

Roy's sermon for March 7, 2021

Acts 12:1-6 Peace Be Still!

We now jump ahead to Acts 12 in our walk through Peter's life with Jesus: that ordinary man serving our extraordinary God! Last time we left him at Cornelius's home at Caesarea, and the wonder of the Gentiles (the non-Jewish people like you and me), being brought into being part of the universal Church of Jesus. In Chapter 11, Peter had to go on to explain his actions at Cornelius' home to the Jewish Christian heavyweights: Why he done what he had among the Gentiles. In Ch 11:8 the contempt toward the non-Jew becomes apparent after Peter had recounted all that had happened. "When they heard this they had no further objections and praised God saying, "So then God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." Notice they *did* have objections; that is why Peter had been called before them. But after he had explained himself, "they had no further objections." It truly was a revolutionary moment within the church. The gospel was beginning to go to the whole world!

The second half of Ch 11 explains the dispersion of the believers after Stephen's death at the end of Chapter 7. Bold men went to Antioch and preached to the Greeks. Barnabas hears of this, visits them for a while and then goes and gets Saul (Paul), from Tarsus and they spend a whole year at Antioch ministering to the believers there. And in Acts 11:26 we learned that at Antioch the believers were first called Christians! Then a man named Agabus foretells through God, that a "great famine is coming" throughout all of Rome. So, the disciples gather funds together with everyone giving all that they could. They then send those gifts off with Paul and Barnabas to be distributed amongst the believers throughout Judea.

And that's where we pick up the narrative this morning. Acts 12:1-6 'Peace Be Still!' In Verse 1-3 we read: "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belong to the church intending to persecute them. He had James the brother of John put to death by the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews he proceeded to seize Peter also."

Friends, the first thing we notice here is that Herod was like any modern day political animal. The persecution had broken out after Steven's death. Indeed, it was at that death Saul believed he had found his calling. Murder the church! But after his conversion in Chapter 9 the Lord's People enjoyed a relative time of peace. But now the persecution against the church was in full flight! It is interesting that it says here: "Herod arrested some intending to persecute them." Such was the depth of the evil at that time that for Christians to be arrested was not even considered to be part of the persecution.

Now brothers and sisters, notice how seemingly short verse two is, and how little is made of the death of this Apostle. (This brother of John the gospel writer!) "He had James the brother of John put to death with the sword." That's all we read. Nothing more! Marcus Loane makes a keen observation about this man's death. He was John's brother. One of the two sons of Zebedee. He was known as one of the "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17) He was one of the two brothers who had their mother ask Jesus if they could "sit at his right and his left" (Matthew 20:21) when Jesus comes into His Kingdom.

So he did have a major role in Jesus' mission. And yet like Andrew, Peter's brother, he is seldom mentioned throughout the whole of our Lord's ministry or the Acts of the apostles. We know that both James and Andrew were of the inner circle of Jesus' friends. So along with John and Peter they too held His closest confidence. Yet they never seem to have a prominent or upfront role, so to speak. And even in death so little seems to be made of James' life. Only 13 words are mentioned by

Luke. And yet in contrast, of Peter's life and John's life so much is recorded and made. And it does appear that James' death (may I suggest), seems only to announce Peter's getting arrested, and that marvellous deliverance which follows, as we will see!

So what is the Bible commentators point? Well it's simply this. In the Kingdom of Jesus, (with His Kingdom meaning the Lord's rule and authority over His People), we all have different roles to play! There are people such as Billy Graham, Michael Youssef, George Whitfield, John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon and countless others who have played prominent or up front roles, and then there are the rest of us. Like James and some of the other apostles who are always in the background, as it were. We still have important roles and are still precious in the sight of God; indeed "the hairs of our head are all numbered." It's just that we have a *different* role. One that has been ordained by God for us!

You know, we should never think that the role which God has given us is insignificant or inconsequential. That's what Satan wants us to believe. That we don't count. That we don't matter all. That we are insignificant. So much so that if we went missing it wouldn't matter and we wouldn't be missed. But it's not true! Think about it. If you are the only person throughout the whole of your family, and even your extended family and friends who knows Jesus and lives for Him, do you think that is insignificant? I think it's tremendously significant. If you were not there, who would testify to them for Christ? Whose life would bear witness to the mercy which is at hand in the midst of the coming wrath? If you are the only one praying for your unsaved wife or husband, your son or your daughter, your grandson or grandmother, your friend or your neighbour, is that not significant?

