

A Seemingly Immovable King meets God's Unstoppable Kingdom

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[0 : 00] had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the festival of unleavened bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up.

Quick, get up, he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. Then the angel said to him, put on your clothes and sandals, and Peter did so. Wrap your cloak around you and follow me, the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening. He thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen. When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed, and she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, Peter is at the door. You're out of your mind, they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, It must be his angel. But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet, and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this, he said, and then he left for another place. In the morning there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him, and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. He had been quarrelling with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. On the appointed day, Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, This is the voice of a god, not of a man. Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to spread and flourish. Amen.

Thanks very much, Bethany. If we haven't met yet, my name is Robbie. I'm the youth pastor in training here, and it's a joy to be able to come in and preach God's word for you all. The world is a very big place. We live in a world where power is found in size and influence. Often power belongs to whoever speaks the loudest. Now, if that is how power is defined, then it's easy to view the church and Christians as weak, small, almost useless. There's not many of us. We have very little influence over how our country is run, and the loudest voices in culture are often saying that the Christianity is wrong, it's evil. Not just bad, evil. In Scotland in particular, the church seems weak and powerless, and those that stand against the church seem strong, loud, and powerful. It looks bleak when you kind of take that picture. Maybe we're very blessed in size. We might not feel that immediately here, but I promise you that if you leave here, when you leave here, if you're a student, you'll move to another church. And that church is much more likely to be small and struggling and not growing. They can be strong in the faith, but it will not look powerful. How are we meant to carry on as Christians in Scotland when the world looks so big and we feel so small? When the culture speaking against us seems almost immovable? Well, Acts 12 is the story of a weak church standing against a seemingly immovable

[5 : 05] King Herod. But in that encounter, we see that the church is not weak. Instead, Luke reminds us that the church on earth is actually God's unstoppable kingdom. Nothing can stand in its way. So tonight, that's what we're basically going to look at. We're going to see how this immovable object will deal with an unstoppable force coming towards it. We have three points, and they'll come up on the screen.

First, we're going to see the seemingly immovable King Herod, then the seemingly impossible prison escape, before finally looking at the certainty of the unstoppable kingdom of God. So first up, the seemingly immovable King Herod. Acts 12 comes kind of at the end of this section of Acts, where the gospel has moved primarily from Jerusalem out to Judea and Samaria. Peter the apostle had a vision, and basically that vision showed him that the gospel, the message of Jesus Christ that the apostles are teaching is not only for the ethnic Jewish people. In fact, it's for everyone, for Romans, Greeks, for Samaritans. Anyone who's not Jewish is welcome to this wonderful message of Jesus Christ. And this is a big moment, and it's a big movement. It was promised all the way back in Acts chapter 1 that 12 apostles would be Christ's witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. So after taking the message around Judea, Peter headed back to Jerusalem. He was letting everyone know the gospel is for everyone. It's big news. But this news that he brings back actually leads to one of the darkest moments in the early church, one of the darkest periods that the church would have faced in the 10 years it's been around since Pentecost. Look with me to verse 1.

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the swords. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the festival of unleavened breads. Herod, King Herod, the guy who's in charge of that whole area of the world of like where Israel is now basically. He was put in charge by the Romans. Well, he's decided that he's going to persecute the church. We don't really know why. It just says he does. But what we do read is that it hits hard. Very quickly, he probably beheads James, one of the sons of thunder, one of Jesus' closest followers.

He kills him. Herod has decided to set himself up against the church. Herod is the face of this persecution, but really it had been coming from all angles. Herod must have seemed like an insurmountable opponent because he comes with the might of the Roman army and the Roman empire and all the backing of the Jewish leaders in the local area. We see that. The Jews were pleased with what he did.

