

“THE WORD OF GOD INCREASED AND MULTIPLIED”

Acts 12:1–25

Key Verse: 12:24

“But the word of God increased and multiplied.”

How do you see the world? Sometimes our lives can get really messed up. Events, or our human situation, seem impossible to change. Usually, we calculate this and that and worry. We begin to give up, or fall into fear. A crisis or problem we go through exposes the way we really think. In today’s passage there’s a strong attack on Christians, particularly on their leaders. Believers react in a way that shows how they see the world. They pray to God. And what happens tells us some important truths about God. If we reflect on these truths, we get to know God better. Knowing this God changes the way we think about life and how we react to it. Really knowing God has a vital impact on our lives. As we turn our minds and hearts to these words, may God speak to us personally.

First, human evil (1–4). Look at verse 1. In the Bible, three different Herods appear. When Jesus is born, the first Herod, Herod the Great, feels threatened and tries to kill him (Matt.2:1–15). Later, the second Herod, his son Herod Antipas, executes John the Baptist and mocks Jesus during his trial.¹ Now, this third Herod, the grandson of Herod the Great, goes after people in the church of Jesus. All three Herods exhibit evil behavior. It says this third Herod “laid...hands on” Christians. It’s an idiom for an act that can be either good or bad. It’s used when Peter and John are arrested (4:3), where it says they’re “seized.” In chapter 8 it’s used in a good sense, when Peter and John lay their hands on new Samaritan believers to help them receive the Holy Spirit (8:17). Here, along with the word “violent,” it shows that Herod intends to inflict real harm.

Why is he doing this? History tells us that this Herod has just come to power. His father had ruled only a portion of the kingdom of Herod the Great. But now, the Roman Emperor has given this third Herod all the territory of his grandfather. As the new leader, he wants to consolidate his new power by pleasing the Jews (3a). And ever since Stephen was martyred, the Jewish leaders and their people have become increasingly hostile to Christians. They think Christians threaten their way of life. They don’t want to hear the gospel truth

¹ Luke 3:19–20; 9:9; 23:8–11.

and repent. And used to power and privilege, just like his fathers, this Herod has no qualms about destroying people for his own purposes.

What does he do? Look at verse 2. It's shocking. James the brother of John was one of the top three disciples of Jesus. Jesus loved him and invested his life in raising him as one of the leaders of his people. But for no good reason, Herod kills James with the sword, probably cutting off his head. While on earth Jesus told James and John that one day they would indeed share in his sufferings,² and now it happens. Herod, the new king backed by the Roman Empire, has absolute power to do this. But it's a great injustice, meant to threaten all Christians to stop what they're doing.

Christians don't even have a chance to grieve for James. Look at verses 3–4. Herod is acting quickly, but the Jewish holiday prevents him from killing Peter immediately. It's interesting that this is the same time of year Jesus was crucified. At that time, Peter promised to go with Jesus both to prison and to death (Luke 22:33), but Peter soon caved in to fear and deserted him. This time, Peter is caught. He's been arrested and jailed twice before.³ Now, it's unlikely he'll get away. The "four squads of soldiers" stationed at his prison cell are there to stand guard during the four watches of the night, so nobody can sneak him away. These soldiers know if they don't do their job, they'll get killed, too. After the Passover holidays, Herod wants to bring Peter out to the people to kill him.

It's significant that this is a specific persecution: against the leader of God's people. Men used this strategy against our Lord Jesus: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered."⁴ It may seem unrelatable. But so often people in their sinful nature oppose the leaders God has sent and established. Earlier, Stephen said this was the Israelites' pattern throughout their history, with Joseph, then Moses, then every single prophet.⁵ The devil himself still attacks leaders of God's people in various ways—through problems, their own sinful nature, and through their people. Peter's imprisonment also symbolizes the problems we all face. They may be hardships or even predicaments we've created for ourselves. They can seem like a trap, with no way out. But God is sovereign over all things, and in his own wisdom and will he allows them to happen.

² Matt.20:22; Mark 10:39.

³ 3:11; 4:1–3; 5:17–18.

⁴ Matt.26:31; Mark 14:27.

⁵ 7:9,27,28,35,39–40,51–52.

Second, prayer. Read verse 5. “So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.” At that time there were no church buildings. “The church” means all those who believe in Jesus. These people are in Jerusalem, but they’ve also scattered all over Judea and Samaria, along the coast, and now, way up in Antioch in Syria. The news of Peter’s imprisonment has surely spread like wildfire. Now, all the believers are praying for him. Why? They love him. Peter is their shepherd. He’s shared the gospel with and visited so many of them. When he preached the gospel boldly, many of these people came to believe in Jesus through him, including the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius. They all want Peter to stay alive, not just for themselves, but so that God can continue to use him to spread the good news of Jesus.

And we should note *how* they pray. It’s described here as “earnest” prayer. The word literally means “to fully stretch out the hand.” It means they’re really crying out to God for him. In verse 12, even in the early hours of the morning, many are still gathered at Mary’s house praying for Peter. There might be times when we pray like this, even all night long. But it’s rarely for somebody else; it might be for ourselves or our children. But how beautiful when believers gather to really pray with all their hearts for a servant of God. In light of this, let’s reflect on how we pray. Do we just think? Do we despair? Do we criticize? Or do we really pray? And how can these people be praying so earnestly? It’s because they truly believe in God. The Bible says that without faith it is impossible to please him, “for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists...” (Heb. 11:6). It’s called “the prayer of faith.” The prayer of faith can save the sick and help people experience the forgiveness of sins (James 5:15). In our culture, people tend to be skeptical, cynical, and disengaged. A legal scholar describes it in his book called *The Culture of Disbelief* (Stephen L. Carter, 1994). But as his people, God calls us to think and live differently. This year our UBF key verse worldwide has been, “Have faith in God” from Mark 11:22. We may not be facing problems as severe as jail time or life-threatening persecution. But we all face problems that seem insurmountable. They can look just like the fig tree withered away to its roots (Mark 11:20). Do we just sigh or give up? Or do we pray earnestly with faith in God? Do we pray for our church and our leaders earnestly, with faith in God?

