under the New Covenant?” Should we be seeking guidance and protection from angels?

This is not yet answered in the Gospels. We need especially to consider the epistles, since these letters come after the establishing the New Covenant, after Jesus’ resurrection, after the coming of the Spirit, and were written to give direct instruction in theology and the practice of Christianity. So, what do these works say?

Angels in the Epistles.

The word, “angel”, “angelos,” appears 100 times after Acts from Romans to Revelation. A full two-thirds of the 100 references are in Revelation. Many of these references describe angels in Heaven. Some of them describe angels speaking directly to John. This is clearly a unique case of an angel speaking to a man, because it results in the writing of a New Testament book. This is a one-of-a-kind set of appearances. And apart from the appearances to John described in Revelation, only one other reference in the Epistles describes angels interacting with Christians on Earth. Out of the 100. If we remove Revelation and John’s interaction, there’s only one other reference.

The book with the next most references to angels is Hebrews. Eleven of the thirteen references in that book come in the first two chapters as a comparison, showing that Jesus both lowered himself below angels when he became a man, and yet is superior to angels as the Son of God. We do find in Hebrews the one other example I mentioned of angels interacting with believers after the book of Acts. The author quotes Jesus writing in 13:2, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Interestingly, this one example is an example of people not being aware they have interacted with angels. The stranger you do a good deed for may be an angel, but the point of the verse is, you’re not going to know it.

Now, from Romans to Jude, excluding Hebrews, there are another 30 references to angels. None of these references are reports of angels appearing to people or entering into our daily life to protect people. None of these references are exhortations from church leaders like Peter and Paul for believers to pray to angels, or seek out angels, or expect appearances from angels. And that is interesting since both Peter and Paul had their own experiences with angels, but they are not encouraging anybody else to expect or seek out appearances with angels. It’s not in any of their letters. So, apart from the one reference in Hebrews which tells us we might meet an angel without knowing it, not one of the 100 references from Romans to Revelation suggests that believers will knowingly interact with angels during their walk with God on earth. So, if you’re hoping that interaction with angels ought to be a regular part of our spiritual experience, then you need to accept your disappointment because that is not the teaching of the New Testament.

Could it happen? Could you meet an angel and know it? Yes. Should you expect it? Absolutely not. Angels appearing to people is extremely, extremely rare in the Biblical witness. Now, of course, I am not saying at all that we should not believe in angels, or that angels aren’t protecting us without our knowing about it. God’s angels are very aware of what’s going on Earth and are involved in a spiritual struggle that we don’t see. Elisha prayed to God, and God opened the eyes of his servant to see a host of angels surrounding the army that surrounded Elisha. God’s host is so much greater than any enemy that might assail us. God’s angels are at work. We know that. But we also know it does not automatically mean that God is going to command that host to intervene on our behalf. He may. I am sure we are protected in a myriad of ways without knowing about it. How many times could I have died or seriously hurt someone else in my life from playing with matches as a kid, I started enough fires, or seeing what 100 mph feels like in a car as a teenager, you know, and on and on, all the stupid things I’ve done? There were many opportunities for me to die. So, I sincerely believe that God protected me. I imagine he employed angels to protect me. But in the Bible, He is not encouraging us to study deeply how the angelic realm works. There is this general knowledge that we need to have but we’re not supposed to focus in on learning more about the angelic realm. That’s not where our focus is supposed to be.

Angels do not exist as a power source for us to tap into. Angels are servants of God, fully submitted to His will. We are not encouraged to put our faith or focus into angels. We are to know of and believe in their reality. But that is enough. Our walk with God is a personal one with Jesus. I do not need to be

asking angels to protect me, or guide me, or be with me, or comfort me. I ask the Father. I ask Jesus. We go directly to God in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. We acknowledge the mighty host with respect and a distant love even for these magnificent fellow servants of God. And we look forward to meeting angels in Heaven, to interacting with. It's going to be amazing. But we are not seeking relationship with angels now. It's nowhere in the Bible. God is not encouraging it.

We do get a bit of caution in references to the angels. Paul writes in Galatians 1:8, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed."

