

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE HOLY  
ACTS 12:1-25

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

We don't have to look very far or listen very hard to find evidence of evil in our world. This week Brian Kohberger was sentenced for his murder of four college students in Moscow, Idaho. It was seemingly a senseless crime.

Also in the news this week there was the murder trial of a Colorado dentist who allegedly killed his wife by putting cyanide in her smoothies. There was the shooting of an off duty Border Patrol agent in New York City by an illegal immigrant. Another illegal immigrant was shown on news programs hauling a Chinese gal into his house in Houston. Apparently this bad guy was involved in a sex trafficking ring.

We might classify these victims as the innocent recipients of evil by bad people. There are also people on the receiving end of evil deeds whom we might classify as not just innocent victims but also righteous people. We probably could put the Idaho firefighters into that category. Most of you remember the story about the guy in Idaho who set a brush fire near Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and then shot and killed two of the first responders who showed up to put out the fire. The evil guy committed suicide.

Why does God allow evil people in these situations to harm not only the innocent but even the righteous? There are more mundane but more personally painful cases in which we are involved where evil people also seem to triumph. Many of us have been exposed to unfair bosses, fellow students who cheat, adults who have abused us, family members who have left us, and even Christians who have treated us evilly. What kind of perspective does the Lord want us to have on these situations where the bad flourish and the good suffer?

The passage before us today suggests some answers. We have seen in our study of Acts that the church was poised to make a big breakout. Last week we saw that Jewish Christians had made an advance of the gospel among Gentiles in the city of Antioch in Syria. (PROJECTOR ON--- ANTIOCH 02) This city was going to be a jumping-off point for the progress of the gospel into Gentile areas of Asia Minor and Europe. But before describing the development of this advance the author Luke returns to a consideration of the status of the church in Jerusalem. He shows that God is still at work there. But a new challenge has arisen.

I.

So in vv. 1-3 of #12 we are going to look at THE PROSPERITY OF THE WICKED. (I. THE PROSPERITY OF THE WICKED) Verse 1 says, **"About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church."** The vague expression **"about that time"** probably refers to events that took place between the

coming of Paul to Antioch described in vv. 19-26 of the previous chapter and the collection for famine relief described in vv. 27-30.

The Herod referred to in v. 1 is Herod Agrippa. (HERODS FAMILY TREE) He was the grandson of Herod the Great, who was in power in Palestine at the time of the birth of Jesus. Aristobulus was the son of Herod the Great. Aristobulus became the father of Herod Agrippa in 10 BC. Grandpa Herod was a cruel and paranoid tyrant. He killed one of his wives, three of his sons, and other relatives at various points in his career. When Herod Agrippa was about three years old, Grandpa Herod killed Aristobulus, the father of Agrippa. The mother of Agrippa decided that it was time to leave town. So she took son Agrippa to Rome to protect him from Grandpa Herod.

In Rome Agrippa grew up with two boys who were each to become emperors of Rome. One was Caligula. The other was Claudius. Agrippa proved to be a big spender. In 23 AD, when he was about 32, his debts became so large that he decided to skip town and head back east. Thirteen years later he decided that it was safe to go back to Rome. But shortly afterward Agrippa said some stupid things which offended the emperor, and he landed in jail. A few months later, however, the emperor died, and Agrippa's friend Caligula replaced him. New emperor Caligula released his friend from jail and made Agrippa king over the northern part of Israel. This was in 37 AD.

Four years later Emperor Caligula was assassinated, and Agrippa's other friend Claudius came to the throne. (AGRIPPA'S KINGDOM) Claudius added Judea to the realm of King Herod Agrippa. Judea had previously been ruled directly by Roman governors. Pontius Pilate had been one of them. But now the kingdom of Agrippa was expanded to include most of the territory that had once been ruled by Grandpa Herod the Great.

Unlike the other Herods Agrippa endeared himself to the Jewish people. Since his mom was Jewish, he had more Jewish blood than most of the other Herods. That was a plus to the Jewish people. Then when Judea was added to his territory, he moved to Jerusalem. That won the respect of Jewish leaders. He also intervened when the Roman Emperor Claudius talked about putting a statue of himself in the temple. In these and other situations Herod tried to sensitize Rome to the religious sensibilities of the Jewish people.

