

About that time King Herod violently attacked some who belonged to the church, and he executed James, John's brother, with the sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter too, during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. After the arrest, he put him in prison and assigned four squads of four soldiers each to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was praying fervently to God for him.

Acts 12:1-5

12:1 begins with the curious phrase... "About that time"

**What time? The period that we've been speaking of the last three weeks. God has been pouring** out his Spirit on the gentiles and it was **a time was a period of measurable success, fruitfulness for the kingdom of God and also opposition. Why have we called this series "The Relentless Gospel"? Because it *has to be*.** The success of the gospel is met with constant unceasing opposition.

**Illus.** Classic story of opposition to the purposes of God is in Nehemiah 4, the story of Israel returning from Babylonian and Persian exile to their land to rebuild their temple.

Nehemiah 4:1-3 "When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became **furious**. He **mocked** the Jews <sup>2</sup> before his colleagues and the powerful men of Samaria and said, "What are these **pathetic Jews** doing? Can they restore it by themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they ever finish it? Can they bring these burnt stones back to life from the mounds of rubble?" <sup>3</sup> Then Tobiah the Ammonite, who was beside him, said, "Indeed, even if a fox climbed up what they are building, he would break down their stone wall!" (what is this, 4<sup>th</sup> grade?)

It was a time of God releasing them from captivity. A time of going back to repopulate their homeland, to rebuild their sacred temple—to restart their festivals and priestly teaching in the temple...**And no sooner do they get there to enjoy the promise of this moment—and trash-talking Sanballat and his crew from Samaria show up furiously mocking the people of God in an attempt to demoralize their work.** Israel is there because God wills it. They are rebuilding their temple because it is the plan and purpose of God. And no sooner do they repair all their gates and outer walls the opposition arrives to taunt them, mock them, and to discourage them from what God has called them to do.

**In Acts 12—this is a time when the Spirit is being poured out on the Gentiles (God is building his new temple consisting of Jew and Gentile united in the same house)** and thousands upon thousands of people are streaming into the church. God's work in Jerusalem—still going strong. Now, hostility increases toward them.

**Transition: In the passage today we'll see that Jesus is humanity's only hope and the enemies of Christ are always at work to stop the forward momentum of this life-changing message about Christ.**

Let's pause and look at a very important character in the story...

**1. Herod represented a futile approach to religion and politics.** Acts 12:1 "About that time King Herod..."

Before we are tempted to come to this passage and view Herod Agrippa I as some mustache twirling villain...

### Background on Herod Agrippa I

- Grandson of Herod the Great
- Educated in Rome along with his best pals Caligula and Claudius—both of whom became Roman Emperors
- The brother of Herodias who married Herod Antipas was denounced by John the Baptist later executed for that.
- He managed to consolidate just about as much territory as Herod the Great.
- First century historian Josephus described him as generous to the Jews, mild in temperament, a competent administrator and ruler, and a close friend to the Pharisaic Party—the zealous Jews who were mostly responsible for opposing Jesus.

Headline: He was loyal to his friends Caligula (who appointed him before being assassinated) and Claudius (who deployed him to Judea's throne) and the Roman empire—but fervently Jewish in his practice and affections. He even convinced Emperor Caligula to remove his statue from the temple mount in order to settle the locals and the religious leaders. Through these kinds of pro-zionist actions, He in turn wins the affections of the Jews and is remembered to be a pious king—obedient to Torah law.

**His problem is that he has set himself against Israel's Messiah and rightful King—Jesus.**

**He is a servant of Imperial Rome**—The Gospel of Jesus was a counter-Imperial message. Christians claimed for Jesus titles that belonged to Caesar alone: Lord (*Kyrios*) Savior (*Soter*) and Son of God (*Uiou Theou*). Christians claimed to have a counter-gospel (*euangelion*) to Caesar's. Caesar's gospel being the royal announcement of the "arrival" (*parousia*) of the emperor's accession to the throne, his victory in battle and his birthday.

The slogan of Rome's Pax Romana (Peace of Rome) was "**Peace and Security.**" That's Caesar's gospel.

- The Gospel of Jesus, by contrast, was a saving message for lost mankind—saving us from sin, death and Hell.
- The Gospel was a subversive message for ungodly rule. Romans 5:17 "If by the one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive the overflow of grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."

