

Acts Series Part 32

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[0 : 00] Hardcore violence, torture, Taliban-style executions, jailbreaks, sounds like the latest film by Quentin Tarantino. But actually, it's some of the stuff we find in chapter 12 of the book of Acts. And I want you to think about this chapter that we've read as a battle scene.

And this morning, we want to explore the battle, the enemy camps, the power wielded, the weapons employed, the ebb and flow of the battle, and the final outcome.

And this is going to be quite a ride, so hold on tight as we explore this battle. Before we do, let's just set this particular battle in the context of the big picture. We might even call it rather grandly the cosmic context of this battle described in chapter 12 of the book of Acts.

At the dawn of time, long, long ago, Lucifer, subsequently better known as Satan, rebelled against and declared war on his Creator, Almighty God. And in the Garden of Eden, he struck a huge blow for his cause as he provoked the rebellion and fall of man, represented by our first fathers, Adam and Eve.

However, in the very blaze of the glory of that victory, his ultimate defeat was announced by God, as he declared that the seed of the woman, the very woman who had fallen, the seed of the woman would bruise Satan's head, would deliver him in due time a mortal blow. And we know that in the fullness of time, Jesus, Jesus, the eternal Son of God, came to this world as the seed of the woman, and on Calvary, he paid the price for our rebellion, and so struck that announced mortal blow.

[2 : 40] In the words of Paul, in the letter to the Colossians, we're told that Jesus on Calvary's tree disarmed the powers and authorities. He defeated Satan and his hosts. He made, we are told, a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Jesus himself uttered those familiar and yet dramatic and eloquent words of triumph on the cross as he cried out so near to his death, it is finished. Not a cry of resignation or defeat, but rather a cry of triumph. His mission of defeating the devil and his hosts had been successfully completed, and so he cried, it is finished.

The war was won. It was and remains a done deal. The victory had been gained. Now, that victory of Jesus Christ that he won on Calvary will be, as it were, consummated, or perhaps we can better say visibly displayed for all to see at the last great day when Jesus returns, and when every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Today, now, we live in what we might call the in-between chapter. Between Christ's victory at Calvary when that mortal blow was struck and his future triumphant second coming. We're in between these two great events. This in-between chapter, spoken of in the New

Testament as the last days, is a time when King Jesus, as the victorious head of the church, takes possession of what is rightfully his possession of what is rightfully his. The war has been won, but now there is this time of taking possession of what is his. And this taking possession of what is his involves a series of battles. And we return, as it were, to the battle theme. A series of battles are ever raging between Jesus, the king of the universe, and Satan, described by Jesus as the prince of this world. Battles raging. On the one hand, the king of the universe, King Jesus, and on the other hand, the prince of this world, Satan. The chapter before us, chapter 12 of the book of Acts, describes for us one such battle. But as we consider it, take note that these battles are not recorded in the Scripture simply to satisfy a historic curiosity as to how the early church grew and developed and responded to the persecution that they met on their way. Rather, these accounts, though they are indeed historic accounts of actual events, they also anticipate for us and teach us about the battles that will ever rage until Jesus returns. Battles that we are to be protagonists in as soldiers of Jesus Christ.

To put it another way, as we gather here this morning and consider this battle, we are not in a cinema watching a war movie. We are at boot camp preparing for battle. So, let battle commence.

Well, that is, if you wish, the big picture within which we can understand the importance of this particular battle that is described, or where it fits into the big picture, this particular battle.

[6 : 55] But as well as the big picture, there is also, and we just want to note briefly, the immediate context of this particular battle described in this chapter. And it is, we might say, deliciously dramatic, the immediate or particular context. You see, in the chapter that we've read, we notice there in verse 3 that these events happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And then a little further on, mention is made of how the execution of Peter, the projected execution of Peter would take place after the Passover. This is what was going on in Jerusalem as this battle rages. The Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Feast of Unleavened Bread were several days following the actual Passover meal. This is when this battle rages. And I say that this is deliciously dramatic because remember what was celebrated at the Passover, well, what was celebrated was another battle, another glorious victory for the King of Kings as Pharaoh's army was consumed, and God's people were rescued from slavery in Egypt. This is the festival that is being celebrated in Jerusalem.