In 41 AD Herod Agrippa celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. In obedience to the words of the Bible he read part of Deuteronomy #17. A Jewish document called the Mishnah says, **"King Agrippa received it standing and read it standing; for this the sages praised him. And when he read, 'Thou mayest not put a foreigner over thee which is not thy brother,' his eyes flowed with tears [Herod was part Edomite and not a full-blooded Jew]; but they called out to him, 'Our brother art thou! Our brother art thou! Our brother art thou!'"**

(OVERHEAD OFF) Herod Agrippa, however, was at heart an evil man. He treated the Jews well because he saw it as advantageous to his own interests to treat them well. In

Rome he had little concern for Jewish faith. Now he pretended to be religious to win the support of the Jewish people. He also began to persecute the Christians because they were a small minority in his realm, and most of the Jews were upset with them. We have seen that the chief apostle of the Christians, Peter, and other Jewish Christian leaders had begun to hang around with Gentiles. So the Jews got worked up about that. Agrippa saw an opportunity to cultivate favor for himself by persecuting the Christians.

People who act religious, or who actually are religious, are not always good people. Sometimes they are evil. We see that today with Islamic extremists. But even people who claim to be Christians can be evil. Vladimir Putin claims to be a Russian Orthodox Christian. He supposedly wears a baptismal cross on his neck given to him by his mother. He has promoted the Russian Orthodox Church. The top Russian Orthodox official, Patriarch Kirill, is a good buddy with Vladimir. Yet Vladimir Putin has committed horrible atrocities. His army has destroyed churches in Ukraine and brutalized evangelical pastors when they have been captured.

Verse 2 tells us that Agrippa displayed his evil colors by killing James the apostle, the brother of John. James thus became the first of the twelve apostles to be martyred for the faith. Luke adds in v. 3, **“...and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread.”**

When Herod got a good reaction to his execution of James, he decided to go for the chief apostle. He made his move at the time of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. There were a lot of Jews who showed up in Jerusalem for the feast. Arresting Peter at this time would bring positive attention to himself, so Herod reasoned. But in deference to the holiness of the feast Herod would put off the brief trial and execution until the holiday was over.

Herod Agrippa seemed to be on a roll. He had a good personal friend who was the most powerful ruler in the world. He had a kingdom under his authority. His own people seemed to love him. Picking on the Christians had no downside risk. The wicked were flourishing, and the good were suffering.

Sometimes life does seem to be like that. The sleaze ball at work gets promoted. We get laid off. The cheater gets a good grade. We don't do so well. Churches in Ukraine get burned, and the Russians kill evangelical pastors. (PROJECTOR ON--- PSALM 73:3) The writer in Psalm 73 cries out, **“For I was envious of the arrogant/ when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (PSALM 73:4) For they have no pangs until death;/ their bodies are fat and sleek. (PSALM 73:5) They are not in trouble as others are;/ they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. (PSALM 73:6) Therefore pride is their necklace;/ violence covers them as a garment..... (PSALM 73:13) All in vain have I kept my heart clean/ and washed my hands in innocence. (PSALM 73:14) For all the day long I have been stricken/ and rebuked every morning..”** But this is not the end of the story.

II.

In vv. 4-17 we come to GOD'S DELIVERANCE OF THE RIGHTEOUS. (II. GOD'S DELIVERANCE OF...) Verse 4 tells us, **"And when he (Agrippa) had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people."** A squad of soldiers was four men. These four squads rotated their duty time, serving either for three hours or six hours at a stretch. Now Peter was already in a prison. What was the purpose of the extra guards? Perhaps Herod had concern that the Christians might mount an effort to rescue Peter. He was, after all, their most important leader.

A more important factor, perhaps, was Peter's previous prison record. If the royal family did not remember it, the leaders of the Sanhedrin certainly remembered that Peter had on an earlier occasion escaped from prison and returned to preaching in the temple where he had been arrested the previous day. Herod was surely told about that incident if he did not already know about it. He was not going to take any chances now that this Christian was going to escape his jail and embarrass him.

Meanwhile v. 5 tells us, **"So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church."** The Christians realized the dangerous predicament that faced Peter. Other Christians were likely to join him in suffering the deaths of martyrs. So they prayed.

