

March 18/19, 2006

*The Unstoppable Church*  
**Herod Versus Jesus**  
**Acts 12:1-25**  
Pastor Bryan Clark

Most of you are familiar with the name Madeline Murray O'Hare, best known for her crusades to get prayer and God out of the public schools. Of course, we all know as long as there is algebra in the public schools there will be prayer—but that's another story.

On a spring evening, 1946, there was a tremendous storm. Thunder was rocking, the lightening was flashing. Madeline Murray O'Hare gathered her family on the front porch, went out into the front yard, shook her fist at God, screamed vulgarities at Him, blasting Him, and challenged God if He is real to strike her dead. Because God did not strike her dead, she concluded she had proven conclusively there is no God.

Well, of course God doesn't play such silly games, but what Madeline Murray O'Hare would one day realize is: You can't fight God and win. That spring evening when she stood in that yard and blasted God, she was pregnant with her son Bill. This would be the son around whom the public school controversy would focus. She did absolutely everything in her power to convince her son that there is no God. But as Bill began to grow into adulthood, he recognized the only place he could find meaning and purpose in life was through a relationship with Jesus Christ, and he became a dynamic Christian. And Madeline Murray O'Hare learned you can't fight God and win.

All through history there have been nations, there have been world leaders, there have been individuals who have tried with all their power in their own way to fight God, but nobody fights God and wins. In the first century, there was a very influential, very powerful family that tried to stop Jesus and His church, but they learned the hard way, you just can't fight God and win.

As we continue in our study in the Book of Acts, chapter 12 verse 1 opens with the words:

**Now about that time...** (Acts 12:1a, \*NASB)

Mark mentioned to you last week that the Book of Acts doesn't necessarily follow in chronological or sequential order. As a matter of fact, that's true of all the historical books. The purpose is not to record history in sequential order; it's to teach theology. In this case, these are not necessarily things that happened chronologically, they're just glimpses of different things that were happening, for the most part, simultaneously. So we would maybe open chapter 12 verse 1 with the words, "Meanwhile, back at the ranch"—because that's really what's happening here.

**...Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them.** (v. 1)

Now to understand what's happening here, we need a little bit of a history lesson related to Herod. "Herod" was not a name; "Herod" was a title. There were multiple Herods. There were three Herods in the New Testament. It starts with Herod the Great, who is the Herod that the magi appeared to when Jesus was born. That was the Herod who was responsible for executing all of the male infants in order to somehow eliminate the baby born king because he feared the

competition. Herod the Great would have been the grandfather of the Herod in Acts 12. Herod the Great was a lunatic. He executed many of his own family members, including his own son who was the father of the Herod of Acts chapter 12. When the Herod of Acts 12 was four years old, his grandfather executed his father, so that gives you a little bit of family history there.

The next Herod we reach is actually the uncle to the Herod in Acts 12, which would have been Herod Antipas. He was the Herod who enjoyed hearing John the Baptist speak but ultimately had him beheaded, also the Herod that was part of the trial and execution of Jesus. This is now the third Herod in Acts 12, Herod Agrippa I.

This Herod, when he was younger, had some serious problems. Tiberius the Caesar didn't like him at all and threw him in prison, and it was really kind of an up and down story. But when Tiberius died, Caligula took over as emperor. He and this Herod were friends as children, so he took him out of prison and gave him a fairly significant role. When Caligula died, Claudius took over. He, too, was a friend of Herod's as children, and so by this time in the story, Herod has a fairly significant area he's responsible for.

The Herod in our story today desperately wanted the Jewish people to like him. It was very important that if the emperor gave you an area that you were responsible for, that you kept peace, because if things started to get out of hand, you would immediately be removed and somebody else would be put in your place. To do that, Herod needed the Jewish people to respect him and to like him. But no matter what he tried, they wouldn't respond to him. He lived a very orthodox life when he was in Jerusalem, followed all of the laws, followed all the religious rituals, tried to be very much like them. But they still hated him. So that's the background behind the story in Acts 12.

Verse 2:

**And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.** (vs. 2-5)

Herod understands that the religious Jews, the powerbrokers in Jerusalem, hated Jesus and they hated His church. So he arrested James and he had him executed. This would be James as in Peter, James and John—one of the apostles. When he executed James, it greatly pleased these Jewish people, and for the first time he found something that he could do that they liked. And so you can see where this is going: Okay, finally he's found something.

Next in line is Peter. He arrests Peter, and of course Peter is scheduled for execution, but the problem is they're right in this feast period, the Passover followed by seven days of unleavened bread, and during that time period you weren't allowed to have trial, you weren't allowed to sentence anyone. So he just put Peter in prison, he's going to guard him for seven days, and when the feast is over Peter will be executed. That's the plan.

