

POLITICS AND POWER

Acts 12:1-25

Sermon for Peace Church

September 28, 2008

PURPOSE – To call forth commitment to the Word of God & prayer for the power of God.

MAIN IDEA – Because the power of God stands behind the word of God, we are people of hope and prayer.

I. INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bibles to ACTS 12.

1. *You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea & Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

- That PROMISE of Jesus FRAMES this book of Acts – which we've been reading through these past 6 months.

- It's a promise for US – and our life in this age. As we walk in the presence and power of the Spirit, our lives shall be witnesses of God's kingdom on earth in Jesus - a kingdom which will never end ... a kingdom of truth / beauty / goodness ... a kingdom for ALL people!

- Luke wrote the account of the Acts of a Spirit-driven church in order that we continue this story in our day. You have a MISSION in this cause.

(i) Today's chapter brings us to a place at which we're going to hit the PAUSE button on our journey through this book.

- In October & November, we're shifting to a new series on "What Love is Like". It may be in 2009, we pick up the remaining chapters of this book, probably in our evening services.

2. Acts 12 is a good place to break because it is a unique chapter inserted into the flow of Acts just prior to a new missionary phase in the expansion of the church. The chapter's PURPOSE is to show us that the GOSPEL – the cause that we're about – is UNSTOPPABLE!

- As we covered last Sunday in Acts 11, Saul and Barnabas have just teamed up in ministry in Antioch. Together they're about to travel from the Middle East, across the Roman Empire, spreading the Word of Jesus. Acts 13 is the story of their first mission trip. Paul then takes a 2nd & 3rd trip also described in this book. (The story shifts directly onto him.)

(i) How many here have been on a Mission Trip of some sort? Cary?

(In some ways our whole church is seeking to go on a mission trip to build ministry in our community – more about that next Sunday.)

A. Before you go on those mission trips, you huddle together – pray / draw from the Word – time of dedication / encouragement.

I.e. – I recall, 2 years ago, a circle in Fellowship Hall ... I've spoken at services of youth about to depart on a mission trip. There & then, it's helpful to remind people of the GREAT CAUSE they're part of = the UNSTOPPABLE GOSPEL

3. Chapter 12 is that kind of “mission-send off” message in the story of Acts.

READ ACTS 12

4. Verse 24 – *“But the word of God continued to increase & spread.”*

= THE UNSTOPPABLE GOSPEL

John Stott summarizes our reading with these words:

The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the Word of God triumphing. Such is the power of God to overthrow hostile human plans and to establish his own in their place.”

The gospel is UNSTOPPABLE because the power of God Almighty is with that Word!

(i) MISSION-TRIPPERS – this story is for you!

You're on the WINNING SIDE! = God's side!!! (no matter how tough things seem)
Have hope ... take strength!

When you're inclined to think your mission is impossible because of how great the opposing powers are, think of Peter & Herod, think of this story of God's power with us ... This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

There are 2 MAIN POINTS in this chapter – accessing that power & aligning ourselves with that power.

II. POLITICAL FOLLIES

1. God's power is set in CONTRAST to Herod's. Let's begin there.

The Herod in this chapter is Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great – the one who slaughtered the infants in Bethlehem when Jesus was a baby. That psycho-Herod also murdered his own son, Agrippa's father. Agrippa grew up & became known as the playboy of the Roman Empire (not unusual for fatherless boys). He loved the praise of men – another symptom of someone struggling for identity. The Emperor Caligula eventually assigned him to rule the territories around Palestine.

One commentator writes, *"In this responsibility, Herod was the quintessential politician who knew how to court the Jews. He used his influence to keep the Emperor Caligula from erecting a statue of himself as god in the Jewish temple. He moved the seat of government from Caesarea to Jerusalem. He began reconstruction of the city's northern wall. He knew that to keep Rome happy, he had to keep the Jews happy. He came to view Jewish Christians as disruptive. It is possible that he was conniving with the Jewish Sanhedrin (= religious legal leaders), a group which already was taking severe measures against the church. So Herod arrested a number of the Christians and had James, the brother of John, beheaded.*

(i) These actions, v. 3, PLEASED the Jews. They sent his approval rating numbers SOARING!

= political expediency ... doing what's popular, who cares about justice?

- The beheading is a political windfall ... who else?

A. To debate or not debate? What's going to help my ratings? (It's often what politics seem to degenerate to.)

When you love the praise of men, you must beware of doing the popular thing at the expense of doing the right thing. That is not godly leadership. Young people, face up to peer-pressure when it comes to gossip and drinking and cheating and ignoring the needs of others. Do the right thing, not the popular thing. You'll face that choice many times in life! The earlier you train yourself in that choice, the clearer and easier it becomes.