The Jerusalem Christians were cut off from access to political power. Peter and his friends had little or no legal rights to claim. The ACLU was not about to come running to the rescue. Herod had already decided Peter's fate. There would be a brief show trial, and then the Christian leader would be killed, in a way similar to how Agrippa had dealt with the Apostle James. Peter and the Christians were also cut off from the other institution of power in Judea. They were cut off from religious power. The Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism, also wanted Peter's blood.

But Christians are never really cut off from power. They always have access to the greatest power in the universe. Thus in vv. 6 & 7 Luke says, **"Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. 7 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, 'Get up quickly.' And the chains fell off his hands."**

Most of us would have had a sleepless night in this situation. Perhaps Peter was just dead tired from this ordeal. But I wonder if his faith might have entered into the picture also. (JOHN 21:18) Perhaps he had confidence that stemmed from the words of Jesus recorded in John #21 v. 18: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go."** Those words sounded like a warning of future imprisonment and maybe even death. But Peter was not yet "old." So perhaps his sleep involved confidence in the promise of Jesus.

(PROJECTOR OFF) So the angel leads Peter out of the prison, and he finally realizes that it is not just a dream that he has had. According to v. 12, **“When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.”** This John Mark is the same Mark who wrote the Gospel According to Mark. Apparently there was a church that was meeting in his house.

Verse 13 tells us, **“And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer.”** The family of Mary was apparently well-to-do. She had a house large enough to accommodate a gathering of Christians. The reference to a gate suggests that there was also a courtyard that separated the house from the street, which was true only of the homes of wealthy people. Then also there was a servant girl in the family.

Verses 14-16 describe what the early church recognized as a humorous incident: **“Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. 15 They said to her, ‘You are out of your mind.’ But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, ‘It is his angel!’ 16 But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.”** These dedicated Christians have been praying fervently for the Lord to miraculously intervene and deliver Peter. So the Lord answers their prayer, and Peter shows up at their door. The excited servant girl forgets to let Peter in. Instead she runs in to announce the good news. Of course these men and women of faith don't believe that it could be true. Meanwhile Peter is still knocking at the door, concerned that soldiers could already be looking for him and not wanting to make too much noise so that the neighbors would be awakened and alarmed.

Finally Peter gets in, and everyone is amazed. Isn't that just like us Christians? We pray for the Lord to intervene in the affairs of men. Then when the Lord answers our prayer, we can hardly believe it. Luke says in v. 17, **“But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, ‘Tell these things to James and to the brothers.’ Then he departed and went to another place.”**

The order to report this information to James and the brethren implies that James has become the leader of the church in Jerusalem. This James is the half brother of Jesus who would write the Epistle of James. He was not the Apostle James who had earlier been killed by Agrippa. This James has gained a prominent leadership role in the church. Probably the twelve apostles were involved now in evangelism and in visiting churches outside of Jerusalem. Early tradition outside of the Bible says that James maintained good relations with the unbelieving Jews through his entire life. Perhaps that was why he came to have this leadership role.

Notice also that Peter doesn't decide to stick around in Jerusalem. In his earlier escape from prison he went right back to preaching in the temple. This time he seems to

recognize that his life is in greater danger, and that the wiser course of action is to make a strategic retreat. So it is not necessarily a lack of faith for Christians to avoid situations where their lives are endangered by persecution.

The death of Peter at this time was ultimately not part of God's sovereign plan for his life. But Luke also recognized that prayer played a key role in Peter's deliverance. This effective prayer involved a group of Christians who were praying fervently. This kind of prayer is especially needed in tough times. The great Puritan and author of *Pilgrim's Progress* John Bunyan once observed, **"You can do more than pray after you have prayed. But you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed."**

Not all of our questions are yet answered. Peter was rescued, but James was killed. Was there no fervent prayer that was made concerning his situation? I suspect that there was. But the answers to our prayers are not always according to our will. There are different kinds of deliverance for the Christian. Deliverance for James the apostle meant entrance into the presence of his Savior. Deliverance for Peter meant more years of service on the earth. The author of the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews may have had these two situations in mind when he spoke in #11 about those who by faith **"escaped the edge of the sword"** and those who by faith **"were put to death with the sword."** Faith was present in both situations, but the will of God for the two individuals was different. So it is with Christians today. Our responsibility always is to pray and trust God.