This is what is going on as this new battle is raging between the King of the Universe and the Prince of this world. This is the backdrop to this battle, and it is dripping with drama. Well, as we have said already, let battle commence. And what do we read there at the beginning of the chapter?

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. At this time, the king, as it is translated in another version, laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. The two camps are clearly described for us in this battle. Every battle has to have two camps. Well, here are two camps. On the one hand, we have King Herod, Herod Agrippa.

Now, to give a little bit, a very brief biographical sketch, King Herod was part of quite a family. His grandfather was Herod the Great, of infant massacring fame, say no more. His uncle was Herod Antipas, who was involved in the trial of Jesus. His son was Herod Agrippa II, who was involved in the trial of Paul. So, we have quite a family that Herod Agrippa, the Herod mentioned here in chapter 12, forms a part of.

And yet, though he bears the title King, and despite his title and appearance, he is not the King of the army in this battle. He is rather what we might call a pawn of the prince. We've already noted how Satan is described by Jesus as the prince of this world. Well, if we take that designation that Jesus himself uses, then we can say of Herod that he is a pawn of the prince on one side of the battlefield.

[10 : 30] But then on the other side of the battlefield, we have the church, the church upon whom King Herod is laying his violent hands. We have the church, and we have its leaders, those mentioned, James and Peter.

James and Peter, as with Herod, they are not the kings of the army. They also answer to another supreme commander. They answer to their king, to King Jesus. So, we have the two camps in this battle.

We have King Herod, and we have the church, and James and Peter. And who appears more powerful? Now, we are privileged because we know the bigger picture, and so maybe it's difficult for us to answer this question without bringing to bear our broader knowledge of what's going on. But just for the moment, I ask the question, who appears more powerful? Who appears more powerful in this battle? Is it King Herod, or is it the church and James and Peter? Well, it's very clear who appears more powerful. King Herod appears so much more powerful, and at one level we can say he is so much more powerful than the ones he is battling with. And it's not so very different today. In many lands, there are those who oppose the cause of Jesus Christ, and indeed in our own land. There are battles raging.

You are involved in such battles. I hope you realize that. But even if you don't realize it, you are involved in them. Much better to know, and in that way, to better fight the battle.

And in these battles, the powers of those who oppose the gospel so often do appear to be so much greater than the power of those who are in the church, the disciples of Jesus Christ. Well, we have two camps in this battle, but we can also notice the power and influence they enjoy. We've already touched on that, but I want to just delve into that in a little bit more detail. The power and influence enjoyed by the two camps in this battle. Well, King Herod. King Herod has friends in seriously high places.

[12 : 56] Again, just a little bit of biography. His father, Aristobulus, was executed in 7 BC, and Herod was sent aged four to be brought up in Rome. So the Herod that is mentioned here, at age four, he is dispatched to Rome to be educated there. Very well. I wonder who his best pal was there in Rome. Well, one of his great pals was a wee boy called Claudius. Now, Claudius was very much in the most likely to succeed category in the school yearbook. Indeed, this Claudius, who was best pals with Herod there in Rome. When the years passed, in A.D. 41, he became the emperor, no less. And as emperor, Claudius remembered his friend Herod, and was instrumental in extending the territories over which

Herod had dominion. Indeed, Herod, the Herod referred to here in chapter 12, was able to secure the extension of his kingdom to the level that it had been in the days of his grandfather, Herod the great. The kingdom had been divided among his sons. But Herod, Herod Agrippa here, the one we are concerned with, was able to secure that same power, thanks to, in great measure, his friend in a very high place, his boyhood, a pal, a Claudius. So as this battle begins, King Herod has Emperor Claudius, and all the power and the might of Rome just a phone call away. And if that were not enough as concerns his power and influence, he was actually pretty popular at home among the Jews.

He had very wisely, if you wish, in an evil kind of way, successfully courted the Pharisees and the religious authorities. He was careful to pay certainly lip service to Jewish religious traditions and customs. And so consequently, he was relatively popular among the Jews. So he has the Emperor as his pal there in Rome. He has the Jews who are supportive of him. This is a man with great power and with a great influence. What can we say of those on the other side? What can we say of the church? What can we say of James and Peter, also engaged in this battle against King Herod? Well, they were really a bunch of nobodies.