**The political system that Herod and his pals Caligula and Claudius represented is the reign of death—through sin.** The best they could ever offer was political peace and security from foreign invasion—the *Ordo Romanus* (order of Rome). Jesus offers you peace with God, security knowing that you are saved and hidden in Christ forever.

**Herod Agrippa is the best they can do.** Politically savvy, Torah observant Jewish king who loves Israel and her people. And King Jesus offers so much more than any political system ever could.

## 2. Nothing the world throws at us can stop the Gospel.

Acts 12:1-3 “About that time King Herod violently attacked some who belonged to the church, <sup>2</sup> and he executed James, John's brother, with the sword.”

**The goal is to stop the mission of the Church. Remember the title of our series “The Relentless Gospel: Acts and the Unstoppable Mission of the Church.”** Herod Agrippa is about to find this out first hand. Obviously, Satan is behind this effort.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 6 that our struggle is not against flesh and blood (humans) but against the rulers, authorities and cosmic powers—spiritual forces in the heavenly realms.

Peter said (1 Pet 5:8) “Be sober-minded, be alert. Your adversary the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, firm in the faith”

**He begins with individuals.** Notice the word “anyone.” Whoever he can, by whatever means he can, to whatever extent he can he will attempt to destroy your life. How does he do it?

- **He starts in the mind.** He will launch incendiary thoughts—flaming arrows into the thatch of (what he hopes) is an ignorant and unkempt mind. **Have you ever gone through something, and then right after that your mind becomes consumed by all that might happen?** To set us on fire with fear, doubt, frustration and deception. This is why folks we must renew our minds in the Word.
- **He gets you to doubt God's promises.** Peter says, “The God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore, establish, strengthen, and support you after you have suffered a little while.” (1 Pet 5:10). God is my salvation, and he himself will come through. He will not abandon me.
- **He gets you to forget who God has made you.** In Christ you and I have been made new creations; heirs of heaven; recipients of a new and greater kingdom; recipients of peace with God and power over sin. But his ploy is to get you to forget all of that and to only identify as your failure; to identify as your past or your tragedy. I'm here to tell you **your tragedy, your loss, your failure does not define who you are.** Jesus Christ defines who you are and he says “your mine.” He says, “your life is hidden in me, renewed in the Holy Spirit, an heir of heaven and new creation.”
- **And if he can't do any of that, well, he'll just keep you preoccupied by in the American cult of leisure.** He'll keep you so sedated with entertainment—you'll be binge-watching something and think “why am I even watching this show?” and leisure that our minds become flabby and foggy—and unready for the battle that lies ahead.

Herod Agrippa attacked individuals within the church. “some who belonged to the church...”

In the same way, Satan will attack you individually, personally.

**He attacks the leadership.** Notice, James the brother of John the Apostle is executed by the sword.

There is an entire list of movements, religions, and governments that Rome had destroyed by simply killing the leader. Kill the leader and shame him by public execution and the movement will quietly go away or at least go underground.

- He attacks the leadership to take them out of commission.
- This results in demoralizing the church in their gospel efforts.
- Resulting further in the loss of momentum.

This is Satan's work. To attack individuals and the leaders and to stop the gospel from going forward.

"At this time King Herod violently attacked the church" and when he saw that this pleased his friends—particularly the Pharisaic party (his good friends)—he then rounds up Peter and puts him in jail to execute him the following day.

**Application: How do we handle success in, and opposition to the gospel? Because these things go hand in hand.**

**I think the first instinct we exercise is to...**

- **Practice generosity**

Acts 11:29 "Each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers and sisters who lived in Judea." God's nature is that he is a giver. For God so loved the world that he *gave...*" The Antioch Church is funding the Mother church in Jerusalem at this point because of the severe famine. Our instinct in times of abundance needs to be giving to those in need.

**Our second instinct should be to...**

- **Habitually give God the glory—making this a heartfelt habit**

Rom 16:25-27 "Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation about Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept silent for long ages <sup>26</sup> but now revealed and made known through the prophetic Scriptures, according to the command of the eternal God to advance the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles— <sup>27</sup> to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ—to him be the glory forever!"

This passage is obviously a doxology to close the book of Romans. **Why do we relentlessly give glory to the only wise God through Jesus the Christ?** Because of who he is and because of what he does. God is good and God is able to strengthen our feeble arms. To hold us up when we feel like we can't carry it anymore.