No true angel will ever contradict the written Word of God. You're not looking for visions from angels. You have the written Word. Our faith is grounded in the Bible, not in visions, from angels or otherwise. We may experience a vision or dream and it might encourage us. Great! But you always test it according to Scripture and you go with Scripture.

Here is one more warning in Colossians 2:18, "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,"

Our hearts are so easily tempted away from worship of God. Easy. I see this in Christian faiths that promote praying to saints and to Mary. The practice of asking for intervention from worthy believers who have died can seem harmless. You can rationalize that. You know, what's the difference in asking for prayer from a living believer or a dead believer? And yet, what I see in that practice, which is nowhere encouraged in the Bible, and that's the main point, is the tendency to develop relationship with dead saints at the expense of developing relationship with God the Father and God the Son. Whatever the person is seeking for in a saint or in a relationship with Mary, they ought to be seeking for through Jesus Christ, through God the Father. When we are asking for protection and care and understanding from someone else, or mercy from someone else, we are not seeking those same things directly from our heavenly Father.

And I use that example because it is very similar to this idea of seeking out angels for help. What seems like a rational practice, you know, there are angelic beings. You can go into Daniel and read a little bit about the struggle of the angels. They're really there and even connected to our prayers so we can make it into some kind of rational idea that we ought to be seeking angels. What seems like a rational practice is nowhere encouraged in the Bible, and it is going to play on the tendency of the human heart towards idolatry. When you're seeking from someone, a dead saint or an angel, something that you ought to seek from God, then your human heart is just a step away from idolatry. Speaking to angels, at the least, sets us one step back in our relationship with God since we have to go to another being to get to Him. At the worst, seeking out angels becomes a form of angel worship, where we begin to give the glory and honor and central place due to God to another being. Putting angels in the place of God also opens the door to a type of New Age Christianity. And I've heard some Christians who are really excited about angels. There is something off there. It reminds me of the strange fire offered by Aaron's sons at the consecration of the Tabernacle back in the book of Numbers. God laid out clear instructions for service in the Tabernacle: this is how you're going to do it. And immediately, those two appointed priests began to improvise. And we read in that story, we know that God was aware that there was something wrong in their heart. There is unhealthy improvisation going on. We discover how to walk with God, serve God, love God by humbly submitting to God and learning from God according to the Word He has given us. We model ourselves after Jesus according to how Jesus is revealed in Scripture. We have freedom and opportunity for significant diversity within the principles of Scripture. We do not have freedom to improvise with dead saints or the world of angelic beings. That's so unwise. It opens the door to strange fire. What is the motive? What in your heart is driving you from God to something else? Or from Bible to something else? And at its very

Speaking of Herod, have you ever noticed how often the name comes up in the Bible? And have you ever asked, how many different people are we talking about? You might want to pause the audio here and think about that one, just to see if you can add them all up in your head. How many Herods are there in the Bible? I am going to explain a bit of human history here. Human history loves to cover rulers and wars. This is a testimony to the power of man, the exertion of human will and human strength according to the human motive for conquest and glory.

How many Herods? Well, we start with Herod the Great. Let's review quickly the history of kingship over Israel to get us down to Herod the Great. Which nations ruled over God's people? This is the point of Nebuchadnezzar's multilayered statue in Daniel 2 and the four beasts in Daniel 7. From the exile in 600 BC to the first-century AD arrival of Jesus, Israel lacked self-autonomy. Israel was ruled by foreign powers. And Nebuchadnezzar's statue and the four beasts suggest four powers. And broadly we might identify those powers as Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. There is always and overlord. My Macedonian friends will have to forgive me for saying, Greece, instead of, Macedonia. Greece does get named in Daniel, so I'll be biblical there. It was Alexander the Great, the Macedonian, who replaced Persia followed by four generals who carved up his empire. But Alexander is the one most responsible for spreading Greek culture, so much so that we have been talking about Hellenistic culture in Acts, not Macedonian culture or Roman culture, but Hellenistic Greek culture.

