

Acts 12:20-25, No. 27**“Reading the Signs”****April 3, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We’ve been away from Acts for several Sunday mornings and return to it at a paragraph that relates an incident that has, at first glance, little obvious connection to the main drift of the narrative to this point. It is not about what the Christians were doing to spread the gospel or how they were enduring persecution, the subjects of the previous paragraphs. But, as will become clear, the account of Herod’s death, in a very important and illuminating way, completes the narrative begun in 12:1. Herod had arrested and executed James and had also arrested Peter. Now we find out what happened to Herod himself. Indeed, the previous sentence, v. 19, connects what follows to what had gone before. It tells us what Herod had done when unable to locate Peter and re-arrest him. The scene has changed from Jerusalem to Caesarea.

Text Comment

- v.20 For some reason Herod had fallen out with the citizens of the two Phoenician coastal cities north of Caesarea, Tyre and Sidon. But those cities depended on Galilean corn for their food supply and so realized that they needed to patch things up with the king. So, no doubt with a bribe, they secured the help of Blastus, one of Herod’s advisors, to represent them as they sought to regain the favor of the king and so the shipment of grain.
- v.21 On the formal occasion when their case was to be heard and Blastus was to speak on their behalf, Herod – not a man to take the high ground – harangued them with a speech. He may have been ready to meet their demands, but he wasn’t going to give them what they wanted until he had gotten his own back!
- v.23 Dr. A. Rendle Short, both a professor of surgery and a biblical scholar, observed that many people in Asia harbor intestinal worms, which can form a tight ball and cause acute intestinal obstruction. Perhaps that was the physical cause of Herod’s death. [Cited in Stott, 213] Other medical people have suggested that he died of a ruptured cyst and that the phrase “died of worms” was, for ancient writers, simply a characteristic way of describing the death of someone who particularly deserved to die. [Bruce, NICNT, 256 and n.25] Evidence exists for the use of that phrase in that way.
- In any case the fact that an angel of the Lord struck Herod down doesn’t mean that he was killed by a bolt of lightning or that it was obvious to any observer that he had been executed by the hand of God. Luke, a doctor himself, takes note of the fact that he died, not that he was killed. What he wants us to know is that it was God’s doing.
- v.24 This is the third such statement in Acts, a subscription that divides the book into chapters. By subscription I mean that it stands at the end of a chapter, not at the beginning. So v. 24 ends the third chapter of Acts. The previous subscriptions are found at 6:7 and 9:31. In this case, however, the point is very clear: the gospel continued to

spread in defiance of opposition, sometimes very severe, sometimes even lethal. To say that “the word of God” increased, highlights Luke’s confidence in the victory of the gospel. [Peterson, 371] Kings and others might be able to contain or even kill individual Christians, but they have no power over the word of God!

This simple understatement – “the word of God continued to grow” – underscores how completely the situation had been reversed. As chapter 12 began Herod was on the rampage. He had arrested a number of Christians, executed James, and imprisoned Peter. As the chapter ends, Peter is free again, the gospel is flourishing, and Herod is dead. [Stott, 213]

- v.25 Luke segues to the next major section of his narrative by recording that both Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem to Antioch from which they, and John Mark, would embark on what has come to be called Paul’s first missionary journey.

As is always the case, when Luke’s narrative can be checked against other sources, it is shown to be reliable history. He may include different details – usually a sign of independent eyewitness sources – but he reported the same event that other historians of the time also reported. In this case, we have a description of Herod’s death from Josephus, the Jewish historian, Luke’s contemporary.

Josephus reports that the particular assembly Luke describes in v. 21 was part of a festival that Herod Agrippa had put on in honor of the Roman emperor. Matters such as the concerns of Tyre and Sidon would regularly be addressed at festivals of that sort. Caesar wouldn’t have been there, but such events were a way of displaying the loyalty of client kings. To the festival came various provincial officials and other distinguished citizens. The point was to make a display of imperial glory and, of course, reflect glory on Herod himself.

On the second day of the festival Herod wore a robe made of silver and entered the theater just before dawn. As the sun’s rays fell on his robe it shined in a dazzling way, precisely, of course, as Herod intended that it would. The king’s resplendence inspired a sort of fear and trembling in the audience – whether real or feigned you be the judge (the dignitaries certainly knew what effect Herod was intending to produce) – and from all sides they began to hail him as a god. Don’t take that sort of language too seriously. For example, the Caesars were supposed to become gods upon their death, but it is highly doubtful that anyone took that prospect seriously. Indeed Vespasian, the Roman emperor in the 70s of the first century, is said to have quipped on his deathbed, “How depressing, I think I’m turning into a god.”