Verse 5 tells us that while Peter was kept in prison, prayer for him was being made fervently by the church of God. "Fervently" is a very strong term. It's the term used of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. These people were agonizing in prayer. I think the reason they were agonizing

is that they were absolutely shaken to the core. I think they suddenly were so overwhelmed with what was happening that they were desperately on their faces before God because they didn't know what else to do. I don't think these people said, "Well you know, it's Wednesday night at 7:00; we probably should have a prayer meeting." I think these were people just absolutely overwhelmed on their faces before God.

There had been several times when Peter had been arrested and released. And they may have gotten it into their head that these apostles were invincible—that God would not let anything happen to them. Pretty much every scholar believes that by this time James was the leader of the Jerusalem church. And when they arrested James, one of the twelve, and for the first time one of the twelve was executed, I think it just absolutely rattled their cage. They didn't know what to do with this. Now not only has James been executed, but they've arrested Peter and everybody is convinced he will be executed. And I think now at this point they don't know what to think. They don't know what to believe. They're suddenly just shaken to the core.

We've talked many times about the fact that when we trusted Christ as Savior, we did not climb on board the Love Boat, but we climbed on board a battleship. We would all agree that there are days we would prefer the cruise ship. But you know, there's an interesting thing about the cruise ship: They never have prayer meetings. They never have prayer meetings because they don't need prayer meetings. But I'll guarantee you when you get on the battleship you find that there are impromptu prayer meetings all the time.

Sometimes it's hard for us to determine whether we're on a cruise ship or a battleship. Well, let me suggest to you that if you don't find yourself on a regular basis on your face before God, you're probably on a cruise ship. Because if you're on a battleship, you're going to sense your overwhelming need for God on a regular basis; you just don't have a choice. You're not looking at your calendar saying, "Well, let's see, it's Wednesday night, 7:00—probably should have a little prayer meeting." You just are constantly aware that you're in over your head. You're overwhelmed. You have this desperate need for God. And that's exactly where these people were.

Verse 6:

**On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. (vs. 6-10)**

One of the interesting pictures of Peter is the fact that he was in prison sleeping. This is the night before the execution. When you look at the details of the story, I'm convinced that Peter believed in his mind the next day he was to be executed. Why wouldn't he? James, his dear friend and fellow apostle, had just been beheaded. Now he was arrested, he had every reason to

believe the same fate would fall on him. This was the night before, and yet he isn't in the prison pacing the floor, he's fast asleep. He trusts God; he's at peace with that. If that's his role, then so be it, and he's sleeping in the prison. The angel shows up and it walks through the details of the story that are pretty straight forward.

One of the things that is interesting to note, though, is that Luke records the angel basically had to tell Peter what to do every step of the way. "Okay, Peter, now put on your shoes. Okay, Peter, now ties your shoelaces. Okay, Peter, now put on your coat. Okay, Peter, come on out with me." You get the impression that Peter was so stunned. This was the last thing he imagined and he's kind of confused. He thinks maybe this is a vision and he really doesn't have his wits about him at all. He just didn't expect this. So the angel is walking him through this deliverance. They get outside, the gates open automatically, and finally the angel departs and Peter is left on the street.

Verse 11:

**When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."**

It says when Peter came to himself, when he finally got his wits about him, when he finally realized God had delivered him, he reoriented himself and he headed off to find the church.

Verse 12:

**And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel." But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place.** (vs. 12-17)

If you remember when we went through the Gospel of Mark, we suggested that it was possible that the upper room where Jesus met with His disciples and had the first communion was the home of John Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark. And we suggested it was possible he was an eyewitness to the events there and all the way through Gethsemane and to the cross. Well, we don't know that for sure, but one of the texts that we go to would be this text, where we know for a fact that the Jerusalem church met in the house of John Mark, with his mother Mary, in probably an upper room. And they have discovered today that many upper rooms in those days could have easily held 70 to 100 people. So it's likely that that was the case.

Either way, Peter comes knocking and they're in the midst of their prayer meeting. Rhoda comes and recognizes that it's Peter. She's so excited, she leaves Peter out there and runs back to the prayer meeting and says, "You'll never believe who's knocking at the gate. Well, it's Peter!" And they respond with great faith, saying, "You're out of your mind. You must be

crazy. The guy's in prison; he couldn't possibly be at the gate." I don't think it dawned on them that it was possible that God could actually answer their prayer.

So they're arguing back and forth, and in a kind of a matter-of-fact way, they say, "You know, it's probably just his angel." Well, even if it's his angel, let him in! Open the door! So they finally go back, they open the door and, sure enough, it's Peter. And the text says they were amazed! They were stunned. They just did not imagine this was possible.