It met with their approval. All of the political power in Israel stands against the early church. For those Christians, Herod would look like an immovable object that they have no chance standing up against. That pressure must have felt almost physical at times, pressing them in, amplified but with the grief of the loss of James, the impending death of Peter, and all their friends, brothers, sisters, sisters, family members who are also in prison. What on earth were this early church going to do? How were they going to survive against this immovable object? We get verse 5, which is a wonderful little verse. Look with me. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. Peter was stuck in prison facing his death, but the church gathered to pray. Despite the pressure, despite the grief, despite their loss, these faithful believers knew they had no other option.

[9 : 13] They could not stand against Rome, so they gathered together knowing that their gods, the god of the early church, the god of the early church, the god of the early church, the god of the early church, the god of the early king, and the only place that the church could turn when things seemed so dark is to him. Surely if anyone can deal with this seemingly immovable object, it is the god that saved them. It is the god that is their refuge.

I think that verse 5 is a challenge for us, and it's a really timely reminder. When we face the pressure of the world, do we gather and pray? What is our first response when we're reminded of our weakness, our small size, and the hopeless nature when everything else looks so big? Prayer is the safest place for us to go, not just on our own, but together, communally as a church, entering the presence of God in prayer, interceding for those who are struggling against the overwhelming power of the world we live in. We need as a church to gather around these people, just like the church gathered around Peter in prayer as he was locked away. I think specifically, I always find it challenging to pray for the people in our church who are on the front lines against a world that seems insurmountable. Specifically, I think of teachers and those in schools. It is one of the hardest places to be a Christian. I have a friend, I think I've said this story from the front before, he's worked in a school for like four years now, and he's had two warnings from his principal teacher and his head teacher. Those warnings came for owning a Christian book that was passed around the staff room, and secondly, he was given a warning for telling two students what it meant to be a Christian when they asked it.

The pressure of the anti-Christian message feels immovable. So we need to gather to pray when the world seems so big, and we need to gather to pray when tragedy hits, when life feels bleak, when we hear of our mission partners in far reaches of the world where Christianity does not feel strong, we need to gather to pray. It's why we gather all together every month at Central Prayer Meeting, and this Wednesday we have a great opportunity to put this into action. For the early church, Herod's power and might put the church into hiding, but that whole time they spent praying because they knew it seemed impossible.

But that takes us nicely to our second point, the seemingly impossible prison escape. Now, Peter's been taken to prison, and it's not just prison like a normal person. He's not just chucked in a cell and locked up. Either King Herod wants to show off his might as the leader of that nation, or he is really, really scared of a fisherman from Galilee with the message of Jesus Christ. In verse 4, we read that Herod has put 16 guards to watch Peter in prison. That's four watches of four men for throughout the night, and at all times when Peter was in that prison, he had two men chained to his arms. And if that wasn't enough, the other two men were standing at the door of the cell, Peter was not escaping. It seems excessive. I mean, to be fair to Herod, maybe he recalled the last time Peter was in prison with the rest of the apostles. If you look back in Acts 5, don't turn there now, but you can go back tonight, you'll see they were all put in prison, and they walked out because the Lord opened the door for them.

But you know, King Herod, he's bigger. This isn't the religious authorities in prison, and this is King Herod, the big man. Peter is not going to escape again. This time, Peter will stay in prison. You can almost hear him screaming at those guards, making it impossible for him to escape. Spoiler alert, Peter does escape. And really, I think this passage is played up for humor, right? It's good to laugh at this kind of stuff, because I think it's like one of the worst prison escapes ever. I mean, it isn't Shawshank Redemption. It's not Prison Break Season 1.

[13 : 23] It's more like Mr. Bean escapes from prison, or like Prison Break Season 4. Like, it's just ridiculous. It's definitely comedy. Let's just walk through it, right? So look down with me.

Peter's asleep, which to begin with, that's amazing. He's chained to two men, and he's asleep. Good on him. But as he's sleeping, he gets woken by great white light, and a blow into his sight. Like, he's punched to be woken up by this angel.