Josephus, a less sober historian than Luke, then reports that as the people heaped their praise on Herod, the king looked up and saw an owl sitting on a rope above his head and immediately reckoned that it was an omen of evil tidings and a pang of grief pierced his heart. At the same time he was seized with a severe pain in his belly. He was carried from the theater to the palace and after five days of intense suffering he died, in the 54th year of his life and the 7th of his reign. [*Antiquities* xix.8.2]

So, historians conclude that the appointed day of which we read in v. 21 was a festival that Herod himself sponsored, perhaps on the emperor's birthday, August 1st. The royal robes of which Luke speaks would be the glittering silver number that Josephus describes. Both writers agree that Herod was hailed as a god and both condemn him for accepting the title instead of refusing it.

Now what are we to do with this? Are we being taught here how to see the hand of God in the circumstances of life? After 9-11, if you remember, there was something like a cottage industry of evangelical writers and preachers who told us that God had judged America for one sin or another: for approving of homosexuality or for the legalization of abortion or for its materialism, the terrorists having struck at the center of American finance. There is a long tradition of Christians reading the signs in this way and supposing that they could detect the divine purpose in historical events. The English puritans all believed that the destruction of the Spanish armada by storms off the coast of England was God judging Catholic Spain and saving Protestant England. The brilliant Jonathan Edwards frequently practiced what has come to be called in our time "newspaper exegesis." He was not only sure that this development or that was the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, but that he could tell precisely what God was intending by this military defeat or that financial setback suffered at the Vatican. General Braddock's defeat in the French and Indian war of the mid-18th century, for example, was a divine judgment on British pride and self-confidence. [Marsden, 416]

Several years ago a book of popular American history by two Christians purported to look at American history "from God's point of view." Through the book we are told what God was doing to build America into a force for the extension of the gospel from Christopher Columbus, through the Plymouth pilgrims, to the revolutionary war. We learn that God was fighting for the Americans in this way in this battle and in that way in that, saving George Washington from defeat in one instance, granting him victory in another and all to further his purpose to make America into a force for the kingdom of God. Does Acts 12:20-23 teach us that we can read the purposes of God in history in such a detailed way?

Certainly not. The Bible is emphatic in teaching us that we do not and cannot understand the ways of God. They are far above us. There were Christians on both sides in the American Revolution, perhaps as many on one side as the other, and for a century or more after the American Revolution Great Britain would be a greater force for the worldwide extension of the kingdom of God than the United States. We are told here that Herod was judged, condemned, and executed by God and told why. But we are not told that we can discern the specific purposes of the Almighty's absent his disclosing those facts to us, as he did here.

In this short account we learn other things, but things fabulously important for us to know.

I. The first is that God does execute his judgment in the world. That is, he punishes wrong doers.

Herod was a wicked man. We already knew that. And God struck him down *for his wickedness*. That is the explicit teaching of this passage: God did it, and he did it for that reason. It was not simply the outworking of some soul-less principle that consequences follow inevitably from one's mistakes, as if it is axiomatic that pride goes before a fall. Herod's death, by all accounts,

had nothing to do with the efforts of other human beings to dethrone him. It was not part of a *coup d'état*. God did it and, we are told, he did it in judgment of Herod's sins, his pride and vanity in particular. There is nothing particularly surprising about this. We see God's hand of judgment everywhere we look in Holy Scripture. No one can read the Bible and believe that God does not punish evil and that he does not bring down the proud. From the very beginning he is revealed to us as a God who avenges evil. He did in Cain's case. He did so in the flood. He did so in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, and so on throughout the history recorded in the word of God.

The biblical world defines the horizons of that judgment in Scripture itself. We hear nothing, for example, of what judgments God might have been executing in distant regions of Asia or in North or South America during the history of Israel. But the entire horizon of Israel's world, the kings and the nations that filled that horizon, were emphatically subject to God's judgment. And the Bible leaves us in no doubt that he is always and everywhere the God who raises up and casts down, who rewards and punishes.

What is more, he executes his judgment upon those who rebel against him *even when there is no obvious benefit to be gained by the kingdom of God*. It is not the case that God judges only those nations who are interfering with the progress of the gospel or who must be removed for the gospel to advance. Herod was no worse than the kings and governors who came before him or those who would come after. Whether he lived or died had little bearing on the spread of the gospel or the growth of the kingdom of God. Herod was far too little a man to prevent either. Mao Zedong wielded far greater power over his dominions than did Herod Agrippa, but he couldn't prevent the word of God from increasing either. Herod wasn't executed because the salvation of the world depended upon his death. We are told why he was punished. He was a pompous, vainglorious man, who accepted blasphemous praise.

