

Herod: Glory to God . . . Alone!

Saints and Scoundrels – Part VIII

Acts 12:20-25

Introduction

I want to read a list of names and ask you to answer, to yourself, what you think these men had in common. They were at the height of their careers during the 1930's, '40's and '50's. The names are:

- Owen D. Young;
- James F. Byrnes;
- Pierre Laval;
- Harlow Curtis;
- Hugh Johnson.

More than likely you do not recognize the names of any of these men. You certainly could not tell me what they did or how they rose to fame. Yet, each of these men was at some point in his life, *Time Magazine's* "Man of the Year". They were judged to have had the greatest impact of any human being on the rest of humanity during a given year.

In the first century, the most watched family in the civilized world was known as the family of the Herods. You may think the Kennedy's are famous, or the royal family of England is worth watching or reading about, but they would not hold a candle to the most powerful family on planet earth for more than one hundred years. The family of the Herods held the highest political offices in the land, influenced kingdoms, and conquered empires.

Historical Setting – The Infamous Family of Herod

Let me give a historical setting for the infamous family of Herod.

Herod the Great reigned for forty years and was on the throne when Jesus Christ was born. You may remember the wise men searching for the one who was born "King of the Jews." Herod told them to go and find Him and, when they had, to come and tell him where the boy was so that he could go and worship Christ as well. When Herod learned the wise men had kept their discovery a secret, he sent his soldiers to Bethlehem with orders to slaughter every Jewish boy who was two years old and under. He was a ruthless tyrant who only gave glory to himself and never to God.

When Herod knew that his health was failing and that he would soon die, he ordered his generals to incarcerate prominent Jewish leaders. They were placed in jail and his soldiers were commanded to kill all of them as soon as they learned Herod was dead. He did this in order to ensure that there would be mourning among the Jewish nation when he died.

Herod the Great was married ten times. His sons and their sons were known as evil, immoral men. Three of his wives bore five sons whose names were:

- Herod Philip I;
- Herod Antipas;
- Herod Philip II;
- Herod Agrippa I;
- Herod Archelaus.

Herod Antipas was the immoral drunkard who beheaded John the Baptist. He was also the one whom Jesus Christ stood before, while on trial before being sent back to Pilate. Luke records that Herod personally mocked Jesus.

Herod Agrippa I was the one who killed James and imprisoned Peter. He is the one we are about to learn more about in Acts, chapter 12.

Herod Agrippa II, son of Herod Agrippa I, was the one who rejected and scoffed at the apostle Paul's defense.

I will not take time to mention the murders, conspiracies, and adulteries that are all recorded in the history of this wicked family who, at the heart of the issue, hated the creator God.

This family went down in history as the family that opposed everything Christianity stood for. It is so obvious that the prince of the power of the air manipulated this family's reign and power to coincide with the coming of Christ and the beginning days of the church.

The Deliverance of God is Unbelievable!

The apostle's escape

In our last discussion, we focused on the escape of the apostle Peter. Today, we will look at the other leading character of this drama; that is, King Herod Agrippa I.

Turn to chapter 12 of the book of Acts. Look at verses 1 through 3a.

Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. . . .

Can you imagine the frustration and hopelessness the church must have felt? They were not being arrested for breaking the law; they were not being executed because they were criminals, but because the political leader was trying to please the majority of his constituents.

The political process has not changed from the first century to this century. There is always more interest in polls than in pursuing the truth. The opinion of the public will always outweigh the opinion of providence.

The church's encouragement

In fact, Daniel, chapter 4, clearly teaches that God has appointed evil men as rulers over world

powers. Notice verse 17. Nebuchadnezzar is explaining his dream to Daniel.

This sentence is by the decree of the angelic watchers and the decision is a command of the holy ones, in order that the living may know that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes and sets over it the lowliest of men.

Now Daniel interprets the dream. Skip to verses 24 through 26.

this is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king: that you be driven away from mankind and your dwelling place be with the beasts of the field, and you be given grass to eat like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven; and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes. And in that it was commanded to leave the stump with the roots of the tree, your kingdom will be assured to you after you recognize that it is Heaven that rules.