This is verse 7. He must have thought it was morning. The bright light would have stunned him, and he was about to be executed that day. But instead, rather than a guard, it's an angel. And that angel says, quick, get up. And the chains fall from his arms, and he gets up and follows the angel. Like, shout out to Peter, who's learned. If you know Peter's story in the Gospels, Peter never does anything first time. He always asks questions, or like, has a stupid statement to say. But here, no, he gets up and goes. Because he thinks it's a vision. I don't really know what he thinks this vision would be teaching him, but he thinks it's a vision. So he follows the angel. He goes from between the sleeping chain guards on either side. He goes past the door where the other two guards are meeting, or are sleeping, I don't know, wherever they are. And then the angel tells him to get dressed.

So that's verse 8. So he does. Then they leave the prison. They pass some more guards. They go through a giant iron gate that opens itself in verse 10. And then they make it to the main street in Jerusalem. And all of a sudden, the angel disappears. Suddenly, the bright white light is gone, and Peter's standing there blinking in the darkness, alone. I wonder how long it took him to realize this was real. If he'd thought it was a vision the whole way. You know, if it were me, it would definitely have taken a few minutes. You know that feeling like post-nap, where the world is upside down, and you're like, where's my mom? And then you remember you're 29, and you've slept for an hour? Maybe that's just me. But I think that's the kind of feeling Peter would have had.

He had to shake that mental fog clear to realize that, wait a minute, God has freed me. I'm no longer in prison. And he makes a beeline for the believers who are praying for him. And he thumps on that door, desperately let in, because he knows if he gets caught again, well, it doesn't get worse than execution, but it might be more painful. She's thumping on this door. He's thumping on this door.

[15 : 41] And a servant named Rhoda answers the door. Rhoda's brilliant, isn't she? I wonder if you thought that when it was read out by Bethany. She is so excited that she's heard Peter's voice that she runs in and interrupts the prayer meeting. Guys, guys, Peter, he's at the door. And everyone's like, shut up, Rhoda. No, it's not. They must have had that look on their face where they're like equal parts confused, a little bit of disbelief and a bit of annoyance. That kind of look is what I'm picturing. And they say to her, this is verse 15, you are out of your mind. There's no way it's Peter. That guy is locked up. There are 16 guards on him. He's not escaped. It must be his angel.

What a riot. They're literally praying for Peter's freedom. They're saying it could never be Peter outside. That guy is locked up. And we're trying to pray on what we do next.

And, you know, they're Christians. They're being persecuted. They're praying in secret. So I picture this whole conversation like loud stage whispers because it's night and they're Christian, you know, until all, you know, they're whispering like, Rhoda, no, it can't be Peter.

And they're like, it is Peter. I swear it's Peter. And over that conversation, they just hear that thumping of the door. And they're like, oh, who's at the door? Rhoda will be going off our nuts. Like, it's Peter. Let him in. So they run back. And finally, there he was, Peter the apostle, standing before them. Their prayers had been answered.

The impossible situation, the immovable Herod and the might of Rome have just been one-upped by the sovereign gods. One angel took on a whole squadron of Roman soldiers. It's possible they didn't even think. I imagine these Christians didn't even think in their wildest imagination that God was going to answer their prayers like that. And as they prayed, maybe that doubt was niggling in the back of their mind. But God really does move. And he moves in ways we could never, ever comprehend.