Third, Peter walks out of prison (6–11). It’s the very night before Herod plans to bring Peter out and kill him. There’s no way out of there. In his prison cell, Peter

is sleeping between two soldiers, chained to each one of them. But an angel stands next to him and a light shines in the cell. Everyone is still sleeping. So the angel strikes Peter on the side and says, "Get up quickly." The chains fall off his hands. The angel says, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals...Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." Still, nobody is awake except Peter. He doesn't think any of it is real; he thinks he's seeing a vision. In the prison they pass a first and then a second guard, but the guards seem induced either in sleep or in a trance. Finally, Peter and the angel reach the locked iron prison gate that leads to the city, and it opens by itself. They go along a street, and the angel leaves. Then Peter comes to himself. He realizes God sent his angel and rescued him from the hand of Herod and from everything the people were expecting. The emphasis here is not on Peter or some kind of epic faith he has, but on God. Peter is just sleeping. He's just as human as anybody else. It's God who wakes him up and takes him out of that impossible situation. Peter is helpless. He needs to be rescued. The word literally means "plucked out." Like Peter, sometimes we're crushed by insurmountable problems. They might be tough circumstances, or our sins. But God can rescue us from them all; he can pluck us right out of them, through faith. What impossibilities are we facing? Are we praying and asking God for help? Do we really believe God can do the impossible?

Fourth, Peter continues knocking (12–19). First of all, in this section Luke highlights the humor. Peter goes to Mary's house. It's Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark. It's a pretty big house. Many are gathered there. The house has a gateway. Mary has a servant girl named Rhoda. Having such a large home and servants in Jerusalem tells us Mary is wealthy, and since there's no mention of her husband, she might be a widow. When Rhoda hears Peter's knocking and goes out to see about it, she recognizes his voice. He probably whispers: "Hey, it's me, Peter." But Rhoda is so joyful she leaves Peter standing there behind the locked gate, runs into the house and tells everyone it's Peter. People tell her she's out of her mind. She keeps insisting. They say it's his angel. And Peter's still knocking. Basically, though they're praying for Peter, they can't even imagine that he's really out of prison. Often when we pray, we too don't really believe God will answer. Maybe they're just praying God will lessen Peter's sentence. Maybe they're praying he'll have the courage to talk about Jesus. But God actually delivers Peter again. Like Rhoda and these people, our unbelief is sometimes comic. God wants us to think and live based on real faith in him. The Bible tells us, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think,

according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph.3:20–21).

These verses also show what a shepherd Peter is. Out of jail, he doesn’t just run for his life. He takes the risk to go and reassure the believers gathered at Mary’s house. He stands at the gate and keeps knocking, though they won’t let him in. He tells them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. He wants them to know God has answered their prayers. And he leaves to another place, to protect them. May God raise real shepherds like Peter and like our Lord Jesus in and through us. In verses 18–19 we also see that though God has just done something so great, the threat against his people is still very real. Herod still has power. He’s still ruthless. And he won’t hesitate to eliminate anyone in his way.

Fifth, God himself deals with Herod (20–23). Herod has no fear of God and no concern for his fellow human beings; he just cares about himself. He makes an idol of himself and tries to glorify himself in public. But all his human power and glory are no match for God. In striking Herod with illness and death, God reveals that before him, human pride and vanity are foolish, worthless. Revolting worms eat up all Herod’s glory. These verses tell us that getting praised for speaking well is dangerous. We need to strongly reject people’s flattery and attempts to glorify us. Also, it’s so encouraging to know that God himself will deal with vain and arrogant people who oppose God’s work.

Sixth, God’s purpose prevails. Read verse 24. “But the word of God increased and multiplied.” This can happen because God has once again removed a person trying to stop the spread of the gospel. But from now on, Peter has to minister kind of like guerilla warfare, popping up here and there, then hiding in the bushes. No doubt through Peter, more and more people are hearing the good news of Jesus. And now, more and more believers are encouraged and strengthened to keep spreading the good news. Herod tried to snuff out the church of Jesus. But God removed him and enabled his people to share their faith in Jesus once again. It tells us that sometimes, God’s people can be bound, bound by opposition, problems, or impossible situations. But God works through those who believe and pray earnestly. God’s word can still increase and multiply, even in the midst of threats or impossibilities, if we believe and pray earnestly.

Look at verse 25. Here Peter and the church in Jerusalem fade into the background, and Luke turns his attention to the future, to Barnabas and Saul and the missionary church God established in Antioch. They had brought a relief offering for the brothers in Judea suffering from a famine (11:28–30). Now, they return to Antioch. But they take with them someone they met in Jerusalem, a young man named John, also called Mark, Mary's son. They want to develop him as a future spiritual leader. Even through this young man, God's word will someday increase and multiply to future generations. With Peter's help, he goes on to write Mark's Gospel, which spreads the gospel of Jesus to this day.

This passage tells us how to think about the world based on who God is. Who is God? God is the God who answers prayer. God is the God whose justice will someday defeat all kinds of human evil. God is the God who accomplishes his purpose through all things. God is the God who wants the good news of Jesus to increase and multiply among people of all the nations. God is the God who wants us to pray earnestly for his servants. When we encounter harsh realities, what do we think? How do we react? Read verse 24 again. May God's word increase and multiply when we fight spiritually to pray earnestly.