These major empires ruled with over the ancient Biblical territories, but in the large expanse of territories over which they ruled, they exerted their governance with some variety. A king might be deposed, and his place given to a foreign governor. Or a native governor might be appointed. Or the king might be allowed to rule as king under the emperor: to keep the title of king. But they're paying tribute, they're ruling under, they have a covenant with that king that defines their subservience.

If you have ever read the apocryphal histories of 1 and 2 Maccabees, you know that Judea gained some autonomy under the Maccabeans while under the rule of the Seleucids, one of the Greek inheritors of Alexander's empire. The Seleucid King Antiochus Epiphanes IV, ruling from Syria, despoiled the Temple in Jerusalem by ordering a pig sacrificed to Zeus on the altar. And that prompted a revolt. The Maccabeans led the revolt, and they defeated several Syrian armies, and they gained in the end more autonomy for Israel, but they did not gain complete freedom. They were still under the Seleucids until the Romans come in 63 BC, and then they're under Rome. Israel from the time of Nebuchadnezzar down to the time of Jesus has always been controlled by somebody else.

And after the Maccabeans, that's where Herod the Great comes along because he wrests control from the Maccabees and sets up his own dynasty - though, as a servant under Rome. He rules by the grace of Rome.

Herod's father, Antipater was a wealthy Jew who developed some pretty powerful friends, like Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. He knew some major players. And the Romans made Antipater governor in the region. I said Antipater was a Jew. That's true religiously. It's not true ethnically. He held the Jewish religion, but he was an Edomite, so a cousin of the Jews who had converted to Judaism. And he married a noble woman from Arabia, so she wasn't Jewish, either. Their son Herod then is definitely not ethnically Jewish, but he was raised religiously Jewish. After his father's death, Herod managed to make himself the unchallenged ruler over the whole region, including ancient Israel plus.

So, this is the first Herod we meet in the Gospels. I'm back to enumerating them. Herod number one: he greeted the wise men, had the babies murdered to try and kill Jesus. He succeeded in doing much evil but did not succeed in eliminating Jesus.

This Herod had many sons. His territory was split into four parts, or tetrarchies. A tetrarch is one who rules over a fourth. One son, Herod Antipas, ruled over Galilee and Perea. He is the Herod who killed

John the Baptist. And the Herod who tried Jesus. He was not ruling over Judea. The son of Herod that had been ruling over Judea displeased Rome, so they took Judea away from the Herods and inserted a Roman governor. So, at the trial of Jesus, the Romans have their own man in Jerusalem, Pilate. Pilate does send Jesus to Herod Antipas because he is ruling over Galilee and Jesus is from Galilee, but Herod Antipas sent him back to say, “No, you are the governor of Judea. He is your problem.”

Our third Herod, Herod Agrippa is the one here in Acts 12. He is a nephew of Herod Antipas and a grandson of Herod the Great. His father sent him to Rome as a boy where he grew up with the future emperor Caligula and became friends with future emperor Claudius. So, he is also well connected. Works out well for him. Claudius eventually rewards him as ruler over Judea and Samaria.

In Acts 25, later our fourth Herod will show up to help the governor Festus try to figure out what to charge Paul with when they send Him to Rome. He is going to be called King Agrippa in Acts, so it is easy to forget that he is also a Herod, Herod Agrippa, son of our third Herod, great-grandson of Herod the Great. His domain was to the north and east of ancient Israel in southern Syria bordering Galilee. He did not rule over Judea.

So, when you come to a Herod in the New Testament, he is going to be one of these four. They each rule over a different territory. And all of them, even if they bear the title, “king,” govern by the will of Rome.

The Report

Coming back to our story, sources from the times tell us that our present Herod had taken too much liberty in fortifying Jerusalem’s walls without permission from Emperor Claudius. And so, he had a good relationship but he lost good favor. And Herod is actually holding these games in Caesarea dedicated to Claudius as an attempt to win himself back into good relationship with the emperor. So, we know something about this occasion from reports outside of the Bible.