[17:37] Acts 12 helps us see that we should pray often with together, but also expect God to do miracles. He does bigger things than we can ever imagine. So after they finally clock on that it is Peter, he quietens them down quickly. He knows this is urgent. He explains that he can't stay in Jerusalem, tell James, the brother of Jesus, and the other leaders what's happened, and I'm going. And he leaves the city, not for good, but at least for the next little while. And as he moves on, he takes the gospel message with him. This impossible prison break has become a reality. And it is this reality that leads to the unstoppable growth of the kingdom of God, which leads us nicely on to our final point of tonight, point three, the certainty of the unstoppable kingdom. Now if the first part of our passage tonight painted Herod as an immovable object, with the whole power of Rome behind him, standing against God's kingdom, well then this last section opens our eyes to what he really is. And that's nothing compared to the sovereign gods. He is just a man. Now as soon as he realizes that Peter has escaped, he's fuming. Verse 19, he interrogates the guards, he searches for Peter, can't find him, and so they've not done their job. He executes all 16 of them. We see again the vicious streak of Herod Agrippa, who takes just after his father, kill anybody who gets in the way, or is a problem. But he isn't just painted as vicious here, right? I think Acts 12 and this little section paints him as a vain and arrogant man. He is someone who loves being told how great he is. He has power and he loves using it for his own gain, no matter who's hurt by it. So we're looking now at verses, this is 18 to 24, and specifically 20 to 23. But we see this little interaction between Herod and representatives from Tyre and Sidon. That's an area nearby in that, he was king of that area. But he'd been quarreling with them. And it seems that in this quarrel, Herod was withholding food from these people. We see that in verse 20. They depended on the king's country for their food supply. In this quarrel, he was holding it from them. But they find an audience, they make a friend in the courts, and they needed food. So they go to him, begging. They were desperate to squash the beef so they could get food for everyone. They needed the ally in the courts. And boy, does it look like Herod loved this situation. And he really hams it up. Let's look at verse 21. On the appointed day, Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. He put on his finest outfit, sat on his biggest throne to make sure these people who were coming to ask him for food knew he was in charge. And he made a lovely, big, long, showy speech. He's making a show.

And to be fair to these people who've come to him, they play their part. They know exactly what Herod wants, and they give it to him. In verse 22, they shout, this is the voice of a god, not a man.

Whether they believe that or not, it's hard to tell. But it does tell us a lot about Herod's. He loves it. He's lapping this praise up, but not for too long, because he immediately collapses.

An angel of the Lord appears and strikes him down. Why does that happen? Well, Herod has attempted to take God's place. He's attempted to take the glory that is due only to the gods who created all things. Herod lived for his power and authority, and he was deserving of this judgment. Herod should absolutely have known better than this, right? He was the king of the Jewish people, and he was a Jew himself. He knew that the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

That's from something called the Shema, a verse from the Old Testament that the Jews believe. The Lord our God is one, and Herod is not that one God. So God immediately sends his angel to enact the judgment that Herod had earned. His life is forfeit for the rejection and attempt to put himself higher than the Lord's. Now, Josephus is an ancient historian. He was alive around the time when this happens. I think he died around 100 AD is what they think. And he wrote down the history of the Jewish people in this era, and he actually wrote down about this story. He was a Jewish man. He wasn't a Christian, but he details that Herod wore this bright, shining silver robe, and how he spoke on this throne, this huge, long speech, until they called him a God. And in a very, very similar way, in almost the exact same terms, Josephus says, then as suddenly as the Christ came up, he collapsed with severe bowel pain. Josephus says, Herod spends five days in bed before dying. Now, when it was read out,

[22 : 34] I guarantee we all got to verse 23 and went, wait, worms did what now? Now, I think Josephus' explanation might help us try and figure out what happened, but the answer is we don't really know.

What I do think, well, what I don't think happened is that he was like, he collapsed and these giant worms came up and ate him whole like it was some mini dune, you know? I don't think it's anything like that. But rather, what it sounds like is that he collapsed, and it's possible he died from some parasite, some worms that ate him from the inside out. This bowel pain he had killed him.

That's just putting two things together. We don't know. The thing we know is an angel came, struck him in judgment, and he died. That's the important bit to take away. Herod flew far too high above his station, and he paid the price by forfeiting his life.

As he stood before all the people in his shining, glorious robes, he collapses. That seemingly immovable object, King Herod of Rome and Judea, is no more.

