



JULY 25, 2021 | REV. DON MCISAAC

“How a Healthy Church Responds to Crisis” (Acts 12)

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

⁶ The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. ⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.

⁸ Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him. ⁹ Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.”

¹² When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. ¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”

¹⁵ “You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”

¹⁶ But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.

¹⁸ In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.



Acts 12 (cont'd)

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. ²⁰ He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

²¹ On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. ²² They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." ²³ Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

²⁴ But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

²⁵ When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

Good afternoon, church. I would like to start off with a little prayer just so that we can focus our attention on God's Word and not the speaker or our circumstances.

Lord, I pray that your Word that we will hear today will bring about a renewed resolve within Your people to seek first Your Kingdom and Your Righteousness so that we may give all the glory to You and You alone.

Let me share the main idea at the centre of this sermon: Our response to crises, no matter where they originate from or how they are manifested to us, for Christians, should always be the same, a deep and solid reliance on the sovereignty of God. In other words, we should respond in a way that gives glory to God with confidence knowing that His will, will always be done.

**Let's read and hear from God's Holy infallible, inerrant, and authoritative Word:
Our passage today is Acts 12:1-25**

[read passage Acts 12]

Today as we continue with the sermon series in the book of Acts we come to chapter 12. The title of today's sermon is something of a give-away as to how we should apply the main point of this whole chapter. Let's jump right in and see what this chapter has to teach us about "**How a Healthy Church Responds to Crisis**".

Of course, like all expository sermons we want to place everything in its overall context. So, let's do that now. I'm sure it has been explained that the main purpose of the book of Acts has been to highlight the spread of the early Christian church as the Holy Spirit took up residence in the lives of the early believers and enabled them to preach the Good News wherever the Spirit sent them. I'm also confident that the connection between the book of Acts and the Gospel according to Luke has likewise been explained thoroughly. Rather than repeat all of that let me begin by putting chapter 12 in its place in this unfolding historical narrative.

Chapter 12 seems to bring the progress that the church had been experiencing since chapter 9 to a full stop. At the same time though, because we know there are another 16 chapters left, it also serves as a transition.



Let me explain that first assertion. We need to go all the way back to the end of chapter 9 where we read in verse 31, **“Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers”**. By the time we come to the events described in chapter 12, the church has gone through a time of relative peacefulness (probably around 8-11 years. We can assume that length of time if we put Stephen’s martyrdom at 33 AD and Paul’s persecution in Damascus at 36 AD, then Herod’s Death at 44 AD). The believers were free to spread their message during this time. Sure, there was probably some persecution and opposition, but it had generally been localized and short lived, at least that was the case since the major persecution that broke out following the martyrdom of Stephen and scattered the believers amongst the Roman empire. We can conclude that if the believers weren’t creating too much of a disturbance in society it seems that the authorities were quite willing to leave them alone and during this time of peace the church thrived. **However, we also know from history and in some cases experience that, wherever the Gospel is properly proclaimed it will eventually cause a disturbance.**

The transition I mentioned is seen here at the end of Acts 12, as Paul and Barnabas return from Jerusalem to Antioch after giving the ‘gift’ to the church in Jerusalem. This signals the end of the spread of the Gospel, amongst the Jews only, within the areas known as Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Now that does not mean that mission to the Jews ceased from that point, we only need to look at the apostle Paul’s strategy of going first to the synagogue or the Jewish elders of each town or city that he came to during his subsequent missionary journeys. He would present himself to the leaders and proclaim the gospel by way of introduction. In fact, we see this same strategy towards the end of his ministry when he entered Rome at the end of this book. However, from this chapter on in the book of Acts we will see a more focused effort on proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles. So, it is within these contexts that we place Acts chapter 12

Introduction:

You would have to have been living under a rock for most of the past few years if you weren’t aware that the world has experienced a major crisis. Of course, I am referring to the one that we all shared in, that is the COVID Pandemic. This major crisis has spawned a lot of mini crises along the way as well. For many it resulted in their struggling with life as it meant losing the means to support their families, the quarantine systems that were put in place in many ways negatively impacted our social interactions.

Each crisis not only affected us as individuals within society, but also as members of a community of believers.

Due to the COVID quarantine, CoaH was hampered from following its vision to **lead peoples near and far to become devoted followers of Jesus Christ.**

There was also the impact that this, quarantine induced, separation had upon the ability for individual leaders in CoaH to realize their own personal visions and, if the past few months has taught us anything, we will continue to experience crises well into the future.

Of course, a crisis is not a new experience to any of us, they always come whether we want them to or not. Here is a working definition for crisis that I found to be helpful when asking whether something should be understood as a crisis or not. **A crisis is any event or period that will lead, or may lead, to an unstable and dangerous situation which will affect an individual, a group, or all of society. Crises are negative changes in human or environmental spheres, especially when they occur suddenly, with little or no warning.**



It's for this very negative reason that a crisis often leads to the experience of heightened anxiety and stress in our lives. This is always the inevitable result if we don't respond to it properly.

In today's passage we can see two main ways that Christians can respond to any crisis in a healthy and God honouring way.

