

## Sermon 40, The Reign of Christ Over Enemies, Pt. 2, Acts 12

**Proposition:** The persecution of James and Peter culminated in the death of Herod Agrippa I, because Christ reigns over those who attempt to persecute His church.

- I. Persecution, vv. 1-5
  - A. James Killed, v. 2
  - B. Peter Imprisoned, vv. 3-5
- II. Rescue, vv. 6-17
  - A. It Begins and Ends with Prayer, vv. 5, 12
  - B. It Was Accomplished by God Through an Angel, vv. 6-10
  - C. It Demonstrates God's Power over Enemies, v. 11
  - D. It Is both Entertaining & Edifying, vv. 13-17
- III. Revenge, vv. 18-23
  - A. On the Guards, vv. 18-19
  - B. On Herod, vv. 20-23
- IV. Renewal, vv. 24-25
  - A. Through the Spread of the Word, v. 24
  - B. Through the Completion of Barnabas' and Saul's Ministry, v. 25

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have seen the power of Christ's reign in many cases and places. Luke has shown how Jesus reigns in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. He has shown the kingdom expanding to include Gentiles. And now, he shows us how Christ reigns over enemies like Herod Agrippa I. It's important to see that the reign of Christ means that in the end, it turns out His way. But in the middle, His reign is compatible with suffering and death and failure on the part of His servants. Christ reigns even over enemies — but that doesn't mean that all the enemies love us like Jesus does, or that they have all become friends or will all become friends. But if they aren't converted, they will meet with their just deserts because Jesus reigns.

#### I. Persecution, vv. 1-5

Our passage begins with the story of persecution. Once again, a Herod is persecuting the people of God. This is not Herod the great, who killed the boys of Bethlehem. It is not his son, Herod Agrippa, who killed Jesus or at least cooperated with Pilate in killing him. It is yet another Herod, Herod Antipas, who briefly ruled this part of the Roman world. Luke doesn't bother us with all the distinctions between the Herods, because, as he rightly surmises, no one really cares. Rather, what's important is that one of the longtime enemies of the people of God is at it again.

In other words, in a book that is about the certainty of the reign of Christ, Luke feels no need to gloss over the reality that earthly rulers can and do stand against Christ and His people. Indeed, Luke portrays this as completely normal, both in his gospel and here in Acts. That is just

the way the world is. The reign of Herod is not a threat to the reign of Christ — rather, it's vice-versa. The reign of Christ is a threat to the reign of Herod, which is why when Herod hears about Him, or about His followers, Herod "is troubled" — and all Jerusalem with him! You better believe he's troubled. The message Jesus brings is that earthly loyalties are not ultimate. Earthly rulers' days are numbered. A kingdom that cannot be shaken is on the horizon, and it invites men and women to give it their highest allegiance, so that they no longer need to fear the whips and swords of earthly tyrants like Herod.

That is why Luke does not have to censor the death of James and the imprisonment of Peter. These things happen even though Jesus reigns. They are not evidence that He is no longer reigning. They are evidence that His reign is not yet consummated. They are evidence that we need to keep evangelizing so that people like Herod can become people like Paul. But they are not evidence that we should give up because Jesus is not really in charge anyway.

#### **A. James Killed, v. 2**

Right away, we are told that James was killed. Just as he did with the bad news about Judas, Luke doesn't try to hide it. He states it forthrightly: James suffered the ultimate penalty. This is not unknown for Christians. In fact, martyrdom is a thing. It is not an incredibly common thing, but it is a real thing. And it can happen even though Jesus reigns.

#### **B. Peter Imprisoned, vv. 3-5**

Well, being a good politician, Herod was more than willing to serve his constituents more of whatever it was they were liking. And so he imprisoned Peter during Passover — right at the same time of year that Jesus was arrested. The parallels are obvious.

Notice, too, that the thoroughly discredited temple leadership is not averse to encouraging the state to wreak havoc on its religious foes. Would that such an attitude were confined to a specific race or ethnicity. In that era, Jews persecuted Christians. In many other places and times, Christians have persecuted Jews. Hindus persecute Muslims in India, and Muslims persecute Christians in Saudi Arabia and Iran. The hatred and malice never stops, at least not until the perpetrators have truly surrendered to the rule of Jesus.

So get this straight: If you're following Jesus, you can go to prison. You can even go to the chopping block. That doesn't mean that He has stopped reigning. You know how people will often tell you how something worked out perfectly for them, and then add "It was such a God thing"? Well, Luke is telling us the opposite. Here's a time where things didn't work out for James, not at all, and yet Jesus still reigns.

### **II. Rescue, vv. 6-17**

#### **A. It Begins and Ends with Prayer, vv. 5, 12**

And one way the church expressed their confidence in the reign of Christ was to go and pray. The church got together for earnest corporate prayer. They did not just pray alone. They gathered in a big group because they were really serious about this.

