

“BE WARNED, O RULERS OF THE EARTH”

We were introduced to Herod Agrippa in the first part of chapter 12, where Luke told us about Herod’s execution of the apostle James and how the Lord rescued Peter from the same fate. As I noted last week, Herod’s connections with two Roman emperors led to his being given control over a significant portion of the land of Palestine. Herod was a powerful man, and he used his power to persecute the church. He was also a proud man, as we see so clearly in this passage. And Luke tells us that it was Herod’s pride that was his undoing. The fate of Herod is a picture of the fate that will eventually befall everyone who exalts himself instead of giving glory to God. As Calvin says in his comments on these verses: “This memorable story shows, as in a mirror, the end that awaits the enemies of the church; it also shows how greatly God hates pride.” This is the point that Luke is making in verses 20-23. Set up against this is the point that Luke makes in verses 24-25, a point that has to do with the continued advance of the gospel. When we put them together, the two parts of this passage set an important contrast. *The first part gives us a picture of the judgment that awaits those who exalt themselves and oppose Christ’s church, while the second part gives us the assurance that nothing can prevent the word of God from bearing fruit and growing.*

Simply put, this passage is about the demise of the church's enemies and the increase of the gospel.

The Demise of Herod Agrippa

The passage begins by telling us that the people of Tyre and Sidon, two cities in the coastal region of Phoenicia, somehow fell out of favor with Agrippa. We do not know what the specific issue was, but the fact that Herod was angry with them would have had significant ramifications for them. As Luke points out, coastal cities like these depended on the region of Galilee for a significant part of their food supply. Herod's anger would have meant empty bellies for the people of Tyre and Sidon.

Because of this, the people of these two cities persuaded Herod's household manager, a man named Blastus, to help them petition the king for peace. Luke tells us that on the day appointed for Blastus to present the people's case to Herod, the king dressed himself in his royal robes, sat down upon his throne, and delivered a speech to the people. And the people responded to this by shouting out their words of approval and adoration, saying that the one who addressed them from the throne was not a mere man but a god. Of course, it

seems unlikely that they really believed what they were saying. They were probably just flattering Herod in hopes of regaining his favor.

After the people acclaimed Herod as a god, he was immediately struck down by an angel of the Lord and died. It is worth noting that there is a parallel account of Herod's death in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, and the details are essentially the same. Both passages tells us that Herod's death came about because he allowed these people to give him the glory that belongs to God alone. It serves as a powerful illustration of the principle that is set forth in Proverbs 16:18: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

It is interesting that the Lord struck down Herod but not the people of Tyre and Sidon. After all, the words that they had spoken were idolatrous, regardless of whether they believed them or not. They had ascribed the glory that belongs to God to a man. Yet it was Herod who was struck down by the angel of the Lord. This shows us that God holds those whom he places in positions of authority accountable for the authority that he gives them. If they use their position to usurp God's unique authority, they bring God's wrath upon themselves.

In this particular instance, God's wrath was poured out suddenly. There was no delay. This is the sort of thing that you sometimes hear people make jokes about. They do something wrong and then they jokingly wonder if lightning is going to strike them. The reason why people speak of God's wrath as if it were a joke is because things don't usually play out the way they did in this passage. There are occasions when the Lord brings swift judgment upon those who defy him, but he does not often work that way. Instead, the wicked are often allowed to go on thinking that God does not see what they are doing, or that he lacks the power to do anything about it. But this is only because the Lord is hardening them in their sin. Judgment will one day come. And when it does, it will be too late for them to repent.

The downfall of Herod reminds us that tyrants are under the Lord's sovereign control. They may rear their heads for a time, but eventually they will meet their end. We saw an example of this just recently, with the death of Muammar Qaddafi. There have been many tyrants through the ages, many of whom have persecuted the people of God. There have been Neros and Bloody Marys and Idi Amins. But in one way or another, all of these tyrants met the same end as Herod Agrippa. The church always outlives her enemies.