2. Herod loved the praise of men – and, on the surface, this put the cause of Jesus in serious jeopardy. He has PETER – THE Christian leader – arrested & put in prison – to also be kangaroo-courted & beheaded. This was only 12 years after Jesus had died & rose – 44 AD. Christian leadership was yet largely in the Palestine region over which Herod ruled.

Would all the leaders be imprisoned & executed?

Could the cause be stopped?

WOULD THE message of Jesus BE EXTERMINATED?

(i) No! Never! - because this is God's world. Yes, it's currently enemy-occupied. But God has come in Jesus to reclaim the story of this world. And His is the power and dominion forever – and He is committed to the increase & spread of the word of Jesus.

He protects His people. He dismantles & installs governments. He removes Herod.

His is the power still with us today – it is our hope & confidence!

III. GOD PROTECTS HIS PEOPLE

1. God protects His people. The deliverance of Peter from prison is a CLASSIC story. It's one of those stories – maybe you learned it in Sunday School – that leave you in wonder!

4 sets of 4 guards ... Peter walks right out with the angel, shackles fall off ... doors swing open on their own ... he thinks he's dreamin' ... till the angel leaves him in the street ... WOW! – where am I? ... I'm free!

Goes to the house of his friends – RHODA leaves him standing there knocking!

(humorous) – the miracle's even too great for the Christians to believe!

Then Peter goes into hiding ... the guards are executed by Herod (politically, that saves his skin)! = A GREAT STORY!

(i) ... One that Charles Wesley had in mind when he wrote that hymn about the wonder of his salvation: AND CAN IT BE?

Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast-bound in sin and nature's night

Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;

My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose went forth and followed Thee

Amazing love – how can it be that you, my Lord, shouldst die for me?!

- A. Like Peter, when God saves us, we're sleeping in the darkness of sin ... we're chained to the pulses of the world & flesh ... we're blind to the glory of God ... we're sentenced to eternal death
- B. Like Peter, our salvation is wholly of God's doing
- C. Like Peter, we're saved because God is committed to the increase & spread of the word of Jesus. That's why we're delivered from sin's prison – not to waste time at Vanity Fair.

2. Peter's deliverance was occasioned by prayer. This is not to be missed. It is a significant point of that story.

Verse 5 – *So Peter was kept in prison, BUT the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*

(i) That's a BIG BUT!

So Peter was kept in prison ... BUT the church prayed "earnestly" – "fervently, without ceasing" are other translations

"MOST STRENUOUSLY" is how The Message describes those prayers.

A. Yes, God's is the power & dominion – but PRAYER is our responsibility – it shows God what our hearts LONG for.

"You have not cause you ask not" – James 4:2 ... but you ask not cause you care not"

B. Prayer PLUG US INTO God's power

Yes, God can supersede prayer and deliver Peter without it. But He has chosen the means of prayer to engage us in Kingdom building.

(i) That BIG BUT is put in that story in the context of James' execution. Yes, some prayer would have been offered for his need.

God chose to allow that beheading. One of the results of that, however, was that upon Peter's imprisonment, the church got TOGETHER prayed "most strenuously".

- Not just individually, TOGETHER they got to praying. = CORPORATE PRAYER.

It's what we do to invoke the power of God into the needs of our mission together!

Individual prayer for individual mission; corporate prayer for corporate mission.

(ii) Thomas Watson states: *"The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel!"*

A. B. Simpson adds: *Prayer is the link that connects us with God. It is the bridge that spans every gulf and bears us over every abyss of danger or of need. How significant is this picture of the NT church: Peter in prison, the Jews triumphant, Herod supreme, the arena of martyrdom awaiting the dawning of the morning. "But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him."*

And what is the sequel? The prison open, the apostle free, the Jews baffled, the wicked king divinely smitten, and the Word of God rolling on in greater victory. Do we know the power of our supernatural weapon? Do we dare to use it with the authority of faith? God grant us

holy audacity and divine confidence. God is not wanting great men and women, but He is wanting men and women who will dare to prove the greatness of their God.

- THAT'S PRAYER

Herod has the power of the sword. We have the power of God ... through prayer.

IV. HEROD'S DEATH

Committed to the increase & spread of His unstoppable Word, God's power protects His people AND removes pompous authority.

After Peter's deliverance, our chapter returns to Herod's downfall.

1. He's in Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast. A lobby-group from areas north of Palestine come to meet with him. Galilee is the bread-basket of that area. They need to curry favor with Herod to ensure food supply. Herod steps out to speak (a media-briefing, perhaps) and they adulate:

"This is the voice of a god, not a man"

He should have known where they were coming from. Instead, he soaks it in. He loves the praise of man. He does not give God glory and is struck down by a lowly tapeworm.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, records in a separate account that in 44 AD Herod Agrippa was suddenly struck by violent pain in his belly. After 5 days of awful suffering, he died at 54 years of age. The Bible explains – that's God's power & judgment.