They had no friends in high places, no direct line to the Emperor. They were weak and powerless and vulnerable and exposed. And so again, we ask the question, who appears more powerful in this battle that is about to rage? Who appears more powerful? This matchup between King Herod and the church, it's not so much a Celtic against Ross County, it's more like a Barcelona, a Stenhouse Muir. Like, the difference is just so dramatic in terms of their power and their influence. There is no comparison, or so it would seem. But of course, as you well know, appearances deceive.

Did James and Peter and the believers in the church in Jerusalem, were they actually devoid of friends in high places? Oh, they had a friend in a very, very high place. They could sing even as they languished in Herod's Gaul. James could sing even as the sword was about to behead him. They could sing, what a friend we have in Jesus. Oh, they had friends in high places, yes, indeed. No direct line to the Emperor, for only a great high priest at the right hand of the Father. The power and influence that each camp was able to wield. What about the weapons at their disposal in this battle?

[17 : 40] What weapons could they employ as they would seek to win this battle? Well, what about Herod? What were Herod's weapons? Well, Herod was a great fan of brute force. He had the military might of Rome at his disposal. He had the hardened soldiers, the guards that are made reference to here who protected and who secured Peter in the jail. He had the crooked judges that he could bribe and influence to secure the outcomes that he wished to secure in any trial that would take place. He had public opinion in his favor in winning this particular battle against the despised Christians.

These were his weapons. He had quite an arsenal at his disposal. What of the church? What were the weapons that the church could count on as they would fight this battle? Well, it's not a list as it was with Herod. In fact, the church, as regards its weapons, is a bit of a one-trick pony. They had one thing.

They had prayer. That is what they had. They could pray. We read there in chapter 5, so Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. This is what they had. And we'll be considering in much greater detail the use that they make of prayer this evening.

Again, I ask the question, who appears more powerful as we consider the weapons at the disposal of these two armies, the weapons at the disposal of Herod and the weapon singular at the disposal of the church?

And again, it's not so different today as we consider those who would seek to crush the cause of Jesus Christ as those who would seek to oppose the advance of his kingdom. They appear to have, and at some level do have, great weapons at their disposal. And we seem so devoid of weapons.

And yet again, appearances deceive. But then the battle rages. The battle rages. We've read the chapter. We've read of the battle. And King Herod lands the first blows. And there are several victims of his violence. Not all are named. But there, where we read in the beginning of the chapter, it was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. Some, now we're not told how many, but clearly the reference here isn't just to James and Peter.

[20 : 32] The reference would seem to be a number, including several unnamed believers who were victims of this first, as it were, attack of Herod in this battle. And of particular note, we're told that James is killed. James is, to put it more graphically and more accurately, he is beheaded by King Herod.

What is his crime? Well, simply, he follows another king. And that is how it is in times of war. Following another king is a capital offense. And so James discovered. And of course, the death of James was, by any measure, a huge blow for the church in Jerusalem. At the personal level, he was a much-loved leader and disciple. And so there is the personal sadness and tragedy of losing one in such horrendous circumstances. And the church is, of course, greatly affected by the death of James.

There is perhaps—and this is something we'll be considering more in the evening—the confusion of why did God allow this? Were we not praying for James as we prayed for Peter, and yet he's dead? And so this was a huge blow, but it was also a huge blow at the strategic level, if you wish. You see, this is really the first time in the book of Acts where the might of Rome, formally, as it were, involves itself in the persecution of the nascent church. You see, previous persecutions described and recorded for us in the book were all at the instigation of the Sanhedrin. Now, they had much reduced powers, but when Herod becomes involved in representation of Rome and persecutes, this is a step-jump in the level, in the degree, in the seriousness, in the possible consequences of persecution. And so the death of James is a huge blow for the church. And Herod, as he engages in this battle, he is a brute, but he is a calculating brute. You see, he first kills a lesser light. James was, as it were, in the pantheon of the leaders of the Jerusalem church, a lesser light. And so he kills James, and then he gauges the reaction, and to his, perhaps not surprise, but he is pleasantly to discover that this pleased the Jews. We read there in verse 2, when he saw, rather in verse 3, when he saw that this pleased the Jews. They celebrated the execution of James. They were pleased with Herod for killing James. And so he says, ah, well, I'll go for the big fish now. I'll go for Peter.