One is given as an individual response and the other as a corporate response. But I would suggest that they can be interchangeable, the corporate response could also define the individual response and vice versa. But before we see that it would be very helpful to 'set the scene' so to speak.

Acts 12 opens with the mention of a very familiar name, Herod. This wasn't Herod the Great who had ordered the killing of all babies in and around Bethlehem upon hearing of the Messiah's birth. It also wasn't Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist beheaded for condemning the adulterous relationship he had with his brother's wife and who was also complicit in Jesus' crucifixion (remember he sent Jesus back to Pilate after Herod had examined Him). The Herod mentioned here in Acts 12 is Herod Agrippa I. We can place him historically within the Herodian dynasty, by reminding ourselves that he was grandson of Herod the Great and nephew to Herod Antipas.

History tells us that this Herod, like all the others that came before him, was essentially a puppet of the Roman empire. Like his grandfather Herod the Great, and uncle, Herod Antipas, Agrippa the 1st was placed in power by Rome and served at Rome's pleasure. The job of the Herodian rulers was mostly to act as figureheads and just keep the peace. The Roman empire was huge and therefore keeping everyone happy was in their best interests and it is for this reason that Herod began to persecute the church. Verse 3 tells us that he, **"arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also."** We can see from this same verse that Peter's arrest and subsequent jailing was a direct result of Herod's putting two and two together and concluding that the persecution of the Christians, and especially the execution of one of their leaders, pleased the Jews.

Next, we read the announcement in verse 5 that while Peter was, **"kept in prison the church was earnestly praying to God for him"**. This should not surprise us as prayer was an important regular activity amongst the early church as we are told in Acts 1:14, **"They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers"**.

This is followed by another major segment of our passage which tells us that Peter did not die at the hands of Herod Agrippa but was instead delivered by the miraculous intervention of God. We are told that Peter is jolted awake by an **"Angel of the Lord"**, he is released from his chains and told to get up, dress, and follow the **'Angel'**. This he does while in some sort of dream state that he doesn't fully shake off until he, **"come[s] to himself"**. Peter's conclusion to all that has happened is given in verse 11. At the same time as he **"come[s] to himself"** he deduces, **"Now, I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating"**. As far as Herod, and everyone else involved, was concerned Peter's imprisonment would end in only one way, his death. Yes, even Peter, who was sleeping had probably resigned himself to the same fate as James. But we will speak more to that later.

This section also includes the humorous account of Peter's reveal to the church that was praying for him. I think this narrative is also telling us something about our tendency to not see the answers to our prayers that are prayed according to His will, even when the very answers are staring us right in the face. Maybe that is because God's answers are always more spectacular than we can imagine. The church was **'astonished'** as verse 16 tells us, when they opened the door and saw Peter standing there.



Next, you can imagine Herod's frustration as his unspiritual eyes could only see a blatant escape from custody. Peter's absence also caused "**no small commotion among the soldiers**" we read in verse 18, as they were likewise at a loss to explain their prisoner's disappearance, after all he was fully secured by them. Verse 19 goes on to reveal that Herod was so disturbed by this turn of events that, "**After [he] had a thorough search made for [Peter] and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then [he] went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there**".

It was there in Caesarea that Herod Agrippa I met his eventual demise.

Let's look at these events a little more closely. The church's response to this crisis of Peter being jailed and slated for execution is, to include him in their Prayers. At the same time, Peter experiences his own personal crisis. But notice Peter's individual response to this crisis: Sleep! Where do you think Peter would have learned this response? Turn to Matthew 8:23-27. Let's read: ²³ **Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him.** ²⁴ **Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping.** ²⁵ **The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"** ²⁶ **He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"** **Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.** ²⁷ **The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"**

We should also note that Peter is, according to his own words, rescued by God. This was not a miraculous escape as most headings from the translations we have would suggest: (The heading from the NIV puts the attention upon Peter and the church's prayer. We can easily get the impression that their faith somehow had a part to play in it). Of course, this immediately raises the questions, wasn't the church praying for James? Why was Peter rescued and James beheaded?

These alternate endings to the lives of two of the apostles puts to rest the notion that God must answer our prayers the way we want Him to. Yes, the church was praying for both, but that doesn't mean we should believe that mere human beings can pray with such earnestness that we can change God's mind. Yes, there are a few passages in the Bible that some have interpreted in this way. But all we have to do is acknowledge God's Word as being totally true and authoritative and read the unambiguous passages such as [Malachi 3:6](#) which declares that, "**I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.**" Or consider, [James 1:17](#) which tells us, "**Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.**" Also we see that [Numbers 23:19](#) is just as clear when it says: "**God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?**"

I think it is quite clear that based on these verses, we can answer the question, 'Can we make God change His mind?' by concluding that, 'no, God does not change'. To suggest otherwise is to actually to deny one of God's attributes. The attribute of immutability which means that God is [unchanging](#) and unchangeable. We would also be denying His sovereign right to act in anyway He chooses.