Now that's interesting, isn't it? They were in there fervently praying. I think they were overwhelmed and they were pouring out their heart before God. But I don't think it was even on their radar that God could somehow deliver Peter. And so when Peter shows up, they're just *shocked*.

Do you have any problem finding yourself in this story? Do you ever find yourself praying for things, but deep in your heart you're not convinced God's going to do anything about it? It's more a kind of therapy session than it is really believing God will do what you're asking Him to do. There's a delicate balancing act between understanding God is sovereign and His ways are not our ways, and sometimes when James goes to prison he gets executed, and sometimes when we pray, Peter gets delivered. And we don't know which it is.

But the danger of that is we find ourselves slipping into a form of fatalism where we think, *Well, God's already got it all figured out. What difference does it make if I pray? Nothing's going to happen anyway.* And so we come before God more out of a sense of therapy, where we're just kind of unloading. But there really isn't a sense of expectancy that God's going to do a miracle—that God's actually going to respond because we've asked, that prayer actually moves the hand of God, that if we pray God could actually open up the prison doors and set Peter free. And Peter comes knocking and we say, "No, that couldn't be. I mean, I know I've been asking for it, but it can't be."

Think about something that you've been praying for. Do you really believe God is going to do that? Do you have a sense of expectancy every day? Maybe it's a wayward child that's gone down a bad path and you're praying, but deep in your heart you have to be honest, you just don't feel like anything's going to change. Maybe it's a marriage that's falling apart. Maybe it's a financial issue. Maybe it's a disease that just won't go away. Maybe it's someone you've been praying about—that they would come to know Jesus as Savior—but by now you've resigned yourself that it's just not going to happen. Oh, you ask. It's kind of a form of therapy. But you really don't believe it.

We've got to understand that we should pray with a sense of expectancy. God is a God of the impossible. God delights in displaying His glory by doing the unimaginable. Now, I don't know on any given day whether this is going to be a James situation or a Peter—whether there will be an execution or a deliverance. God's ways are not our ways, and I understand on any given day if God doesn't do what I've asked Him to do, I'm willing to submit to that and surrender to that. But I'm not going to give up my faith believing God may do the impossible today.

One time my mom was talking about how she got through twenty plus years of my dad's illness. And she said, "You know, I believed every single day that God was going to heal your dad and he would come out of that bed and come walking into the room." Just because for over twenty years God chose not to answer that prayer doesn't mean He couldn't have. Every day was a reason for hope. And every day my mom had that hope that kept her going one more day. She believed that with all her heart.

One of the prayer requests at the top of my list is that I'm asking God that a year from now, when we enter into that new auditorium, every bill will be paid. You say, "That would take a miracle." That's exactly right! But why not? Why shouldn't we pray that? And I'm not just praying it as wishful thinking to deal with the stress because it's overwhelming. I'm believing it. If God chooses not to do that, then I will surrender to that, but I'm believing it because I believe that would provide a platform where God would get glory and wake up this community to the fact that God is real. I encourage you to pray the same thing.

Those of us that are on staff have a dear friend named Sue who has been battling cancer now for several years. The prognosis is not very positive. But we're not praying a defeatist prayer that "God, if that's Your will, that's the way it has to be." I'm expecting God to answer. I'm asking God for healing and I'm praying it because I'm believing it. Now, if God chooses not to answer that prayer, then when that time comes, I will accept that and I will surrender to that. But until that day I'm believing for a miracle. Because God wants us to ask and believe that He might display His glory.

What's interesting about this story is God did not deliver Peter because the people had great faith. They didn't have much faith at all. I think at this point they were shaken to the core. God delivered Peter because that was God's plan, and it was to build their faith. That's why when Peter comes back, he quiets them down and explains what has taken place and he says, "Make sure you tell everybody. Make sure you tell James. Tell everybody that God is a God who delivers"—to build their faith, to believe that sometimes it's like James and sometimes it's like Peter. You just don't know, but you've got to believe.

By the way, if you're wondering, you know at the beginning of the chapter James is executed. At the end of the chapter James is back alive. It's two different men named James. The James that's executed is Peter, James, and John—that James. The James at the end of this story here is James the half brother of Jesus, who went on to write the epistle of James. An interesting note about him is that he would eventually be thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and be beaten to death in the streets. He would die for his faith.

Well, this couldn't have been good news for poor Herod.

**Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution.**

**Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.** (vs. 18-19)

In other words, it's time to "get out of Dodge." Herod had found something that was going to endear him to the Jewish people. To show you how desperately he wanted this, when it describes Peter in prison there were two chains, two guards—all of that was double. Typical would be one chain, one guard. Herod had doubled up on everything to make sure Peter didn't get away.