Again think of it. If it not be for you, no one is praying for them. No friends, we should never fall into that trap of comparing ourselves and our gifts or abilities, indeed our lives to others. Satan loves that sort of stuff and he feeds upon it, because it produces envy and jealousy. That coveting ungrateful heart, even among the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, His church!

Surely the point here is that James' death is glorious and significant in the sight of God. Not because of what was said of it, but because he lived and died for Jesus! Psalm 116:15 "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his Saints." Yes, a life poured out for God, whether it be as a martyr in death or as one who has sought simply to honour Him throughout one's life is "precious". God's People are precious to Him. You are "precious" to God Beloved. There is nothing in the universe which is more "precious" to God than you. It was not for stars or planets or suns or oceans or worlds did Jesus die, but for you. Yes, "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his Saints." No Beloved if we are going to compare ourselves to anyone, we need to humbly and soberly compare ourselves to Jesus. Philippians 2:6 "who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped."

Friends, may I suggest that contentment within our lot within the Kingdom of God should be at the top of our prayer request list. Now, by all means, if we have a growing hunger and desire to know and serve Him more, (and Beloved we all should have to some degree), pursue it wholeheartedly. But never allow the Evil One's whispers to convince you that anything that you do wholeheartedly in Christ's Name is insignificant!

In verse 3 we can see the political animal which I mentioned earlier. "When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also." Can you imagine? Murdering one man, whose only crime is to be a Christian. Yes, the charge against him is Christian, (and in his case there was ample evidence for him to be convicted, even sentence to death as they did his Lord), yes can you imagine how inherently evil is the unsaved heart, that human life can have so little value. This Herod "had James put to death with the sword" (officially murdered) and just as Jesus' Own death had, this

made the Jews happy. Then he figured he was on a good political path so he would arrest Peter and kill him too! Brothers and sisters, at this point there is one very important thing that I need to point out. Up until now the persecution had come from the Jews only, that recognised Church of the day. But from this point on, we find that Satan's attack upon God's people is two-pronged! The recognised church, and the state, or the governing authorities band together; at this point the two become one, with a common enemy: Jesus Christ and His True Church. It remains the same to a large degree to this very day! Whether it be Rome, the Greek Orthodox church, the Russian Orthodox church, or all of those other orthodoxies (meaning those state sanctioned churches) around the world. Or Islam, or Hinduism or Buddhism, whatever the Idol is that has the state's, or the governing authority's approval. Yes they have a common enemy, and it's Jesus and His People!

For us in Australia today, (though we have by God's grace a Christian Prime Minister), more and more through evil political influence the state sanctioned 'church', for want of a better description, is the evil, immoral and amoral Greens' movement and all it stands for, hand in hand with other political positions from all sides. It is behind the gender fluidity movement, the homosexual lobby, and the attack upon everything which Christians hold to in accordance with sound "God-breathed" biblical principles. And it all began here with Herod Agrippa the First, who was the grandson of Herod the Great, who built the modern temple, and also tried to kill Jesus by murdering all of the Hebrew baby boys two years old and younger. The only difference being that Herod the Great tried to kill the prophesied King to come, while this Herod targeted the people, the church. And also the message of freedom which the King of heaven brings!

So in Satan's hands this Herod has put Peter in prison for his own political purposes. And he will seek to make a great political show of Peter's death for all to see, suring up his ties and allegiances of the Jews! And this all took place, verse 3b: "during the feast of unleavened bread" Or the Passover. Brothers and sisters, I want you to notice the extreme measures that this king went to, to keep his prize exhibit in prison. Verse 4 "after having arrested him he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. He intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover". So again, clearly the goal is to make a huge public show of Peter's mockery of a trial and then to also have him publicly murdered. And why? Simply to engender more political favour from the Jews. Yes, state, working hand in hand with the recognised Church of the day!

Friends, Satan will leave no stone unturned in his hunt for Christ's people. 1 Peter 5:8 "Beware your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking souls to devour." Think of the overkill here: "Four lots of four squads of soldiers." As we will see, there were three lots of gates to get through, the last one made of iron, and guards set at each of the gates along the way. In v6 we learn "the night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance." Again, think of the overkill here: "four squads of four soldiers," three sets of gates to get through the final one being made of iron with guards at each set of gates", and "Peter is sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains." Yes, it appears this common fisherman who Jesus has transformed into a "fisher of men" really was a prized catch!