[23 : 17] Of course, in God's providence, there was one minor inconvenience, that as he arrests Peter, the Passover festivities overtake him, and executions were considered in very poor taste during the festivities.

And so Peter could not be executed during the festivities. He would have to wait. He would have to exercise some patience and wait until the week of festivities had passed, and then he could proceed to his show trial and the beheading of Peter as well. So the battle is raging, and we can recap what we've considered, and it really simply is a re-describing of what we have there and we've read in the chapter. The first couple of rounds of the battle, as we smoothly or not so smoothly shift to a boxing analogy, the first couple of rounds, several believers imprisoned, tortured, no doubt.

James is dead. Peter is in prison and soon to die. The believers are cowering in Mary's house, the leaders possibly, the other leaders possibly, in hiding elsewhere. We don't know that for sure, but it is interesting that in verse 17, when Peter is rescued and he heads to Mary's house, and the believers celebrate his liberty, then Peter says in that verse, at the end of the verse, tell James and the brothers about this, where the term there, James and the brothers, though it could be understood simply as the other Christians, is very possibly a reference to the leadership of the church. And so it begs the question, why aren't they in Mary's house? Could it be that they were in hiding in light of the arrests of James and Peter, and given that they realized that they would be next in the list? And so they're not in Mary's house, a house that was known to be a house of a believer. They were elsewhere. So this is the situation. The first rounds of the battle would seem very much to have gone Herod's way. The bout is practically over, bar the final knockout punch that is already penciled in the agenda for the close of the Passover festivities. And so I ask again, who appears to be winning? And of course, appears, as we're discovering, is the operative word.

Even before the fight back that we already know of because we've read the chapter, even before the fight back that we are about to witness, we can note that the victories of Herod are not all that they appear. Take the death of James. Yes, a tragic death, and yet a tragic death that forms part of the plan, not in the first instance of the prince of this world, but a tragic death that forms part of the plan of King Jesus. Listen to Jesus in chapter 21 of John's gospel in verses 18 and 19. What do we read there?

I tell you the truth. When you were younger, you dressed yourself and went where you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, follow me. There, Jesus is announcing the kind of death that would be the fate of his disciples, and it was no different for James. He faced a death and experienced a death that was part of his king's plan. Mysterious and strange providence, so that may be for us to understand. Even Herod's victories were far from being victories. Even his victories were part of the enemy king's plan and strategy and purpose. You see, whether the believer lives or whether the believer dies, they always win. We've already quoted in prayer the words of Hebrews chapter 12, that chapter that speaks of the heroes of the faith and of those men and women who live by faith. And it is revealing and instructive how in that list we're told that by faith some escaped the sword, and equally by faith some were killed by the sword. So live or die, the believer wins. [27 : 52] But by all appearance, Herod was winning this particular battle. But then even in the terms of appearances, the tide begins to turn. Herod appears to be winning. The battle appears to be lost. But we know that the story does not end here. The tide turns. And why did the tide turn? Well, we've read already that one weapon that the church. But fervent prayer was made to God. But the church was earnestly praying to God for Peter. The people pray, and God answers. He takes his place on the battlefield. He visibly enters the fray. He's ever been in the fray, but he visibly, as it were, enters the fray. The whole prison break shouts of God's absolute and sole control and prerogative. You see, humanly speaking, the fate of Peter was sealed. There was no way he could escape. The dice had been thrown, but God intervenes.

He sends his angel to rescue Peter. And even as they exit from that prison, this is no joint effort between Peter and the angel. What is Peter doing? Peter is sleeping like an angel, only to be awakened by a real angel. He thinks he's dreaming, even as he exits the prison, past the first guard, past the second guard, finally through the great iron gate that served as the final barrier between imprisonment and liberty. And that iron gate opens, just like the waters of the Red Sea had opened at that first Passover long ago. The iron gates open, and Peter is free, and he knows very little about what's going on. He thinks he's dreaming. And only when the angel leaves does Peter realize what is happening. You see, this is all of God, and nothing has changed. The battles that rage today will also be won by the direct action of our supreme commander. And yet, even as we make that point, notice one revealing and quirky, as it were, detail. Something that led me to think, why this?