Steven Cole comments: *"To seek glory for ourselves is to declare war against God. God will not give his glory to another (Is. 46:11). If we seek to exalt ourselves, the Lord will surely humble us. We must all beware of the temptation of pride, of taking credit for ourselves when it is God alone in His mercy who deserves the praise. And to declare war against God is to commit eternal suicide, because God always wins. Herod's glory was short-lived, and his misery is eternal."*

- (i) Self-Exaltation - It's easy to do – when you have a stadium full of people cheering on your name – it's would seem to me pretty easy to get full of one's self.

That temptation faces not only politicians:

- a. When the bank account is flush – yea I'm working hard ... > "It's me!"
- b. When you turn into your driveway & glance at your nice house ...
- c. When the company is growing and has a good year-end ...

... HEROD DID NOT GIVE PRAISE TO GOD! ... and he is removed from office!

2. In Daniel 2:21, it states, *“God changes times & seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.”* Later, in chapter 4, when Nebuchadnezer boasts, *“Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power for the glory of my majesty?”* ... a voice came from God and said, *“You will eat grass like an ox ... until you have learned that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and give it to whom he wills.”*

Because God’s power is committed to the increase & spread of the word of Jesus, He **DISMANTLES & INSTALLS GOVERNMENTS**

3. Our point of application is straightforward – because of this, let’s **ALIGN** ourselves with that value.

- In God’s vision of this age, governments come & go. They are set up & removed.

The word of Jesus is the story – spreading, increasing – the kingdom, eternal life!

Governments are subservient to this cause.

(i) That’s not to say that government & politics are unimportant. Romans 13:4 teaches that Civil Authorities are God’s “servants” to do you good, “an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer”.

Biblically, government finds meaning in God’s justice & truth – like all vocations.

We too are glad that we can participate in the formation & exercise of our government. We take that responsibility seriously, as we vote and write and campaign for issues of justice.

Likewise we pray for those in authority. At this time of year we ask God to bring into office those who will honor the values of his kingdom.

A. But we do all that **MINDFUL** – especially in this season of election fever – that God’s **FIRST AGENDA** item in this age is the increase & spread of the Word of Jesus.

(ii) To align ourselves with this value means:

A. To begin a day nourish ourselves personally with **THAT WORD** – before we read, watch or hear all the politics in the newspaper, on radio / TV, internet

B. To keep this Word as the **TOUCHPOINT** in the relationships of our homes. Men, as head of your marriages & families, ensure that the Word of Jesus is read & discussed & prayed through in our homes.

C. Giving ourselves to the work of the church where we can. That’s what we’re about! – the Word of Jesus – in classes & programs & groups of all ages.

Because God is invested in the Word of Jesus, **I WILL BE!**

V. CONCLUSION

1. Last weekend, I ran in South Holland's 10 Km. "Heritage Haul". The pace I go (slow!) makes it possible to converse with others while we run – and it turned out that I ran most of that race with an acquaintance from Restoration Ministries – Kevin. What a blessing!

We got talking about the work of God in our lives. He told me the story of how broken his life had become by alcohol – ruining his marriage and family, landing him in prison. His failures had gotten to the point where he had no hope and was near to suicide. He was so ashamed of himself that he couldn't face the future.

Then in prison he heard the word of Jesus. He heard the word about a God who actually forgave him; who didn't hold his failures against him. With that knowledge he began the journey of living with this God and learning to forgive himself all his failure. That was the hardest thing to do – to deal with how defeated he was about himself.

The word of Jesus changed his life and is now freeing himself from powers that prevent him from living for others. His relationship with his children is improving. He even is getting along with his ex-wife.

He is finding a reason – THE REASON – to live: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

2. The Word of God changes lives – like no other power on earth.

Yes, governments are important and they can INFLUENCE our life.

The word of Jesus TRANSFORMS our lives.

But governments can't lead a person to overcome such a deep sense of personal shame. Governments can't lead a person into a forgiveness so great, they can begin again.

Only the word of God in Jesus can do that.

- (i) That's why we ALIGN our lives to this cause.
 - a. What can overcome our addictions & lusts?
 - b. What can bring wisdom to succeed in love? To bring Joy in life? Peace?
 - c. What alone is truth?

THE WORD OF JESUS CHANGES LIVES

Governments come & go – but that word will continue to increase & spread ... because God's is the power & dominion forever. AMEN!