He was no gods. He was just a man. I can only imagine how the early church felt when that happens. The immovable object that was causing them so much stress, fear, pain, grief, has been cast aside by the sovereign Lord. Verse 23 and 24 gives us this beautiful picture of the reality. It's looked like Herod is in charge, but immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to spread and flourish. When a seemingly immovable object meets the unstoppable force of the sovereign gods, the unstoppable force will win out every single time.

[24 : 26] Herod has come and gone, but the kingdom of God grows and thrives. Nothing can stop it. Not the most powerful man in Judea with his army and his wealth and his power. In fact, the reality is of Acts 12, it seems like Herod's plan to imprison Peter just to please the Jews has actually ended up furthering the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because Peter was imprisoned and escaped, he had to leave the city.

He had to go to the towns farther away to preach the gospel there. He spread that the good news is not just for Jews, but for Gentiles too. For anyone who would listen, Jesus Christ died for them. That they did not have to face the judgment that Herod did. Because Herod thought he was so clever and thought he'd imprisoned Peter, the Lord used that situation to grow his kingdom. As Peter leaves the city, Luke, the writer of Acts moves us further away from the city. Really, in the book of Acts, we only come back to Jerusalem once or twice. The action moves out to the rest of the world. Herod's imprisoning inadvertently led to this movement and the growth of this movement. God's kingdom is not slowed down by the powers of the world. It cannot be stopped. There is nothing that is actually an immovable object when it stands against the unstoppable force of God. It might seem like it at the time.

But just like it seemed like Herod was immovable, he was cast aside. It'll be the exact same when anyone sets themselves up against the unstoppable force of the sovereign God, of his kingdom growth.

It has always been true and it always will be true. God was unstoppable when Herod stepped up and took on the church. God was unstoppable when Nero, Emperor Nero of Rome, tried to do the same 200 years later. God was unstoppable when Karl Marx stood up to try and smother out the opiate of the masses that the atheistic revolution might win. God is unstoppable today when the world tries to write off Christianity as useless, offensive. When it tries to stand in the way of God's kingdom, God is still unstoppable. The power of the western world and the people who say that what we believe is not true is not good. It seems like an immovable object. But we've seen tonight that that means absolutely nothing. Because the creator God is sovereign over all things. He is sovereign over the prison that Peter was stuck in. He's sovereign over the situation that overcame the early church.

And he was sovereign over Herod's life from birth to death. Just like God is sovereign over every place we find ourselves. God is sovereign over the situations that seem so bleak to us today.

[27:17] And he's sovereign over anyone who would stand against him. Whoever they are, they cannot stand against the unstoppable force of the gospel. So when the world starts to feel like it is pressing in around us, like we are small, like we are weak, like we have nothing to do. When we find ourselves in a church where there is limited growth. When it seems like no one wants to hear what we have to say.

When we find ourselves in a church that is small and we are struggling. When we hear the news of our brothers and sisters around the world struggling in the darkest times when the government are trying to kill them for believing in Jesus. When these things happen, we can turn to the God who is victorious in all of history. He always has been and he always will be. No matter how it looks or feels at the time.

This is the same God who still moves for his glory. He still moves for his kingdom to grow. Even when we don't understand how. The kingdom has not stopped once since Jesus rose from the grave. It will not stop now. So take comfort, brothers and sisters, in the face of a dark and difficult world that seems immovable. Because the sovereign God's and his kingdom growth is unstoppable. Let me pray.

Father God, we know how hard it can be to live for you in this world. Lord, we feel pressure from those around us to stay quiet or to live life their way and not your way. Father, we thank you for the reminder in Acts 12 that you are unstoppable. There is nothing that can stand against you.

Father God, as we leave church tonight and go out into our weeks, may we be comforted and strengthened by the truth that you are for us and your kingdom will never fail. Lord, I pray that you would encourage us to gather together and pray when things are hard and that we would see the way you are moving in our lives and the way you answer our prayer. Lord, I thank you that all of this is true because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that he died and rose again, that all may come in and be known as your children. I pray these things in your holy name. Amen.