Why does the angel say to Peter there in verse 7? He wakes up Peter, and he says to Peter, quick, get up. Get up quickly. You say, well, what kind of question is that? Why does he say that? Well, I say, well, this is an angel of the Lord. Whether he gets up quickly or gets up slowly, this guy is going to be free. There is nobody who is going to stop Peter enjoying his liberty on that night. Why does he need to get up quickly? Maybe I just leave it with you to think about it. But is there not a sense in which, yes, though God is indeed the one who secures his liberty, though this victory in this battle is all of God? Yet Peter had to do his small part. He had to get up quickly. And in the battles that rage today, yes, it is all of God. God brings the increase. But he says to you, he says, get up quickly. Do your part, however small it may appear. Do it with urgency. Do it quickly. Do it passionately. Do your part. Quick, get up, said the angel to Peter. And Peter, in a comatose state, obeyed the directions of the angel. So Peter is at liberty. He is all rosy now by no means. Peter heads to Mary's house, where we meet this endearing character of Rhoda, often maligned, and yet she has the guts to answer the knock on the door that none of the others were willing to do. Peter makes his appearance. They all celebrate. And yet, in the midst of the celebration, Peter simply retires from that gathering, and rather mysteriously, we're told there in verse 17, to another place. Again, presumably in hiding from King Herod. The final outcome. Well, there is a pause in the action. Peter in hiding. Herod in Caesarea.

And though irritated by the escape of Peter, he still reckons he's won the battle. But this is just the lull before the storm. And the scene of the final outcome of this battle is set before us in the final section of this chapter. We've read the verses there from verse 19 through to the end of the chapter concerning Herod's death. And time doesn't allow us to go into it in any detail. But here the picture presented is Herod of Herod, the puffed-up peacock, enjoying his power and his influence and the adulation of all those around him. Indeed, he receives with great pleasure this scandalous and blasphemous acclaim.

[32 : 49] This is the voice of a god, not of a man. Here he is, Herod, at the height of his glory, enjoying his victory, exalted as never before. And then, then death rears its ugly but inevitable face for the one who opposed King Jesus. And Herod dies a painful death. The Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. There could be no other outcome for the one who opposed King Jesus. And there follows in this account, in a surprisingly matter-of-fact, an understated way, a thrilling and empowering description of the outcome of this and no doubt many other battles.

In verse 24, but the Word of God continued to increase and spread. The enemy of King Jesus being eaten by worms, but the Word of God spreading and multiplying and increasing.

This particular battle is well over and well won. And as we close, let me just very briefly direct words to all here this morning and to two groups of people gathered here this morning. If this morning you are not a Christian, if this morning you have not yet bowed the knee to King Jesus, then let me say to you that it is a very dangerous place that you are in. It is a very dangerous thing to be in the opposing army to King Jesus. And maybe you protest, but I'm no Herod. I'm no Herod.

I'm no tyrant like Herod. And I agree with you. But I would ask you to answer this question. Why did Herod die? At what point does the hand of judgment of God come down upon Herod? What is the sin that he has committed that almost obliges God to act in this way? I say almost.

In verse 23 we read immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God. Because Herod did not give the glory to God. This is why God comes down in judgment upon him. Not because he had killed James or because he had imprisoned Peter, though that was part of it, no doubt. His great sin, his fundamental sin was that he did not give praise to God. He did not give glory to God. And this is the greatest sin, to deny to God the glory that he has due, to deny to Jesus your life, to refuse to repent and believe and offer your life as a living sacrifice to King Jesus. This is the greatest folly. This is the greatest sin. And so I urge you, repent of that sin. And give God the praise. Give God the glory, as you would repent of your sins and put your trust in King Jesus as your Lord and your Savior.

[36 : 09] And to the believers here this morning, in your battles, and there are many, in our battles as the church of Jesus Christ, let us remember that things are seldom as they appear to be. And if King Jesus be for us, as he most assuredly is, who can be against us? But I would end with these quirky words, if you wish. Remember the words of the angel. Get up quickly. Let us pray.

Amen.