The day of the execution, he goes down to the prison and Peter is gone. I mean, he had to be absolutely livid, not to mention embarrassed. And so the only thing he could think to do is he gathers the guards, he has them all executed and he gets out of town. He's going to wait until things settle down a little bit.

Verse 20:

**Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country. On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. The people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.**

(vs. 20-23)

Somewhere along the way, the people of Tyre and Sidon had really angered Herod. They needed to get back into his favor because Herod's country provided the food for Tyre and Sidon. So they send a delegation, and their job is somehow to get back in favor with Herod so they can get much needed food. Herod takes advantage of this as a time to dress up in his most regal attire, sits in his big chair and begins to spout eloquently. And the people are responding, "This sounds more like a god than a man." I'm guessing in their hearts they're thinking, *This guy is a windbag*. But externally they have got to win his favor because they need food, so they're saying, "Man, you sound more like a god than a man."

One interesting note is that Luke is fond of recording speeches. He records many of Peter's and Stephen's and other lengthy sermons. But when it comes time for Herod waxing eloquently, not one word is recorded. It is Luke's way of saying there was nothing he said that has any value to repeat—just empty words.

Herod is strutting his stuff thinking, *Yeah, I probably am more of a god than a man*. And God's had it up to here with Herod and the Herod family and He strikes him, and he's eaten by worms. Josephus, the historian, writes that it took Herod five days to die from an intestinal worm. It's a very ugly, painful death. What Luke wants us to know from the text is this wasn't a coincidence. This was God's judgment. You can't fight God and win. Herod thought he was more of a god than a man. He's waxing eloquently, and in a moment he is silenced forever.

Verse 24 is the contrast:

**But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.**

It's the unstoppable Church. You just can't stop God. Over the last two and a half years, we together have been reminding ourselves how important it is to live for that which ultimately matters. What a tragedy to live out your life, pouring it into something that fifty years from now will not make any difference. A hundred years from now—what was the point? When we talk about living for the things of God, pouring yourself into God's unstoppable church, we're not talking about investing in something that may survive. We're not talking about something that may triumph. It may still matter a hundred years from now. We're talking about something that is *guaranteed* to triumph. I'm not talking about Lincoln Berean Church. I'm talking about the Church of Jesus Christ. You can't stop Him. You can't defeat Him. The Church ultimately will triumph.

Isn't it an amazing thing that on this very day I can invest myself in something that a thousand years from now will still matter. Fifty thousand years from now, it will still matter. A hundred thousand years from now, it will still matter. And at the end of the day, isn't that what it's all about?

I recognize the balance between the story of James and the story of Peter. Sometimes the Christians were executed; sometimes they were delivered for reasons only God knows. Eventually Peter would be executed for his faith. Frankly, almost everybody in this story will end up executed for their faith. I don't know if I have one more day or if I have forty more years—that's up to God. What I do know is if I invest what I have today in the things of God, then I am a part of something that will still matter a hundred thousand years from now. And at the end of the day, that's all that matters.

*Our Father, we are thankful that You are the God of the Church, that the Church is the bride of Jesus Christ and she cannot be stopped. Nations and world leaders have tried, and they have all failed to stop the unstoppable Church. Lord, we're thankful for Your power, for Your goodness and Your grace. We thank You that You grant us the opportunity to invest ourselves in that which will still matter a hundred thousand years from now. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512  
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**Study Questions**  
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**Opening Discussion**

1. Does God always answer our prayers?
2. In prayer, how do you balance the importance of praying with confidence and the reality that God's ways are not always our ways and our desires are not always His desires?
3. Do you really believe prayer moves the hand of God? Is your belief evidenced by the amount of time you spend in prayer?
4. Can anyone ultimately stop the Church of Jesus Christ? Why or why not?

**Bible Study**

1. Read Acts 12:1-25. Compare Mark 10:35-40. What did Jesus tell James?  
Why did God allow James to be martyred and deliver Peter?
2. Why do you suppose the church was praying so fervently for Peter (Acts 12:5)?  
When do you find yourself most motivated to pray? Why is that?
3. God could have delivered Peter any way He wanted, including avoiding the arrest in the first place. Why do you suppose God allowed Peter to be arrested and delivered him in this way?  
What do we learn from this?
4. How does the church respond to news that Peter has been delivered?  
Do you think these people really believed God could deliver Peter? Why or why not?
5. Do you ever find yourself reluctant to believe that God has miraculously answered your fervent prayer? Why is that?
6. Why did God strike Herod dead?
7. Summarize this text using verses 23 and 24.

## **Application**

1. List three practical lessons on prayer that you learned from this text.
2. What does it mean to trust God by faith given the fact that James was executed and Peter was delivered?
3. How should we respond to those who are trying to stop the Church of Jesus Christ?