In other words, "Nebuchadnezzar, no matter how great you think you are; no matter how powerful you think your kingdom is, with one flick of God's sovereign finger, you'll lose your sanity and presence of mind and be reduced to living like an animal."

Nebuchadnezzar must have thought Daniel was crazy himself! However, continue to verses 29 through 32.

Twelve months later he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon. The king reflected and said, "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" While the word was in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, "King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you, and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beast of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes."

It happened, just as Daniel predicted, to this man who neither believed in nor followed the one true God of heaven.

The medical community calls his condition lycanthropy. That is a form of insanity that causes a person to act like a wild animal.

The main message from this event in history is that *heaven rules*.

Nebuchadnezzar gained the throne of Babylon only because God willed it. He lost his sanity because God wanted to teach a lesson. He regained his sanity only as he submitted to the fact that God is God alone – and His glory will not be given to another.

Herod is on the throne for the same reason – God appointed him. God appointed this evil man in order to teach an eternal truth – God alone is sovereign. Although the mightiest kingdoms of the earth declare war on God, God can, with one flick of a finger, remove evil man from his little throne and appoint another.

The church does not need to feel frustrated or afraid – God is in control.

Applications

Let me give a couple of applications at this point in our study today.

The power of political leaders can never overthrow the purpose of God

1. The power of political leaders can never overthrow the purpose God.

Matthew, chapter 16, verse 18b, clearly declares the promise of Christ,

. . . I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

The nations of the world can never extinguish the holy nation of God

2. The nations of the world can never extinguish the holy nation of God.

I Peter, chapter 2, verse 9a, informs us that we who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are,

. . . a holy nation, a people for God's own possession . . .

The Judgment of God is Unimaginable!

The truth is, those who oppose the church will ultimately be overthrown; those who stand against the glory of God will one day face the wrath of God.

The death of Herod

For Herod, that is exactly what he is about to experience. Let us go back to Acts, chapter 12.

We studied the escape of Peter from prison in our last discussion. You may remember that the angel appeared and Peter's chains fell off. The doors then opened before him automatically, and soon after, the stunned body of believers were rejoicing with Peter at God's deliverance.

Now notice verses 18 and 19.

Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards . . .

(The word translated "examined" implies interrogation by torture. Herod tortured out of these men a confession of conspiracy. It was either that or Herod had to face the fact that his throne was at war with heaven's throne – and heaven's throne was winning!),

. . . and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.

In other words, Herod was running from the issue. He lost points in the polls. He is guilty of James death and now, Peter got away. His own guards seemed guilty of insubordination. Yet, there were rumors of miracles. And, if the guards were guilty, why were they still at their posts? They certainly would have planned their own escape along with Peter. Why remain behind to die? Herod had seen enough of the church, and now this fiasco had occurred. He thinks, "I'll get out of town for awhile."

The Greek word in verse 19, translated, "spending time there," can literally be translated, "to rub away". In other words, Herod is trying to erase from his mind and conscience the troubling truth.

This is like so many today, who escape into alcohol, drugs, fornication, relationships, sports, money, career, etc. They are running from their troubled conscience – thinking they can outrun it somehow. They are rushing here and there. As one former professor of mine used to say, "People are

rushing, rushing, to keep their appointment with death.”

Herod goes to Caesarea to try and rub away the gnawing guilt.

Continue to verse 20.

Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country.

You need to understand that Tyre and Sidon have done something to upset Herod. While these countries were outside of Herod's jurisdiction, he had imposed some sort of economic blockade on them. They needed peace, so they bribed the king's servant to put in a good word for them. Apparently, it worked.

Herod plans to address representatives from Tyre and Sidon. He also chooses an important day to speak to them – to further magnify his own sense of grandeur.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, informs us that the day he chooses is the festival celebration in Caesarea of its founding father, Claudias Caesar.

In other words, this was a great day to make a speech. Dignitaries from all around the Roman empire would be there. The press would be there to take it all in.