You remember, of course, all of those oracles of coming judgment upon the nations that fill the chapters of the OT prophets. Whether Ammon or Moab, Assyria or Babylon, God promised in great detail to bring them down for their sins – and not only for their sins against Israel, but their sins against God and against their own citizens – and he did. None of those nations exists today or has existed for well over 2,000 years. This world rings with judgment. Kings and nations rise and fall and their falls are very often catastrophic. What those oracles teach us is that God is at work in every nation of the world, if not in salvation in judgment, and that he takes note of their sins and punishes them accordingly.

Some of you remember John Gerstner, the professor of church history and the teacher and mentor of R.C. Sproul. I remember Prof. Gerstner saying in a sermon that a friend of his had done a Masters thesis (more statistical than theological) which reported that for every reference to God's mercy and grace in the Bible (OT and NT) there are three references to his judgment, his wrath, or his anger at sin. The point is certainly not that God is more vengeful than merciful; indeed, that ratio may be due simply to the fact that we find it easy to believe in God's mercy, much harder to believe in his wrath or judgment. But the point most certainly is that the active execution of divine judgment in the world is a fact of biblical revelation and so a fact of human life, a reality we see everywhere we look, and one with which we must reckon if we are to understand the world in which we live. Sin pays a wage!

For example, the most certain thing about the future of the United States of America, amidst all the uncertainty, is that if our nation continues on its present course – indulging itself in an orgy of sins God explicitly condemns in his Word – it will suffer the judgment of God for those sins of pride, blasphemy, violence, indifference to the poor and needy, libertinism, and all the rest. Every other nation in history has suffered such judgment; why do we suppose that we shall be spared, all the more when God judges by the principle that to whom much is given, much is required. *We live in a world in which God is always at work judging sin.* Most Americans don't think that is so and many American Christians don't either!

What we are given here at the end of Acts 12 is simply a peek behind the curtain, a chance to see what happened and why in one particular instance. Surely what God did here he often does. The whole Bible teaches us that.

II. Second, we learn here the mystery of God's ways and of his judgments.

One thing that must strike the careful reader of Acts chapter 12 is that Herod was executed for the wrong sin, or at least so it seems to us. He had arrested a number of Christians, he had then executed James, one of the Lord's inner circle of disciples, one of that trio of the Lord's special friends of whom we read so often in the Gospels: Peter, James, and John. It was those three who had witnessed the Lord's transfiguration. It was those three whom he had invited to accompany him deeper into the Garden of Gethsemane the night of his arrest. Herod had arrested two of them and killed one of them and for no other reason but wanting to impress the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. He wanted them on his side in preserving peace and harmony in Judea for which, no doubt, he expected to be praised and in other ways rewarded by the Roman state. He was a petty little tyrant used to getting his way and cared not a fig for the life of someone like James.

So we expect that we would read in v. 23 that he was struck down because he had murdered the Lord's close friend. But no. He wasn't executed for making James a martyr. He wasn't executed for arresting Peter. He was executed for his pride, for his ridiculous vanity, accepting the praises of these sycophants – all who were buttering up a man they knew very well was easily buttered up – for his accepting their absurd worship as if he actually deserved it. This poppycock was so clueless *he* actually thought *they* thought he was a god!

Think about this. Herod was a vain man. But he was hardly unique in that. The world is chock full of vanity and it is a particular vice of the rich and powerful. The Roman Caesars were impossibly vain men, but many of them died in their beds. They ruled over far more than Herod ever did, they bestrode the earth in a way Herod could only dream of doing. But they were not suddenly judged as Herod was. Plenty of kings refuse to give God glory as Herod did – indeed, most kings and political leaders refuse to recognize the Lord God as their Master to whom they will someday have to give an account – but very few of them die in the sudden and ignominious way that Herod did, dragged out of that assembly which was to be a high point of his glory. Herod's brother-in-law and uncle, Herod Antipas, a man much like himself, who beheaded John the Baptist and who could have spared the Lord his crucifixion but couldn't be bothered, was not

executed as Agrippa was. Why did God make such a distinction and why did his judgment fall so suddenly on the one man but not the other?

