

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear friends in Christ,

We have before us today a fascinating story. It answers one part of the big question: Christ is risen. So what? Now we've already been talking about many implications of the fact that Jesus Christ came out of the grave. But today we're zeroing in on one truth in particular: If Christ is risen, that means God's Word is true in every part. God made prophecies and promises about the Christ. Jesus made prophecies and promises. If Christ is risen, then everything the Bible says is true. It really is the very Word of God. All of the Bible that relates God's law is true. They are 10 suggestions... they accurately represent what God requires in our Christian life. It means we should be afraid to sin against God. It also means his Gospel is true. And that we really are forgiven of all our sins for Jesus' sake.

And ultimately if God's Word is true, then it's also true that the Word of God is unstoppable. Opposing it is futile.

So, today we have a story that demonstrates this very truth. God's Word is unstoppable. It's in Acts 12, and we'll be looking at the first 19 verses. We'll take a look at these verses in three sections so we don't miss what God is trying to teach us here.

Remember the setting here. Christ has already died, risen and ascended into heaven. Scholars have cross referenced the book of Acts and secular history. It's very likely that the events we're about to read took place about 12 – 15 years later. So there has been time for the church to be established. There has already been persecution that church has suffered, which means Christianity is already spreading beyond Jerusalem. However, note that Paul's missionary journeys would not yet begun. An interesting note about this chapter is also that it's the last that we hear about Peter in the book of Acts. Let's listen to the story:

Acts 12:1-19 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

So just to keep the Herod's straight, the Herod that was alive at the time of Jesus' birth... the one who killed the babies in Jerusalem, was called Herod the Great. The one in this story is different... it his Herod Agrippa the First... he is one of the sons of Herod the Great.

Like his father, he is a politician through and through, and what he is concerned with most is not what is doing right, but doing what is good for his political career. Well, he was ruler of Jerusalem, and he found that the Jews in Jerusalem hated the Christians living there. So he started persecuting the Christians, and this proved to be very popular with his constituency. We're told that he arrest James, brother of John, and put him to death by the sword. That's all our text says... on quick sentence. But how devastating that must have been for the church! This is the first apostle to be executed as far as we know. And it was one of Jesus' "inner three." Peter, James and John were the ones who got see miracles that none of the others did. And now he's gone... put to death by Herod. (By the way, it's interesting to note that while James was the first apostle to be martyred, his brother John was the last of the apostles to die.)

The execution of James was wildly popular with the Jews. So Herod decided he would really please them. He proceeded to arrest Peter too. The Jews would have really hated Peter, because he had a big mouth and never knew when to shut up. If Peter were silenced, Herod's approval rating would go through the roof.

But the execution was not immediate, after all, it was the time of the Passover. Religious sensitivities would mean the execution should take place after the religious holiday. But it seems Herod had it planned while the visiting Jews were still in the area. This would be a huge boost to his popularity.

After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. [Talk about over kill! Most likely those 16 soldier took shifts of 3 hours each. Always four fresh guards making sure Peter was secure.] **Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.** [That's an important fact! A prayer vigil was started for Peter. The whole church in Jerusalem was praying to God that Peter might be released. They kept praying and praying and praying.] **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.**

So this wasn't the first night Peter was in prison, right? The feast is winding up. Public trial the next day. For added security, two soldiers watched guard at the entrance. Two were actually chained to Peter. So if someone planned a break out for Peter, they would have to somehow get into the prison. Then they would have to at the very least break into a locked cell or building. They would have over power two guards. Then they would have to over power the two guards chained to Peter. Then they would have to unlock or break the chains. This was maximum security. Herod took no chances.

Now note how fearlessly Herod opposed the will of Almighty God. He has no regard for God's Word... no regard of Peter's preaching. He clearly disregarded it and could care less what God wanted. Herod did what was good for Herod, not what God wanted.

There was another guy who used to be like that: Peter. Remember the night Jesus was arrested, and Peter was in the courtyard? Three times he was recognized as a disciple of Jesus. Three times he vehemently denied that he knew the man. It's not that he didn't love Jesus. It's just that Peter loved his own hide more. It was expedient and good for Peter to deny knowing Jesus at that moment... at least that's what Peter thought.

