

Last week we found the Church in a tough spot. Herod Agrippa, King of the Jews, beheaded James, the brother of John, and arrested Peter, intending to behead him. However, the Church earnestly prayed.

The Church, comprised of a rag-tag bunch of weak and powerless people, did the only thing they knew to do, which is often the thing we neglect to do or turn to as a last resort. They earnestly prayed and stretched themselves out to God in prayer because unless God showed up, they knew they were powerless against the ruthless King Herod, who, upon killing James, smelled blood in the water and became bent on wiping out the Church.

Providentially, Herod was unable to execute Peter because his arrest took place over Passover, and the law forbade it. Still, on the very last night of Passover, the night before Herod planned to carry out Peter's execution, God sent an angel of the Lord to free Peter from prison. Herod finding that Peter had escaped, kills the soldiers who were guarding him, and suddenly we see the tide begin to turn. Herod's grip begins to loosen, and he is about to be made an example of before the nations of the world.

Whereas Herod, at this time in history, was looked to as the king, was in reality a pawn used in service to the true king, the king of kings, and Herod, as it turns out, is just like every other man, worm food.

PP 1. We are the Underdogs

“Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king’s chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king’s country for food.” -Acts 12:20

Herod’s incredible power and authority are on full display in this passage. After having beheaded John and an unsuccessful attempt at executing Peter, Herod leaves Jerusalem and spends time in Caesarea. But, first, let me refresh your memory of who Herod was. His father, Aristobulus, was murdered by his father, Herod the Great, the ruler who ordered the slaughter of children during the time of Christ's birth. As a child, Herod Agrippa was sent to Rome to receive an education alongside the imperial family. He wound up getting into some trouble and imprisoned in Rome only to be freed from prison when his childhood friend Caligula became the emperor. Not only was he released from jail, but soon after, Herod was named ruler of the Palestinian provinces. After Caligula's reign ended, Herod's power grew even more, when another childhood friend, Claudius, came into power and extended Herod's rule to include Judea and Samaria.

Herod was quite powerful, only being outranked in power by the Roman Emperor within his region. In this historical account, he was so powerful that Herod was able to bring the

Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon to their knees. For some reason unknown to us, Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon and placed an embargo against them, banning all trade to and from these cities. Because Tyre and Sidon depended on food from Judea and Samaria, they were able to gain an audience with Herod through a mutual friend, Blastus, Herod's chamberlain. Thus, Herod once again saw an opportunity to exercise his power and authority when it says in verses 21-22, *"On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, 'The voice of God, and not of a man!'"*

Josephus records a historical account of this in Antiquities of the Jews. He says, "on the second day of the festival, Agrippa entered the theater at daybreak, 'clad in a robe made altogether of silver, of quite wonderful weaving' (Ant. 19.344). Herod knew that the early morning sun would reflect off of his royal robes in a way that would astonish his audience. Josephus goes on to say that upon seeing Herod, the people cried out, "'Be gracious to us! Hitherto we have revered you as a human being, but henceforth we confess you to be of more than mortal nature.'"

Herod was a mighty man, and if he could bring entire cities to their knees and convince them that he was like a god, then what chance did the early Church face in its vulnerable state? Similarly, what prospect does the church face today in this culture? We barely survived the issue of masking; what chance do we have in the face of real persecution? The reality is that we are the underdogs, but who doesn't love to root for the underdog?

PP 2. All of God's enemies are worm food

"Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last." -Acts 12:23

Or said another way, all of God's enemies are worm food!

Oddly enough, it's unclear how Herod died. Luke, being a physician, doesn't even take time to give us the details, and history only records that a 'severe pain...arose in his belly' which became so violent that he was carried into his palace, where five days later he died. There is a lot of speculation surrounding Herod's death, but there is an interesting detail I want to point out. Herod, the so-called king of the Jews, ends up like all other people, dead and buried despite his god-like persona. However, when the true king was crucified and buried, he rose from the grave, and he is currently sitting at the right hand of the Father in Heaven, whereas Herod thought he god-like, it turns out he is just like every other man, worm food.

It might appear at times that the Church is failing, and the reality is because it's filled with failures. I mean, look around the room, can you believe that this is the group of people to who God has entrusted the Gospel too! I've gone to Church for a long time, and sometimes I scratch my head and think, what are we doing? Is this even making a difference? Throughout the book of Acts, the Church looks doomed to failure, sharp disagreements, persecution, death, riots, prisons, divisions, and shipwrecks. In the moment—where we live most of the time—these

things are threatening and frightening, even deadly. However, they are all powerless to stop the spread of the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The truth is that everyone who sets themselves up against the Gospel will not prevail, and like Herod, they will end up as an embarrassing footnote in history as nothing more than worm food.

This brings me to my final point...

PP 3. **The best defense is a good offense**

“But the word of God increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name is Mark.” -Acts 12:24-25

As we are about to see, none of what happened in chapter 12 hindered the spread of the Gospel or the resolve of the early Church. On the contrary, they knew their mission, and they knew what they needed to do next.

Let me be clear. When I say that the best defense is a good offense, I don't mean that there aren't times when we need to defend the Gospel or defend against false teaching. What I am saying and what I believe we see from the example of the early Church is that we must remain pro-active instead of being passive. Being pro-active guarantees that we will encounter opposition, but with the Lord's help, we can occupy enemy territory and see the word of God increase and multiply. We need to continue to bring the battle to the enemy's front door instead of allowing ourselves to passively stand by, hoping that if we don't put up too much of a fight, then maybe the enemy will leave us alone; it's never going to happen. As we've learned, trials are a guarantee for every Christian, and we must be prepared for that and not let it stop us from fulfilling our God-given mission. It will appear at times to the world and us that we are losing and outnumbered, and overpowered. In this life and this world, we are operating behind enemy lines, and we are **underdogs**. However, **all of God's enemies are worm food**, so armed with that knowledge, let's step out in faith and take some risks for advancing the Gospel so that we might take it to the end of the earth because **the best defense is a good offense**.

Conclusion & Communion

One final thought before I finish, and we close with communion. God's concern for the lost is evident in these passages. It seems to me at least that God is constantly expanding his Church through the spreading of his word as we see it moving from Jerusalem now to Antioch. The Church is never confined to one place for very long. Just as soon as the Church is established in a new region, we quickly see the Church shifting to a new location, and when the Church is persecuted, it's okay because those who've come to know Christ are secure in him even if it costs them their lives.

The Church is at its best when it's on the offense. The moment a church turns inward and becomes defensive, it tries to do the work of God, and it misses out on the mission for which it was created to advance the Gospel to the end of the earth.

Maybe today, you are going through some trials, and you feel battered and burned out, let's remind ourselves that all of God's enemies, like Herod, are worm food. However, our Lord and King has risen from the grave and is seated at the right hand of God, and he promised to raise us to new life as well, so let's remind ourselves in communion what Jesus has done for us so we can get back to making some offensive plays for the kingdom.