III.

In vv. 18 & 19 we come to THE RESPONSE OF THE WICKED. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE RESPONSE OF THE WICKED) The text says, **"Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. 19 And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there."**

Imagine the confusion of those soldiers when they woke up and discovered that their prisoner was missing. There must have been panic and confusion. How could this guy have escaped? Herod's conclusion was that it must have been an inside job. One or more of the guards had to have helped Peter escape. So Antipas examined the guards. You can be sure that he didn't use methods that would be approved by Amnesty International. But the guards in a divine sleep knew nothing more about what happened than did Agrippa.

The Greek text says simply that **"they were led away."** The implication was that they were killed. Herod Agrippa had considerable freedom in the administration of the affairs of his province. So Roman law was not directly binding on his treatment of soldiers. But probably he followed the Roman example of applying the same penalty for guards who let a prisoner escape as that penalty that the prisoner was due to receive.

Evil people who have enough power and who continue to pursue an evil path end up denying reality with results that are detrimental to the well being of others. Herod Agrippa responded to the intervention of God by excluding the possibility that God could have intervened. So he came to the wrong conclusion. Once supernatural intervention was ruled out as an explanation the only alternative was that the guards had freed Peter. But it was a denial of reality. The result was perhaps the execution of all sixteen guards assigned to watch Peter.

A similar thing has happened in the field of natural science. God has been excluded as a possible agent involved in the creation of life. The only alternative is some kind of evolutionary theory. But the result is a denial of reality. It is a wrong conclusion. God did create life on this planet. The effects of this false conclusion lead to humanism and the loss of any solid basis for morality. If man is simply the result of naturalistic forces, why worry about accountability to a Higher Being? Why not live only for self? The result of such thinking is too often evil.

Evil can even be found in the church. Years ago there was a vacancy in the Church of England in the position of bishop of Durham. David Jenkins was put forth as the candidate for the position. He expressed doubts about basic Christian beliefs. He denied the virgin birth of Christ. He made this statement: There is **“no certainty in the New Testament about anything of importance.”** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37093551>)

The dean of London's King's College told the BBC: **“Nothing short of a thunderbolt striking York Minster [cathedral] can stop the consecration of the bishop of Durham taking place...”** (*Christianity Today* 9/7/1984) (YORK MINSTER CATHEDRAL FIRE) Shortly afterward lightning did strike this famous medieval cathedral and part of it burned to the ground. Nevertheless this church leader who denied basic Christian doctrine was installed as bishop. Church leaders ignored this sign of divine intervention. (PROJECTOR OFF) David Jenkins became bishop.

Sometimes when God intervenes, the evil cut their losses and run. That is what Herod Agrippa did here. He decided that it was time to go back to Caesarea for a while, which was still the official capital of the province. (PROJECTOR ON--- CAESAREA MAP) Herod had set up the situation with Peter to make himself look good. But to have this Christian apostle escape from maximum security under the his nose was a terrible humiliation. How could he explain this?

IV.

Herod soon had a bigger problem. In vv. 20-24 we come to GOD'S JUDGMENT ON THE WICKED. (IV. GOD'S JUDGMENT ON THE WICKED) Verse 20 says, **“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.”**

Tyre and Sidon (TYRE, SIDON, CAESAREA) were not part of the Roman province of Judea, but they were dependent on food supplies that came from Galilee, which was within the realm of Herod. For some reason these communities made King Herod angry, and he either cut off their food supplies or threatened to do so. People from these two towns realized the seriousness of their situation. So they won over a top aide to the king. That means they probably bribed him.

(CAESAREA THEATER) The first century Jewish historian Josephus says that this meeting happened in the theater in Caesarea. That theater has been excavated and rebuilt. I attended a concert there in 1999. (CAESAREA THEATER 5/4) Josephus says that on the second day of a festival convened to honor Caesar, Agrippa showed up there wearing a garment made entirely of silver. A lot of people from Tyre and Sidon were present.