O brothers and sisters, do not underestimate Satan's design upon your soul, and what he will do (if it were possible), to drag you into the eternal abyss with him! He will drag up your past and hound you with it. He will seek to drive a wedge between you and your marriage partner with anger, with resentment, with snappy and rude responses. With contempt. He will seek to lure you away from God's Word and try to get you to stand on self- assurance, and good deeds. And he will constantly whisper in your ears that God doesn't care about you. If He did, why has he allowed you to fall into

such difficulties that you are now facing? Into this trial of which you can see no end. That's of course, if He even exists at all!

Yes Beloved, in his hunt for your soul the evil one will leave no stone unturned. In Job 1:6-2:9 we read: "One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them. The Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "from roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it." Then the Lord said to Satan, "have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him, he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger." Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "the oxen were ploughing and the donkeys were grazing nearby and the Sabeans attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I'm the only one who has escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I'm the only one who has escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "the Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I'm the only one who has escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who was escaped to tell you." At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away again; blessed be the name of the Lord." In all of this Job did not sin by charging God with wrong doing. On another day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them to present himself before him. And the Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it." Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him, he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason." "Skin for skin," Satan replied. "A man will give all he has for his own life. But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face." The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, he is in your hands, but you must spare his life." So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes. His wife said to him, "Are you still holding onto your integrity? Curse God and die."

Again I say dear friends, in his hunt for your soul, the devil will leave no stone unturned. He will hound you and hunt for you through every and any means. But fear not, because we have an Advocate who stands before the very throne of God day and night pleading on our behalf! Yes friends it was the time of the Passover. That time when they looked back, all the way back to Egypt some 1500 years before, when the "angel of death" passed over the Israelites, while taking the life of the first born son of every Egyptian slave or free. And of course, at that Passover, a lamb had to be slaughtered and the blood wiped on the doorframes and lintels of the doors of the houses of those who feared the Lord, so that the "angel of death" would literally Passover those homes and

everyone in them. And again of course, the great Passover Lamb is Jesus! He is the One to whom the hundreds of thousands of Passovers had pointed throughout those 1500 years! To that Passover of all Passovers!

And now here we have yet another Passover. And now yet another servant of God in the shadow of his Master stands accused of being Christian, as James had been. It is the night before his trial and as things tended to go back then, this meant it was the night before his death! As with Job, Satan had done his job well. In his "roaming through the earth" in search of the souls of Jesus` People, he had incited this evil man, and it would seem that the writing was on the wall. Tomorrow Peter would die for his faith and his Lord. What terrors must have run through his mind, you would think. 16 soldiers guarding him. Guards at the three lots of gates. Chains upon both wrists, wedged between two of those soldiers, and yet how do we find him? Did you notice? V6 "Peter was sleeping." It beggars belief doesn't it? Had he lost his senses? Didn't he understand the gravity of the situation. James had just been put to death with the sword. Now his head was on the chopping block as well. I don't know how he could even sleep between the two men chained, let alone sleep when the axe is about to fall upon his life. How could he do it?

Well, he knew Him, in whom he believed! Matthew 8:23-27: "Then he (Jesus) got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord don't you care if we perish? Lord save us, we're going to drown". He replied, "Why do you have so little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuke the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm." We read in the older translation that Jesus said "Peace, be still." The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? That even the winds and the waves obey him?"

"Peace be still." Dear friends, do you know how Peter could sleep with such a storm of terror raging around him? Because he knew Him who held the storms of the universe in the palm of His Hand. Yes, "Peace, be still." Once we have peace with God, through the blood of Jesus, we can have peace within the midst of the storms of this world and this life. You see Peter understood that though Jesus was asleep in that boat full of water, He was still in control. And as Matthew Henry puts it, He who has Jesus in his boat, even though Jesus be asleep, that man's boat will never sink.

Yes, "Peace be still." John 14:27 "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled." John 16:33: "I told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart: I have overcome the world." 2 Thessalonians 3:16: "Now may the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you." And finally, Philippians 4:7: "And the peace of God which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Yes friends, Peter was able to sleep because he had come to learn that though it may appear at times we are in the midst of the storms of our lives, Jesus never sleeps. He has marked us for Salvation with His Blood, and He has set the Almighty's Royal seal of His Holy Spirit within our souls. Yes Peter understood. "Peace be still." Psalm 46:10 "Be still", or a better understanding "Stop striving and know that I am God."