Josephus also tells us that Herod wore a garment made entirely of pure silver. It was designed to catch and reflect the rays of the sun in a stunning manner.

Notice verses 21 through 23.

On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. The people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.

Can you imagine this scene? Herod is dressed in this brilliant garment – the sun is reflecting off the silver thread. He speaks with pride and false humility to the leaders of Tyre and Sidon. Then flatterers began to say – one here and then one there – literally, the words can be translated, “they began to cheer,” “He is a god and not a man.” And Herod does the unbelievable – he believes it!

Like Nebuchadnezzar of old, Herod says to himself, “I really am worthy of the worship I'm receiving. I really am a god!”

And with one flick of sovereign power, God released worms within Herod's intestines that brought about death. Josephus tells us that Herod lingered for five days in pain before dying.

The phrase “eaten by worms” comes from the Greek word “skolekobrotos” (σκωληκοβρωτος). That Greek word gives us our word “scolex,” or the plural, “scolices”. Let me read the comments made by a medical doctor on Herod's death.

The root word skolax means “a specific head structure of a tapeworm.” Since the word skolex is applied to the head of tapeworms, Herod's death was almost certainly due to the rupture of a cyst formed by a tapeworm. The disease is characterized by the formation of cysts, generally on the right lobe of the liver; these may extend down into the abdominal cavity. The rupture of such a cyst may release as many as two million scolices. The developing worms inside of the cysts are called scolices and when the cyst ruptures, the entrance of cellular debris along with the scolices may cause sudden death.ⁱ

The description of hell

It is interesting that this word appears in only one other passage of scripture. In Mark, chapter 9, the horror of hell is described with the repeated phrase:

- “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” (verse 44);
- “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” (verse 46);
- “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” (verse 48).

Jesus Himself is speaking in that passage, warning of the wrath of God to come. Hell is a place where people forever are tormented externally by the flames and heat of fire and internally by the gnawing of worms that never die.

Herod becomes a dying illustration on earth of what happens to people living in hell forever. Why? Because of the sin as old as Satan, as we are told in verse 23,

... because he did not give God the glory ...

Everyone who one day populates hell will be guilty of the same sin – they refused to give God the glory alone; they refused to worship God.

God sent into this world His Son, so that fallen mankind could have a Redeemer King whom they could worship. Those who refuse to accept Him as Sovereign King and Master; who demand that they sit upon the throne of their lives; who demand that their thinking and philosophy and lifestyle be given first place; who want their choices and decisions to remain sovereign, are guilty of refusing to give God alone the glory.

Turn ahead a few pages to the book of Romans, chapter 1. Notice, in verses 21 through 25, all mankind will be judged accordingly. Begin with verses 21 through 23.

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

In other words, God is no longer glorified, but the animal kingdom is glorified; God is ignored while animals are revered. Continue to verses 24 and 25.

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

The judgement of God is not just for the Herods of the world; not just for the Pharaohs, the Hitlers, the Lenins; the demagogues who demanded worship and blind allegiance. The wrath of God is also for all humanity who in various ways, get rid of Father God and put in His place, Mother earth. This is humanity

that does not worship the Creator God, but worships the creatures of creation.

For those who are guilty of not giving glory to God alone, wrath is the result.

The Word of God is Unstoppable!

Now, let us go back to Acts, chapter 12, where we also discover the grace of God.

The word of God spreads

Look at verse 24.

But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.

The worms are set in contrast to the word. The word also works internally – changing, reforming, renewing.

The church succeeds

The church is also succeeding, in spite of Herod and his wicked family. Look at verse 25.

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.

Warren Wiersbe reminded me in his commentary, that the early church had no such thing as political clout or friends in high places to pull strings. Instead, they went to the highest throne of all, the throne of grace.

Let the Herods of earth come and go – the King of heaven is Sovereign. As Revelation, chapter 5, verse 13b through 14a, says,

To Him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever. . . . Amen.

May we not only say it this morning, but live in such a way, that we give glory to God alone.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 7/6/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Dr. Jean Sloat Moron, quoted by John MacArthur, Jr. in Commentary on Acts, p. 327.