The power struggle of man between man is never ending. It’s an ongoing reality. We are not given any detail here in Acts about Herod’s problem with Caesar. The report here is about Tyre and Sidon’s problem with Herod. Herod is trying to please Claudius, but he is angry at Tyre and Sidon. And Tyre and Sidon are trying to please Herod. These are two major Phoenician cities we are familiar with in the Bible. Through the Old Testament, they’re around. And they have upset Herod somehow. We don’t know how. Recognizing their dependence on the food production of Israel, they want to restore relationship. They seek to do this through back power channels, convincing the king’s chamberlain to speak on their behalf. And it looks like they’re the ones instigating this praise of Herod when Herod comes out, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” They’re all shouting out, and Herod doesn’t say anything, and he is struck dead.

“But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.” That is the inevitable outcome when the power of man is raised up against the power of God. Man dies. The Word of the Lord continues to grow. In his success in killing James, along with all his other successes as a power holder, Herod felt no fear going after Peter. The people ascribe to him the position he had taken for himself. He opposed God, elevating himself to the same plane as God. Then he died the death of a man, eaten by worms. Whether God intervenes with an angel of wrath at a certain point in life or not, Herod was going to be eaten by worms. One way or another we are all eaten by worms. We are like flowers in the field who sprout up in the morning, are dried out by the afternoon sun, and pulled up and thrown into the fire in the evening. Our existence is very ephemeral. It comes and it goes.

In a moment that we’re here on Earth, the power of man is going to raise up against the Church, and it’s going to have success. The Christians church does not grow through the power of man. We don’t oppose power for power, or we ought not. The Christian Church is often at the mercy of the power of man. Herod killed James. Christians are persecuted. Churches are torn down. There are real losses.

Real setbacks to the proclamation of Christ. This is a caution to the Christian right in so many different nations in seeing the potential for politics to help make gains on whether it's morality or the place of the Church in society. And we are to be involved in human government, that's not wrong. But to think that that's our power source? That this is where we're going to advance the Kingdom of God, through human politics is a huge mistake. Because then we start mixing up the values of the Church with the value of man, and the strategy of Church with the strategy of man, and the source of power in the Church with the source of power of man. And that's not how we operate. So, we're going to lose the more we are connected with the power of man. And in reality, the Christian Church because of who we are, and because of our principles, and because of our dependence on Christ, and our call to humility we are often at the mercy of the power of man, the power of government.

Herod killed James. Christians are persecuted. Churches are torn down. There are real losses. Real setbacks to the proclamation of Christ. Islam claimed much of the territory where the early Church had spread. Communism claimed much of the territory where the Gospel had later spread to the north. Materialistic humanism has claimed much of the territory where the Gospel later spread to the west. Human power can take a stand and can do damage to the Kingdom of God. But when man does raise his fist against God, he is misled by these transient victories. God is not impressed. The early Church, when ordered by the Sanhedrin to never again preach in the name of Jesus rightly turned to Psalm 2 in their prayer. This is God's view of man's power, Psalm 2: 1-4,

Why are the nations in an uproar, and the peoples devising a vain thing?
The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together
Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying:
"Let us tear their fetters apart, and cast away their cords from us!"
He who sits in heaven laughs, the Lord scoffs at them.

Herod killed James. Herod arrested Peter. Herod accepted acclaim as God. Herod died, eaten by worms. And the Word of God continued to spread and multiply.

In his history of Christianity, Kenneth Scott Latourette describes the ebb and flow of the gospel as a gain of territory, followed by loss, followed by new gains with the overall result of a steady growth in the Church, like the ocean's tide inevitably marching up the beach. The gospel continues to spread throughout the world, and especially in our day showing growth in the so-called third world nations. The Gospel will continue to spread until disciples are made among every people, every nation and then Jesus will return in power surrounded by a host of angels.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 12:1-19. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. When you consider the reference to angels in Acts, the Gospels and the Epistles, what stands out to you? What questions do you still have that you would like to have answers to?
3. What spiritual truths create a foundation for how you understand your relationship with God? Do angels play a role in your walk with God?
4. What benefits do you see in recognizing the role angels play? What dangers do you see in giving more focus to angels than that which is found in the Bible?
5. Read Acts 12:20-25. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. What connection do you see between the reference to Herod in this second report and the reference to Herod in the first report?
7. How would you state in your own words the overall message of this section?