And God is able to strengthen our resolve to keep moving ahead despite our failures. To keep forging ahead despite unforeseen challenges and temptations. Our focus is to be the glory; the prestige; the fame of our God.

Now, I would argue that we need this *all the more* when times are good. When the coffers are full. When seas are like glass the conditions are balmy. It is in my prosperity and abundance that most often tempt me to forget God. And the church in Antioch is experiencing an overflow—believers pouring into the house of God—money overflowing to support Jerusalem. Times have never been better for them and in these seasons we need to be intentional in our efforts in giving him the ultimate praise for all things.

### Thirdly, we shouldn't forget to...

- **Expect opposition**—the most natural thought to have when trials and suffering hits us is “What did I do to bring this on?” 1 Pet 4:12 Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you, as if something unusual were happening to you. Why does Peter have to tell them this? Because we often surprised by the fiery ordeals we face—feeling isolated in the pain.

**Illus. Every quarterback has to not only train to run plays**—they have train with opposition in their faces. Why? Because that's the way it will be on game day. They pull you aside to train you then re-integrate you back onto the field with a live defense on the other side of the scrimmage line. You see, on game day there will be Guys crashing through that line like hungry animals looking at you like you're on the menu. If they stop you, they stop the advancement of the ball down the field.

God has sovereignly ordained that the church *will go forward in the face of opposition*.

**Peter says, “we shouldn't be surprised when we encounter opposition. The fiery ordeal comes with the deal.”**

### Lastly, we must always be faithful to...

- **Safeguard the sacred**—maintain a life of godliness and prepare to defend the gospel. 1 Tim 4:16 “Pay close attention to your **life** and your **teaching**; persevere in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

We must pay close attention—be intentional about following Christ's teachings. To be formed into the image of God's only Son. We do this through trusting obedience to his word, to what he's commanded.

Prov 6:23 “For a command is a lamp, teaching is a light, and corrective discipline is the way to life.” **Let's just take the 10 commandments for example.** Why did God give Israel his commands? Not to limit their fun but to maximize their flourishing. I have put all kinds of parameters and guardrails on my kids in my home. Most of the time they have been pretty

good about obeying them. On occasion they would break the commands. I'm not talking about things for which there is no law or no knowledge of a law.

God does not hold us accountable for things he has not stipulated. Where there is no law there is no sin.

**Illus. I came home and found a half-eaten bag of sour patch candies on the kitchen table (my favorite).** I thought they tasted kind of slimy, gooey, like they were melted. My Son Hayden came upstairs and saw me eating the candy out of the bag and said, "Oh yeah dad. I saw Logan and Karlee (my 3 and 4 year old kids) licking all the sugar off and putting them back into the bag. I called Karlee upstairs and said, "What did you do to these candies?" She made a little pistol with her fingers and said, "I wicked em." Fairly harmless transgression. **No laws, no commands were broken. No consequences other than me being pretty grossed out.**

**Illus. Hayden playing with my exacto knife.** I had those tools on the top of my shelf in the garage for a reason. He climbed up the shelf in the garage despite my express command not to touch my tools. He began playing with the tool disregarding my instruction to not play with tools like toys—and Tyler (his older brother) jumped up and grabbed it out of his hand—severing the nerve in his hand. For which he had to have reconstructive surgery.

**The command is there as a boundary to help you flourish not to ruin your fun.**

**The Command is also there to remind us of our place.** We are not the little gods of the universe. We are human beings made in his image and fallen into sin—and we need to be reminded that God is God and we are not.

Stay the course.

One of the biggest temptations that we will have in a time when God is pouring out his Spirit and abundance; when the forces of darkness are pushing back on us—**we will be tempted to become lax in our guardianship of the truth; God's Word; and Christ's express commands and teachings.**

And some have compromised with the world's systems—pop-philosophy; worldly trends. And in so doing they have shipwrecked their faith.

Prayer: Father in Heaven, we thank you for your goodness and your abundance—for being a giver and making us a generous people to the Gospel. We recognize that there is no earthly system that can give people peace with God—which only comes through your Gospel. May we be intentional to give you the glory, living and working for your fame and the prestige of your

Series: The Relentless Gospel

Today's Message: The Death of James and Herod's Opposition / May 23, 2021 / Jeff Kennedy

Son. Father would you strengthen us as we encounter opposition to the good news of Christ and may we always safeguard the sacred.