

## INTRODUCTION

The subject of Acts seems to change in this chapter. Until now the church has been active; here it is passive. Until now it has been about conversions to Christ; here it is about opposition and persecution. Until now it has been about the kingdom of God; here it is about an earthly king – Herod.

The scenario is familiar. Christians sometimes think the things of Christ are confined within a small part of life and ‘reality’ lies elsewhere. This story addresses that problem.

## KING HEROD WAS THE CHURCH’S MAIN ENEMY

He was a grandson of Herod who lived when Jesus was born, and a nephew of the Herod who killed John the Baptist. The family was not Jewish and was conscious of being unpopular.

In common with others in the family he was a cruel man. The story begins with his murder of the Apostle James.

The church’s enemy was the civil government of the day. There was no power as great. It is one thing for individuals in society to act against the church; it is another when society’s government does so. There is no escape.

Herod’s action was triggered by his ‘need’ for popularity. The beheading of James pleased many of the people. He saw an opportunity to ingratiate himself with them. The injustice of his action did not trouble him. The church was caught between popular feeling and government power.

The hostility was directed against the name of Jesus, and so against God himself.

They hated the disciples because they hated God. That is the case still.

In spite of his power Herod was frustrated. He found that Peter, his intended victim, had vanished from prison. He had succeeded in killing James; now he found himself confronted with a power he did not understand.

The end came for Herod when he came into direct conflict with God. The populace declared him to be a god, rather than merely human. That was a common way of addressing Caesar. When Herod accepted the honour due to God alone he met his end – “the angel of the Lord struck him down”. That was seen as the greatest evil throughout Bible history – Old Testament idolatry, and the temptation of Jesus – “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” When hostility reaches that level we can expect God to intervene.

## SIMON PETER WAS HIS MAIN VICTIM

Peter already had the sorrow of seeing a fellow apostle executed. He felt the smell of evil, and saw its effect on the young church.

On his arrest Peter found himself helpless. It would have taken a miracle to escape from Roman captivity. In spite of the many healings associated with him this was something he could not do. He had to endure it.

He faced the prospect of a similar fate to that of James. There would be a show trial, and he would face public humiliation as justice was denied, as happened to Jesus.

In spite of that he slept soundly the night before he was due to be killed; Christ gives his people peace – at worst they would only hasten his entry to heaven.

God sent his angel and set Peter free. The guards did not see; the doors were opened. Peter found himself awake and at liberty, while the others were asleep and unaware they had lost their prisoner.

The first thing he did was report to the church. They were his family. They were concerned for him, and for the effect it could have on them. It was a selfless act of compassion, very different from Herod's selfish act of injustice.

#### THE CHURCH OF CHRIST SEEMED HELPLESS

During this period the church seemed to be helpless. They could not protect themselves from despotic government. They could not free their brother. They had no power if a tide of persecution resulted (as it did in the case of Stephen). They were highly vulnerable.

The only thing they could do was to pray. It was an admission of weakness. The only power that might save Peter was that of God. This was their request.

They could do more than ask for his pity. They had argue that Peter was suffering as a result of his loyalty to God; knowing God's character they cold expect that God would support his servant – "Those who honour me I will honour, and those who despise me will be lightly esteemed" (1 Samuel 2:30). They knew that God takes note of what people do for him, and is not unjust so will not ignore it. On the other hand, Herod's actions were unjust and hostile to God. Their prayer had justice on its side.

#### HEROD CAME TO NOTHING; CHRIST'S WORD SPREAD EVERYWHERE

The story ends with the death of Herod, a death linked with his contempt for God. His success was temporary. He even lost his prisoner, Simon Peter. And at the moment of his highest honour he was struck down. He lost his power, and he lost himself.

Luke deliberately contrasts this with the fortunes of the gospel – "But the Word of God increased and multiplied."

Christ is at work in the world as well as the church. We may not see it, but he will act when the time is right. Our earthly life may seem to have little to do with the gospel, but Christ is using our circumstances to pursue his own aims.

Whatever opposition may come to the church and gospel of Christ it is nothing compared to Christ's power. He may permit persecution, but he will not permit defeat. "No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper, and you shall condemn every tongue that rises in judgement against you" (Isaiah 54:17).

We have every reason to go on in the faith of Christ. But our only strength and security lie in God, and we must access that resource by fervent prayer. Then we shall see our God giving victory to his Christ and his people.