If you've been to prayer meetings and seen what proportion of them is genuine prayer, you no longer wonder about the state of our nation and world. It's obvious why the world is in such rotten shape. It's because the church has forgotten how to make earnest prayer to God. We

are good at half-hearted prayer. But earnest prayer, in which the overwhelming majority of God's people join to pour out their hearts together? Please. I have never been in a church where a majority of the congregation attended prayer meeting. They exist. But they are vanishingly rare.

But God's rescue of Peter began and ended with prayer. The church is getting together to pray for Peter in v. 5, and Luke mentions it again in v. 12 to make sure you got the message. Many were gathered together and were praying.

When we ask together, God often says yes. He doesn't always, but He often does.

#### **B. It Was Accomplished by God Through an Angel, vv. 6-10**

So God answered the prayers of His church by sending His angel into the cell. What happened to the guards? We don't know. Peter was being guarded by four squads of four soldiers who relieved each other every three hours. He was chained to one on each side, while the other two stood guard at the door. To have 16 men spending all their work time watching a single prisoner is a tremendous investment. And it was a pointless investment. When God decides to deliver Peter or anyone else from prison, it literally doesn't matter how many guards there are or how secure the prison is. The angel whacked Peter hard to wake him up. His chains fell off, he got dressed, and they took off out the door, past two guard posts, into the streets of Jerusalem, and then down one street before the angel left.

#### **C. It Demonstrates God's Power over Enemies, v. 11**

Peter thought it was another vision. He had not the slightest expectation of escaping with 16 soldiers watching him. He was sound asleep; having committed his soul to God, he was ready to die for Jesus. But God had other plans, and when Peter finally snapped out of it and realized that he was actually free, walking down the streets of Jerusalem at 2 in the morning, he said "Now I know for sure that Jesus reigns even over His enemies." And then he names those enemies: Herod and the Jews. Both were out to get him. God had delivered him from them and their expectations. They thought they had him; God said "No you don't."

God reigns over all His and our enemies. Sometimes He lets them arrest us; sometimes they kill us. Sometimes He delivers us from their hands. Either way, God's power is demonstrated. You can safely commit yourself to the reign of Christ!

#### **D. It Is both Entertaining & Edifying, vv. 13-17**

And, of course, this hilarious scene with Rosie the housemaid is a classic in its own right. Rosie is the classic ditz, so amazed that Peter is free that she doesn't even realize the need to let him in. Finally Peter gets let in, and he tells them all about how his escape happened. Then he gets out of Dodge before Herod's goons can catch up with him again.

### **III. Revenge, vv. 18-23**

The next scene pivots to God's revenge on those who sought to harm His people. Yes, I use the word revenge. Revenge is not evil. Revenge is only evil when carried out by the wrong agent, i.e., by the victim. Revenge is a pleasure too great for mortals. That should be obvious. We don't know when to stop; we do not carry it out justly. The Almighty does. And Luke shows us what revenge He took, as a reminder that it is not Herod who reigns; it is Jesus Christ. And you better submit to Christ, even if doing so means defying Herod.

#### **A. On the Guards, vv. 18-19**

Herod thought *he* was getting revenge on the guards. He slaughtered at least four men, and maybe sixteen men. Luke does not tell us if only the guards who were on duty at the time of the escape got it in the neck. But though Herod executed the guards for losing Peter, behind this we can see the hand of Jesus, who executed the guards for holding Peter. The guards had cooperated in Herod's effort to resist Christ's kingdom, and they failed miserably in stopping Jesus' reign. So naturally, they die.

#### **B. On Herod, vv. 20-23**

Herod's fate is even more memorable. He gets flattered by the crowd after his speech — a speech Luke doesn't bother to record. No one cares what Herod says; the "voice of a god" is a voice no more worth listening to than any C-Span clip pulled out of the archives at random. Yet the people applaud Herod as divine. Maybe they are sincere; maybe they are just trying to ensure that they have a good food supply. Either way, it doesn't matter. God strikes down the one who had struck down His apostle and tried to strike down a second apostle. And so he gets eaten by worms.

Again, whose kingdom do you want to submit to? Herod's or Jesus'?

#### **IV. Renewal, vv. 24-25**

The final two verses speak of the renewal that took place in the wake of this demonstration of Christ's power over enemies.

##### **A. Through the Spread of the Word, v. 24**

The first sign of renewal is the spread of the word. Herod is down, but the word is not down. It is up and running, growing and multiplying. More and more and more people are hearing the word and believing in it.

##### **B. Through the Completion of Barnabas' and Saul's Ministry, v. 25**

And Saul and Barnabas, who looked at the end of the last chapter like they were going to show that they had power over money, sure-enough do. They completed their ministry in Jerusalem. They got famine relief to the saints there. They physically enacted the unity of Jew and Gentile in the new entity called the Church by bringing Gentile-funded famine relief to the ethnically Jewish church in Jerusalem.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus reigns. His people might die in persecution, but you can't keep them down forever. His people have power over money; they have power over death itself because they worship a Lord who came out of the tomb. Submit to Him!

Amen.