

In our passage last time our focus was on Herod Agrippa's persecution of the church, in order to please the Jewish leaders. He killed James the Apostle, and had Peter thrown into jail, planning to execute him after the feast. We also read of Peter's supernatural escape from prison when an angel of the Lord delivered him. While the church prayed, Peter stood at the door and knocked. The people could not believe that God delivered Peter in answer to their prayers, but Peter gave his testimony, encouraged the church, and left for a safer place.

In tonight's passage we read of Herod Agrippa's demise and get a sense of how God judges those who dishonor Him, and persecute His church. Let's see what we might discover as we read together, Acts 12:20-25.

We have to be careful when studying the biblical accounts of Herod, because the Herod mentioned in our text is often confused with other relevant people, also named Herod. In order to keep track, we rely upon the writings of Josephus. All of the men referred to in scripture as Herod are Herod the Great, and his descendants. They ruled biblical areas, at different times, at the pleasure of the Roman Emperors. They were from perhaps the most dysfunctional family in the entire bible.

Herod the Great ruled at the time of Jesus' birth. He was the man who had all the boys, two years of age and younger killed, in Bethlehem, because the wise men reported the birth of the King of the Jews. While he is remembered for rebuilding the temple, he was a madman who, out of jealousy, killed many of his own family members, and involved himself in every imaginable godless activity.

After his death, there was a dispute among his sons as to who should ascend to the throne, so they eventually divided the territory. The governor identified as Herod in our passage of Scripture is Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great, who fathered Herod Agrippa II. When you study the writings of Josephus, you find that the Herod in this passage was a spoiled brat, and black sheep of the family, who would never have amounted to anything, had he not befriended Caligula before he became the emperor of Rome.

Herod the Great killed Agrippa's mother, and sent her sons to Rome to receive an education, because he feared one of them might seek revenge for her death. For Agrippa, Rome was a party town. He wasted his wealth, lived, for a time, in poverty, and sponged off of others to survive. Caligula was one of his drinking buddies. Because he was so brash, Agrippa shot his mouth off and said that he wished that the Emperor Tiberius would relinquish his throne to Caligula. Tiberius threw him into prison, but after his death, six months later, Caligula became Emperor, released Agrippa, and made him the governor over much of the land once ruled by his grandfather.

Verse 20 begins with the statement that Herod was angry at Tyre, and Sidon. Apparently his anger arose over a trade war of some kind. The actions of Tyre and Sidon crimped Agrippa's cash flow, so Agrippa threatened to cut off their food supply, and apply military pressure against those two areas. The threat worked, because the people bribed Blastus, Agrippa's chamberlain, to intervene on their behalf. They secured peace by paying a higher than necessary price for their food and other essential items, in order to line Agrippa's pockets.

The bible says that on an appointed day, Herod sat on his throne and delivered an oration to the people. Josephus writes that this was a day of games held in honor of Caesar. On that day, Herod Agrippa wore clothing woven out of thread made of pure silver. As the sun reflected off of his garments, it appeared as if he were glowing so brightly that people could not look directly

at him. Standing in front of the people, glowing like the sun, he gave a speech to which the people shouted, "This is the voice of a god, and not a man."

As he basked in his glory, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and worms ate him alive, because he had not given God the glory. Herod Agrippa thought too highly of himself. He lived a godless lifestyle. God judged him, and gave him the penalty that he deserved. At the height of his arrogance, stomach pains overtook him, and he died five days later from the parasites that ate him from the inside out. This all took place in AD 44. Felix, and then Festus, who we will read about later on in the book of Acts, succeeded him as governor of the province.

What are we to make of this account, for context suggests that the consequences suffered by Herod Agrippa are not directly tied to his opposition to Peter and the church? The text teaches us that the Lord is Lord of all and will not share His glory. It also shows us that while God is patient, he will not put up with godlessness indefinitely.

Agrippa had a lifetime of opportunities to turn from sin, and turn towards God, and His will for his life. He never did. He died, and lost everything that he thought he had gained. He is remembered as a godless, ruthless persecutor of the church who God crushed in judgment. God gave him exactly what he deserved. He died as a consequence of his accumulated sins.

Sin is seductive. The appeal of the promise of instant pleasure can be so strong, that a person without moral fiber will jump at the chance of acquiring what their flesh desires. Sin always carries consequences. The consequences of sin, while not perceived in the moment of sin, work to utterly destroy a person's life. Sin brings a downward spiral that carries a person's spirit further and further into darkness. If the chain of sin remains unbroken, it will utterly and eternally devastate a person. If Agrippa had repented of his sin, his story would end differently.