Or consider Herod's family. His daughter Drusilla, whom we meet in Acts 24 as the wife of Felix the Roman governor, was a Jewish girl who made and broke marriages with a view to accumulating greater power and status. She had a child, Herod Agrippa's grandson, who was killed in the eruption at Pompeii in A.D. 79. Herod's oldest daughter, Bernice, must have been an attractive woman. She had a number of relationships, including an incestuous relationship with her brother, Herod's son and heir, Herod Agrippa II. She was later to become the mistress of both Titus and Vespasian. It was not a holy family! But why was Herod executed by the Lord and other members of his family, equally dissolute, proud, and immoral spared to live long lives? Why was his grandson struck down by a volcanic eruption but the grandson's mother, aunts, and uncle spared?

And why was Herod killed when he was 54 years of age, on this occasion, and not on the many others in which he would have manifested his vanity and spurned the right worship of God? History poses innumerable questions such as these which we simply cannot answer.

And what is more perplexing and more striking is our inability to explain why Herod was executed but James was too; or why James was executed but Peter was delivered from prison by an angel. If Peter, certainly James could have been as well! Why does God require death in one case and not the other? Who can say?

The longer I live, the more of life that I observe, both the life of the world and the life of the church, the more skeptical I become that anyone, even the wisest Christian, can explain the ways of God or account for what he brings to pass. And remember, he brings *everything* to pass as the Bible is careful to remind us times without number.

So we know from our text this morning that God executes his judgment in the world and we know that the execution of his judgment is deeply mysterious and in many respects hidden from us. I do not mean to say that we cannot say that a once proud nation that lies prostrate before its enemies – think of the American south at the end of the Civil War or Germany at the end of World War II – has not been condemned and judged by the Almighty. Surely it has. It is one thing to say that Job never knew, never was told why his life took that terrible turn. But surely we learn from the Word of God to see God's hand of judgment in such public and general catastrophes. But beyond that what can we say? The north during the American Civil War was a deeply guilty society but it was largely spared the horrors of war, though, to be sure it lost hundreds of thousands of its men. The Chinese communists murdered as many as the German Nazis did and they have so far paid no obvious price for their crimes. The United States may live on for some time yet and not be made to suffer for her crimes in a public and objective way. There is much mystery here.

But God *did* execute Herod for his pride. That tells us something about the future of sinners and it tells us something about God. It also tells us something about what is happening in the world. But more to the point, in the midst of that human pride and the suffering it caused for Christians, "the word of God increased and multiplied." Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

We may not be able to tell how the execution of Herod affected the progress of the kingdom of God, or even whether it had any effect, but what we are told in this striking and memorable way is that the sins of men could not impede the work of the Spirit of God.

In a very real way the execution of King Herod was a sideshow, an event on the periphery of the real story of the world. Herod was slapped aside for sins he had committed – a bug stepped on for his vanity and his pride – but the gospel was taking root in many hearts, churches were being established and built up, and a great missionary enterprise was poised to begin under the leadership of the man who would be forever known as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

What this bit of history should teach us, brothers and sister, is to be serious about our lives. We live among people who every day are being put to death for their sins. We see around us everywhere we look the hand of God's judgment, in that hand is the rod of his holy wrath. Do you think about the fact that you live in the midst of a giant death row and – every day you're walking up and down those hallways past those cells of people – utterly unbeknownst to them, countless multitudes of people, proud, vainglorious, utterly indifferent to God and his glory, are shuffling off to their dismal end? That is the world in which you and I live every day. We cannot be frivolous when God is putting men and women to death for their sins every day that we live in the world.

What this bit of history also teaches us is to be full of hope and expectation. Herod couldn't prevent the gospel's advance and the powerful among us today can't either. The progress of the gospel is utterly unimpaired by the opposition of men. God may use that opposition to purify and to sanctify his church, but only for the sake of the church's still greater growth and influence. The futility of the world's opposition to the gospel of God is the great theme of Acts 12. Herod executed James but God executed Herod. Herod arrested Peter and God sent an angel to let him out of jail. Herod, in his ignorance, missed the one man who was going to make the greatest difference, the Apostle Paul, even though he had been right there in Jerusalem, under Herod's nose. Herod was clueless; God knew precisely what he was doing.

If the gates of hell cannot prevail against the church of Jesus Christ, some poppycock like Herod Agrippa or some modern American politician certainly poses no threat! We are, we will be *more than conquerors* through him who loved us. We may not be able to tell in any particular set of circumstances *how* we are going to be so, but *that* we are going to be is a certainty!