There's another person like that: you. And me. Don't we frequently do the same thing. In our daily live we face decisions. Some of them big. Have you ever made a decision on the spur of the moment, and only or mainly considered, "What's best for me. What would be the path of least resistance for me? What would be best for my reputation, for me career, for my pocketbook?"

EXAMPLES: All your friends are doing something you know God has forbidden. Maybe it's getting drunk. Maybe it's drugs. Maybe it's using foul language. It's easier to just go along with it. Why call attention to yourself? Just do what they're doing.

Or maybe your boss tells you to do something that's wrong: hide a sale so it's not taxed, hike up the price on a customer that never ever double checks your pricing, fire a person that does decent work by making up charges because they're too expensive and the company just wants to get rid of them.

Or maybe you know what God's will is for you as a father or mother. But you're too tired to engage your kids and you just turn on the TV for them. Or you are harsh with them and discipline them in anger instead of love. Or you'd rather Facebook or watch a show then teach them and care for them.

Isn't there a bit of Herod in us too? We fail to consider God's will and his Word, and instead we do what is right in our own sight? Let's be clear: fighting God is a failing proposition. Because **God fights back**. God is patient, but only for a time. Sooner or later, we will find that God will do what God will do. And to be on the wrong side of God is a terrifying thing.

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. [Note how deeply Peter slept! How well would you sleep on a prison floor, chained to two guards, knowing you would be executed in the morning? Yet Peter was in a deep sleep! This is sleep that could only come with peace, believing God was still God and his will would be done.] **Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."**

Man opposed, but God's will is always done.

If you have been opposing God, there's only one way out. Repent. Turn to God. Confess your sin. Plead for his mercy. Herod did not do that. He continued to oppose God. God still did what God would do. He didn't thwart God's plans. All he did was seal his own fate.

Instead God did what God has a habit of doing. He rescued Peter.

God had already rescued Peter in a far more dramatic way. We mentioned before how Peter had denied knowing Jesus. Jesus had mercy on him. He appeared to the disciples and talked to Peter specifically. "Peter, do you love me?" Feed my lambs. Three times. Jesus assured Peter that not only was he forgiven, but he was also to be the Lord's apostle, sharing the Word, nourishing faith, guiding Jesus' flock. Amazing grace!

Friends, that grace of God is yours too! Where you have done your own thing for your own sake, repent. Turn to God. Ask for his mercy. And like Peter, I want you to know that you are forgiven. It wasn't easy. It wasn't cheap. It cost Jesus his life. But he took care of your sin. He lived for you. He died for you on the cross. He guaranteed your forgiveness at his resurrection. He called you into his family through Baptism. He's kept you strong in the faith through his Word. God rescued Peter. God rescued you too.

Let's listen to the end of the story:

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and

exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!” “You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”

By the way, what were they doing before all of this commotion began? Praying. Praying for what? That Peter might be released. And yet it never crossed their minds that God might actually answer their prayer and give them the very thing they were praying for? They were zealous, but with little faith! Yet God still answered. Isn't that comforting?

Sometimes we don't even think to pray. Sometimes we pray, but don't really think God will give what we're asking. God hears and answers even our imperfect prayers.

But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the brothers about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.

We don't know where Peter went from here, and it's the last we hear about him. But we can be sure he was sharing Jesus wherever he went.

In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while.

By the way, if we would read just a little farther, you'd hear about the death of Herod. He organized a party in his own honor and for his own glory. The people called Herod a god. Then God gave him worms that ate him alive, and he died. This man who opposed God and even killed one of the apostles did not succeed in his fight with God. God always wins. Herod found out the hard way that it is a foolish thing to fight God, and it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the most holy God.

Friends, because Christ is risen, this means the Word and will of God are unstoppable. Today is the day to evaluate your life and be honest. Where are you living in opposition to God and his will? Will you continue in this foolishness, and eventually be run over by God? Or will you repent of your sin, yield to God, and receive his rescue? He offers his forgiveness to all through Jesus Christ. Those who receive it desire to line their lives up with the will of God and let his Word and will reign supreme.

Conclusion: Christ is risen. So what? His Word is true. God's plans always happen. Those who oppose him will ultimately and eventually fall. Don't stand against God in any area of your life. Instead trust his mighty power to deliver you, rescue you, and save you. And know this: any that oppose you as you proclaim God's Word... they will ultimately fall too. Proclaim it boldly: it is the power of God. It is his unstoppable Word.

Amen.