Some might argue that Agrippa was set up for failure. He came from a godless family of corruption, murder, and every imaginable sin. But remember that Agrippa was part Jew. He had close associations with the religious leaders. He must have heard the stories about the miracle worker, Jesus, but he chose a different path. Today, a person might argue that if only he grew up in a Christian home, his life would be different. It is true that a child who is blessed to grow up in a Christian home has an advantage over those who do not, but once a person reaches an age of knowing right from wrong, he or she is accountable to God for their actions. In other words we cannot blame someone else for our sins. Our actions, whether good or bad, carry consequences that affect every area of our lives.

Every alcoholic started upon the road of his or her downfall with a first drink. No one has ever become addicted to recreational drugs, who did not smoke that first joint, or pop that first pill. There are no adulterers or fornicators who have kept themselves sexually pure. There are no thieves who never took something that belonged to someone else, no liars who only speak the truth.

A person who grows up in a godless environment is at a spiritual disadvantage, but when a person enters into willful sin, he or she opens up spiritual doors that are hard to close. I remember drinking my first beer. I was fifteen. I was at a friend's house, and his dad had left an open beer can in his car. My friend offered it to me. It was hot, and flat. I thought I was going to throw up. I knew from my upbringing that I should not drink that beer. My body screamed at me to never touch that stuff again. But once you open the door, it is much easier to take a drink the next time. Though it repulsed my body, I convinced myself it tasted good. I had to develop a taste for it. Eventually alcohol had such a hold on me that had it not been for God's grace, I would never have been able to stop.

Paul speaks of sin crouching at the door. The opportunity for sin is always there, always tempting, and alluring. If we are not disciplined, it will take us captive, and set our lives on a course of destruction. The deeper we go into sin, the harder it becomes to turn from it, and the harsher the consequences on our lives. For all of his life, Agrippa was on a downward spiral into spiritual darkness that culminated in God's judgement.

Nearly every person incarcerated by our legal system will claim innocence of the charges against him or her. It's all a big mistake. You just don't understand my circumstances. It's how you interpret the law. My lawyer is getting me out just any day now.

We can't make blanket statements that apply to every person, but most people, who find themselves in jail, even if they are innocent of the specific charges against them, have a pattern of a lifestyle that led to their arrest. If by their behavior, he or she had earned a reputation as being a godly person, chances are, that if accused, no one would believe it. On the other hand, if his or her lifestyle reflects the darkness of sin, people are quick to believe the worst. The lesson of Agrippa's life is that sin catches up with you. You may think that you are getting away with something, but you never do, not in the end.

This would be a miserable message indeed if not for the contrast set up in verse 24. "But, the word of God increased and multiplied." While sin can destroy a person's life, the message of the word of God triumphs over sin. Agrippa's sin against the church threatened to destroy it, but sin has no power over God nor His will.

Context tells us that the word of God mentioned in this verse refers specifically to the gospel message, and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Sin destroys life and separates people from God, but grace overcomes sin, and restores a right relationship with God. This is why repentance is such an important element in the salvation process. There has to be a sorrow, brokenness in a person's heart, over his or her sin, which is against God. If a person is truly sorry for something they have done to someone else, he or she asks for forgiveness, and promises not to do that thing any more. If they are sincere, they will discipline themselves against repeating the offense. If they are unwilling to discipline themselves, then the power of sin still holds them captive, and there was no commitment behind their promise.

None of us are perfect. We are all sinners before Holy God. Even sincere and dedicated Christians fall into sin from time to time. But, a person who is truly saved has had a change of heart. He or she no longer desires to sin, but longs to be free from sin. When a mature Christian sins, he or she can't wait to repent and ask for forgiveness. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit the direction of a Christian's life is not toward destruction, but toward God, so that we are becoming more Christ like, in every area of our lives.

The gospel tells us that God in His love offered up Jesus as a sacrifice for our sins. He became sin for us. He took the punishment we deserve, but He won victory over sin and death by His resurrection from the grave. If we confess our sins He is faithful to forgive us. If we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord, and believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead, we will be saved from our sin, and inherit eternal life.

Agrippa never found the Lord's forgiveness, how about you? How about the people you know, and care about? How about that person that you have never met, who God may send your way this week? We have the words of life that the world needs today. If anyone is here who is still lost, why not receive the grace of God tonight? If you are saved, share the gospel, and for everyone, let us live our lives before God in the center of His grace.

Sharing the gospel is the overarching context of this passage, for it ends with a statement that sets up chapter 13 and the first missionary journey. Saul and Barnabas return from Jerusalem

to Antioch. They bring John Mark with them. Soon the church will set them apart for God's special purpose for their lives. They will take the gospel message to the whole Roman Empire.

As we make our way through the remainder of the book of Acts, we will read of many successes and failures, but no matter what happens, the word of God spreads and people get saved. It is good for us to think about that in a world of darkness and seemingly insurmountable challenges. No matter what happens in this world, the gospel will continue to spread and offer people hope through faith in Jesus Christ. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, trust Him, and serve Him as we long for His appearing.