According to vv. 22 & 23, **“And the people were shouting, ‘The voice of a god, and not of a man!’ 23 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.”**  
(PROJECTOR OFF)

It was God’s judgment upon the wicked. Skeptics would write this off as a nice mythical story except that we have support for this account in its essentials from the Jewish historian Josephus. Writing about these events that happened in 44 AD, he says, **“[Agrippa] exhibited shows in honor of Caesar, knowing that this was celebrated as a festival for his welfare. There came together for this occasion a large number of provincial officials and others of distinguished position. On the second day of the shows Agrippa put on a robe made of silver throughout... and entered the theatre at break of day. Then the silver shone and glittered wonderfully as the sun’s first rays fell on it, and its resplendence inspired a sort of fear and trembling in those who gazed at it. Immediately his flatterers called out from various directions, in language which boded him no good, for they invoked him as a god: ‘Be gracious to us!’ they cried, ‘hitherto we have revered you as a human being, but henceforth we confess you to be of more than mortal nature.’ He did not rebuke them, nor did he repudiate their impious flattery. .... At the same time he was seized with a severe pain in his bowels, which quickly increased in intensity.... He was hastily carried into the palace, and... when he had suffered continuously for five days from the pain in his belly, he died, in the 54th year of his life and the seventh year of his kingship.”**

At the beginning of the chapter an evil person is dominating the righteous. James is killed and the chief of the apostles is in danger. But then Peter is rescued by the intervention of God in response to the prayers of His people. In the end God strikes down the wicked man, and he suffers a painful and humiliating death. In v. 24 Luke briefly summarizes the status of Christianity: **“But the word of God increased and multiplied.”** What a beautiful contrast. The wicked may seem to be in control. But in the end the righteous will be vindicated.



Alexander Ogorodnikov (PROJECTOR ON--- ALEXANDER OGORODNIKOV) was a Russian Orthodox Christian who joined with a friend in 1971 to form the Christian Seminar to promote Christianity in the Soviet Union. He was harassed and arrested by the authorities on a number of occasions. In 1978 he was sent to prison for one year. At the end of that time he refused to yield to the demands of the KGB that he renounce his involvement with the Christian Seminar. So he was given a new sentence of five years in prison.

At one point during his imprisonment an especially brutal prison official ordered Alexander to remove the cross that he wore tucked inside of his prison uniform. He refused. He told the official in front of an assembly of prisoners, **"I will never take it from my neck. You must understand that this is my belief. I confess it before these people. I want to warn you that the Lord will never be humiliated. I am nothing, but I am a son of the Lord. If you are against me, you are against him. I warn you."**

Alexander was dragged away and beaten unconscious. While this was happening, another prisoner took his sock and unraveled it to make a cross. Soon after Alexander regained his consciousness, the newly made cross was passed in to him. He had been without a cross for only three hours.

The prison official disappeared two days later. A few days after that guards came and told Alexander that the prison official had taken sick. The man had been a strong, athletic, seemingly healthy man. But he suddenly developed a serious bile disorder. The prison doctors could not help him, and medical experts in Moscow were put on the case. Two months later the official's body was buried in the prison cemetery. After that no one at the prison dared to treat Alexander badly. In the end the righteous one was vindicated. (Barbara Von Der Heydt, *Candles Behind the Wall*)

The psalmist in Psalm 73 who expressed jealousy toward the situation of the wicked expressed a different perspective toward the end of the psalm. (PSALM 73:17-18) He wrote, **"...until I went into the sanctuary of God;/ then I discerned their end./ Truly you set them in slippery places;/ you make them fall to ruin. (PSALM 73:20) Like a dream when one awakes,/ O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. (PSALM 73:26) My flesh and my heart may fail,/ but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (PSALM 73:27) For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;/ you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. (PSALM 73:28) But for me it is good to be near God;/ I have made the Lord God my refuge,/ that I may tell of all your works."**

In the battles involving the good, the bad and the holy, the Holy One, the Lord, always wins in the end. The concern of the Lord is the response of His people in the midst of the trial. Will they trust God? Will they pray? Or will they grumble and complain and give up hope.

The Christians in Acts #12 prayed. James and Peter trusted in God. No doubt some of us are faced with a trial that involves evil people. Perhaps we feel like they are dominating us. Perhaps we are envious of their circumstances in life. In the midst of this situation, what will be our response? Will we grumble and complain like the children of Israel, or will we trust God like James and Peter?