

An Unstoppable Force

Acts 12

As this chapter begins: James is killed, Peter is imprisoned, and Herod is triumphant. As the chapter continues and concludes: Peter is rescued, Herod is killed, and God's word is triumphant. The church in Jerusalem was shocked, stunned; their opponents were elated. Steven had already been stoned, but now, one of the 12 apostles had been beheaded. James was one of the three disciples of Jesus who were closest to him.

James and his brother John, along with their mother, had made a request of Jesus for them to be at Jesus' right and left when he came into his kingdom. Jesus asked, "Are you able to drink the cup that I will drink?" They said yes and Jesus responded that they would drink from the cup of suffering, like him, but that those who sat alongside him in his kingdom was to be determined by the Father. Here, we see this come to pass for James. He drinks from the cup of suffering like Jesus.

Like James, throughout church history many have been persecuted and executed because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord. Bruce Ashford said: "Christianity is a deeply political religion because it declares that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not." For this reason, most rulers like Caesar and Herod seek to destroy the church, with its message, and so many Christians have suffered and died at the hands of earthly powers. When Herod realized that killing James pleased the people, he arrested Peter intending to do the same to him. As we come to verse 5, we see that there are two kinds of kingdoms that are at war. The kingdom of man which has "prison" as a weapon and the kingdom of God which has "prayer".

On the night before Peter was to be condemned and executed, he is sleeping. An angel comes and rescues him. Peter's chains fall off. Peter is in a fog, as he is instructed step by step by the angel. Finally Peter is out and away, so the angel leaves and Peter realizes this has really happened. His deliverance from prison was completely miraculous. Then, he goes to where the church is meeting and knocks. The church is praying for him. A woman named Rhoda hears his voice but leaves him outside in her excitement and goes into the gathering and tells them Peter is here. They think she is crazy or that she has seen his spiritual counterpart, his angel. Finally, as Peter keeps knocking and calling, the door is opened for him. Peter tells the story of his rescue and then leaves and goes to another to hide. His arrival at Mary's house was somewhat humorous and very human.

When we think of what happens to James and for Peter in this chapter, we are confused. James is decapitated and Peter is delivered. Why? We don't know. The lesson here is that God's sovereignty and will are both inscrutable and unpredictable. God's will is a mystery to us. We must be content to serve Christ and leave the outcomes to God. At the end of John's gospel, Jesus told Peter how he would die in order to glorify God. This was the time for James to glorify God by his death. A day would come, and it would be time for Peter, rescued here, to glorify God by dying.

Herod's attempt to kill Peter failed, and before he could devise another plan, he was distracted by a crisis in another part of his kingdom and there he was struck dead by an angel of the Lord. Herod is killed at the peak of his pride. The king who killed James and intended to kill Peter is killed by God.

But, the climax of this chapter is found here, "But the word of God increased and multiplied." Jesus had said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it." As the chapter ends, we see the word of God proclaimed by the church, crashing through all that is in its way and advancing. The word of God is an unstoppable force. The message, that Jesus was the Son of God who died for sinners and rose from the dead so that those who trust and follow him are saved from the penalty and power of sin, will never cease to increase. God buries his workers but carries on his work.