Many Christians bristle when they hear that word 'sovereignty'. To them it leaves the impression that we are at the mercy of a dictator God and that no matter what we do everything is already set in stone. I must admit I used to think that way as well, and then I was introduced to the greatest movie ever, "Chariots of Fire". The story of Eric Liddle and the 1924 Olympics. This movie played a big part in my desire to give up any claims on this side of eternity and take my family to the mission field. In that movie Eric's father responds to the accusation that God is a dictator because of His sovereignty by saying, "A Dictator, aye, but a benevolent and loving dictator."



*(J.I. Packer gives a very thorough treatment of this problem in his book “Knowing God”). Part of which is: There are two important considerations we need to make when we encounter the passages that say God ‘changed His mind’. The first is the ability to recognize a figure of speech known as an **anthropopathism**. This is where we, as finite human beings use our own experiences and attribute them to God. We do this because we understandably realize that we can only know what God is doing from our perspective. For example, in Genesis 6:6 we read, “**The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled**”. We use the figure of speech just mentioned to understand the depth of God’s sadness. The very fact that we are alive now proves that God did not really change His mind about creating humans.*

*The second thing we need to distinguish is when God makes **conditional declarations** and how they are different from His **unconditional purposes**. For example, when God says he “will destroy Nineveh in forty days” this is a conditional declaration because it is conditional upon their repentance. We know this because the Assyrians did repent, and God relented. This example shows that God did not change His mind. Instead, His warning was not ignored, because it resulted in the desired repentance.*

*The other side of this consideration is the example of the **unconditional purpose** of God, such as when He made the promise to King David in 2 Samuel 7:16 that, “**Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever**”. There is no condition attached to this promise which meant that no matter what David did, or didn’t do, the Word of the Lord would come to pass.*

The end of our passage shows that those who persecute the church or otherwise hinder the spread of the Gospel... well their end is assured.

However, before we consider the lesson of what happened to Herod, I want us to see how not to respond to crises. As we take a closer look at verse 20-22. The people of Tyre and Sidon are a perfect example of how not to respond to a crisis. Of course, they weren’t experiencing the crisis of persecution that was being experienced by the Church but note that both the believers and the unbelievers in our passage were experiencing a common crisis. This was the famine that was prophesied by Agabus in Acts 11:28 which also forms a part of the overall historical context of the events described in our passage.

Compare the believers’ response to this famine with the residents of Tyre and Sidon. The believers in Judea received food aid from their Christian brothers and sisters in other Christian communities. In other words, God supplied for their needs, and their focus on prayer, when another more immediate crisis breaks out, is a testimony to the fact that they were trusting in God as their ultimate provider. The Tyranians (okay that one I just made up. I don’t actually know what someone from Tyre is called) and Sidonians, on the other hand, had to resort to bribery, (securing the support of Blastus) flattery and bowing before a person (king Herod) who they had a dispute with. Why is this the case? Because as verse 20 reveals to us they depended upon Herod and his kingdom for their supply of food.

This is the mistake we continue to make: When we find ourselves overwhelmed by difficult circumstances we place our trust in earthly things, in relationships, in our own powers or talents or beauty, or the goodness and skills we see in others, to rescue us. This is a mistake because, when these things fade and fail as they all will inevitably do, the result is we despair.

What we need to acknowledge is that self-reliance or a reliance on anything, but God is the wrong response to crises.

Now let’s return to Luke’s telling of the Herod incident. He tells us that Herod appeared before the people wearing his royal robes and took his place on the royal throne and then delivered a public address. The crowd responds to his speech by saying, “**this is the voice of a god, not of a man.**”



Luke then says that **“Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.”**

At this point we can imagine all sorts of Hollywood scenarios and think that Herod fell down right then and there, and worms started eating their way out of his body a la “Alien”. If that is the picture you have in your mind, then you have been watching too much tv during this pandemic.

The Jewish historian Josephus’ account of Herod’s death provides a bit more detail which serves to ground Luke’s rather short telling of this incident. Josephus tells us that Herod did in fact collapse at the time of his audience with the people of Tyre and Sidon but, that he succumbed to this intestinal worm infestation 5 days later. Now that little historical fact doesn’t minimize what Luke wrote. The judgement against sin is always immediate **“He was struck down”**. Whether the results of unrepentant sin are realized after five days, as in Herod’s case, or after a long life on earth makes no difference.

So, what should our “takeaway” be from this passage. Let me suggest just one thing and if this would be the only thing that you get from this passage, then my work as a preacher has been done. What do these two seemingly contradictory responses have in common? Peter’s individual response of sleeping and the church’s corporate one of prayer. The answer is God’s Glory. In everything we do, in every decision we make, we should always ask the question, as individuals and as a corporate body, “Will this bring glory to God”. In other words, is what I am doing because I want to give all the glory to God or because I want to receive some benefit?”.

Why is this the only conclusion? Let’s read verse 24, **“But the Word of God continued to increase and spread”**. As we know from Isaiah 55:11, **“so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it”**. The purpose is given in verse 13, **“This will be for the Lord’s renown [his glory]”**

Let’s pray:

Lord thank you for Your word, Your holy, infallible, inerrant Word. We pray that you will establish Your purpose in our lives, in our families, in this church, so that your Name will be glorified.

Let’s pray.