The Increase of the Word of God

This brings us to the last two verses of our passage, where Luke turns his focus away from Herod and back to the advance of the gospel. Verse 24 reads, "But the word of God increased and multiplied." Luke uses this kind of language to describe the advance of the gospel at several other places in Acts. Back in chapter 6, at the end of the passage where the first deacons were elected to office, Luke wrote: "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem." (Acts 6:7) And in chapter 19, where Paul's ministry in the city of Ephesus is described, Luke writes: "So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily." (Acts 19:20) This might seem like an odd way of speaking. How can God's Word increase? Well, based upon what Luke wrote in chapter 6, it would seem that he is using this phrase to describe the growth of the church. To say that the word increases is the same thing as saying that the number of Christians increases.

This is one of a number of places in the Bible where we are told that the growth of the church is attributed to the Word of God. We find another example in Colossians 1, where Paul says that the gospel is "bearing fruit and growing" in the whole world. (Col. 1:6) Similarly, Peter writes in his first epistle: "you have been born again...through the living and abiding word of God." (1 Pet. 1:23)

Such passages show us why Reformed churches speak of the preaching of God's Word as an actual means of grace. Preaching is God's appointed method for delivering Christ and his saving benefits to his people. Preaching is not just a matter of conveying information. Christ actually comes to us through the word of the gospel. As Paul says in Romans 10, "faith comes from hearing." (Rom. 10:17) The Word of God gives birth to the church.

This has important implications for us as we think about what the church should be doing in the world. God has not left us in the dark with regard to how we should carry out the mission that he has given to us. He has appointed the method as well as the mission. Listen to Derek Thomas' comments on this passage:

"This is church growth, New Testament style! They had no demographic research, no statistical analysis of the most likely elements of society to respond to the gospel, no evangelism training, no extensive campaigns of any kind; and yet, under the blessing of God, and in the midst of persecution that had seen the execution of one of their most prized leaders, they grew!" [349]

The church grew as a result of the faithful preaching of God's Word. This is the method God uses to built his church.

This might seem obvious, but it needs to be emphasized in our day because of something that Michael Horton has described as "mission creep" in the church. The phrase "mission creep" was first coined to describe military missions that end up evolving and expanding beyond their stated goals. The classic example of "mission creep" is what happened with the U.N. mission in Somalia in the 1990's, which began as a humanitarian assistance effort but evolved into a military effort. Well, we can see the same sort of thing happening in the church. Listen to how one PCA minister describes mission creep in the church:

"the growing trend has been for churches (or just as often agencies) to send out laypeople to be engaged in all manner of activity such as leadership training, art shows, economic reform, coffeehouses, medical clinics, education, and sports. But do these things really constitute biblical missions?... [I]n many of our churches, denominations, and missionary agencies...social action and mercy ministry have overshadowed the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Over time this causes evangelicals to look alarmingly similar to

mainline liberals in their response to the Great Commission—that is, placing deed ministry on the same level with (or, in many cases, above) the ministry of the Word.” [Jon Payne, “The Great Omission,” *Modern Reformation*, Sept./Oct. 2011]

We have to be on guard against mission creep. We must not turn the gospel into what we do for others. The good deeds that we do as Christians are the fruit of the gospel, but they are not themselves the gospel. Our good deeds do not contribute to Christ’s redemptive work. The church has not been called to redeem the world. We have been called to announce the redemption that Christ has already accomplished. The preaching of the Word is the means by which Christ is building his church.

In this short passage, the Lord assures us of two things: first, he tells us that our enemies will not prevail against us; and second, he tells us that the preaching of the gospel will succeed in building Christ’s church. John Stott sums up this passage nicely when he writes,

“Indeed, one cannot fail to admire the artistry with which Luke depicts the complete reversal of the church’s situation. At the beginning of the chapter Herod is on the rampage -- arresting and persecuting church leaders; at the end he is himself struck down and dies. The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod triumphing; it closes with the power of God to overthrow hostile human plans and to establish his own in their place.” [*The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, 213]

It is easy for us to get discouraged when we see so many people opposing or ignoring God’s Word. And it is easy for us to grow impatient or bored with the ordinary means of grace. After all, they are ordinary. They are not flashy. They are unimpressive. They seem so weak. But God puts the treasure of the gospel in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to him and not to us. God will build his church by his appointed means, and he assures us that nothing will prevail against it.