

God is Supreme Acts 12:1-25

Introduction

This morning as we return to our study of the book of Acts we need to take a few moments to reflect on what we have seen so far in the first 11 chapters

We have seen the birth of the church at Pentecost that was ushered in by the coming of the Holy Spirit and how it was confirmed by wondrous signs of sight, sound, and experience

We saw how Peter, once a lowly, uneducated fisherman, rose to his feet to deliver a message so powerful that 3,000 were added to the church that day

We have seen how the earliest believers gathered together and pooled their resources as they gave themselves to the teaching and preaching of the apostles

And how the apostles were bold in their public ministry even openly defying the orders of the religious authorities to cease from speaking in the name of Jesus

We have seen that the fledgling church was not without difficulties as they were forced to confront dishonesty in their midst and how they handled the logistical problems created by their rapid growth

And we saw the church's first martyr as Stephen was stoned by the enraged Jewish leaders leading to persecution against the church that forced many of the believers to flee Jerusalem

But we saw how they carried the gospel message with them and how the Word of God continued to spread beyond the city of Jerusalem

We have seen the conversion of Saul who will in time become the apostle Paul who will be given the task of ministering to the Gentiles

And we saw how Peter opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles through Cornelius the centurion

And in chapter 11 we saw how Antioch, the place where disciples were first called Christians, was poised to eclipse Jerusalem as the center of church activity

Up to this point the church has been on a steady upward trajectory

In spite of occasional bumps in the road they have enjoyed a great deal of success in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ and the ranks of those who have believed have grown exponentially

Certainly, it was a tragedy when Stephen was murdered and many of the believers had to flee the intense persecution that was unleashed on them as his death set loose a bloodlust against them

But looking back on these events we are able to see that even the resulting dispersion of the largely Hellenistic believers as painful as it was, was a positive development as God used it to take his gospel message far and wide

Up to this point in Luke's narrative the apostles have been for largely tolerated

Sure, they were threatened, jailed, and even beaten early on but since those early days they have for the most part been left alone as they remained in Jerusalem

But as we open chapter 12 we will see that is about to change as the apostles are targeted for persecution like they have not yet seen

The narrative in this passage is easy to follow and there aren't any tricky doctrinal points that we need to unpack – there is even a bit of subtle humor in it as we will see

But I want us to look beyond the surface of what happens to the people involved to see what this passage tells us about God

In fact, you will notice that I have titled this message, “God is Supreme” and I am going to endeavor to show you four ways that this passage reveals God's supremacy

First, we are going to see that God is supreme in his preferences

Second, God is supreme in his power

Third, God is supreme in his position

And, lastly, God is supreme in his purposes

To be supreme is to be the greatest, the utmost or the most high – the church word we often use is “**sovereign**” – it is a word that refers to rank or position

It also refers to the utmost quality possible in character – to be supreme is to be the very best a person or thing can possibly be

So when we say that God is supreme in these four things listed it means that his expression of these things defines what these things should be – anything else would, by definition, therefore be inferior

Let's begin this morning by reading chapter 12 through completely

Please join me there in your Bible and follow along as I read

[Read Acts 12]

Before we begin to work through the outline on your note sheet let's take some time to look at some of the details in the account

Herod the king

We are introduced to “Herod the king” in **verse 1**

There are many men named Herod in the Bible and the Herods weren't exactly like the Waltons

The Herod in our passage refers to **Herod Agrippa I** who was king of Judah for three years from 41-44AD

He was the **grandson of Herod the Great** who ruled when Jesus was born

We read about what kind of man *he* was in **Matthew 2** where he tried to convince the wise men to lead him to Jesus and ultimately had all the baby boys 2 years old and under killed when they didn't oblige

Our Herod was also the **nephew of Herod Antipas** who had John the Baptist beheaded for criticizing his marriage to his sister-in-law Herodias and who had a part in Jesus' trial

“Grandpa” Herod also killed our Herod's father, his own son, which caused this Herod to flee to Rome where he was raised as a contemporary of men who would ultimately become rulers of Rome leading to his kingship

Like I said, they weren't exactly the Waltons

Political motivation

But Herod was a very political man and he was intent on currying favor with the Jews

As such, he was known to at least feign piety in observing Jewish religious practices and ruthlessly suppressing any religious minorities that threatened to disrupt the Jewish way of worship

And scoring points with his Jewish subjects seems to be his primary motivation for him laying “violent hands on some who belonged to the church”

It’s interesting that verse 3 tells us that his actions “pleased the Jews” because in Acts 5:26 we see that the apostles had the support of the Jewish people at large

So either this phrase actually refers only to the Jewish leaders or attitudes toward the apostles have reversed in the time between Acts 5 and 12

James

In any event, we read in **verse 2** that what he did that pleased the Jews was “he killed James the brother of John with the sword” which means he had James beheaded

This James was one of the sons of Zebedee who Jesus nicknamed the “sons of thunder” in **Mark 3:17**

He was one of the three disciples who were intimates of Jesus the other two being John and Peter

Those three are often seen in the gospels as being singled out to be with Jesus during pivotal events

In **Matthew 17:1** we see that it was these three who accompanied Jesus to witness transfiguration

They alone were allowed into the house when Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter as we read in **Luke 8:51**

And in **Matthew 26:37** we see Jesus leave the other 8 disciples and take these same three deeper into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray on the night of his betrayal and arrest

The martyrdom of James would have been a significant blow to the remaining apostles and the church

And the **manner of death** was likely meant to send shockwaves through the church as death by the sword, or beheading, was reserved for murderers and apostates in Jewish law – Herod was sending a pointed message

No replacement

As a side note we need to notice that there was no effort to replace James as there was with Judas Iscariot

This is because Judas was a traitor and James was faithful to the end – it was the apostasy of Judas that made it necessary to replace him, not merely his death

Peter arrested

Herod’s action in killing James was popular with the Jews so he decided he might as well double down and he had Peter arrested

It appears that he may well have been intending to work his way through all of the apostles in time and he decided to make a big splash by taking Peter next

The selection of Peter may have had another motivation as well

If the Jewish people at large had turned against the apostles it may well have been because they had included the Gentiles in the church which was anathema to the Jews and Peter as we know played a major role in that

It may well be that Herod would have seen that he would get a big boost by executing Peter for a couple of reasons – either way it is clear that the move was made in order to score political points

Herod was despicable

This shows just how despicable Herod was – Saul set out to ravage the church and was intent on imprisoning or killing as many believers as he could get his hands on

But at least he thought he was doing well and that his actions were pleasing to God as he was sincere in thinking that he was protecting God by eliminating this threat to the Jewish way of life

Herod was simply trying to curry favor with the people to bolster his image

Peter imprisoned

We are told in **verse 3** that Peter was arrested during the days of Unleavened Bread which means during Passover which lasted 7 days

Herod decided to wait until after Passover for reasons that aren't revealed to us

Perhaps it was sort of the opposite of modern day government document dumps on Friday afternoons so as to deflect attention from them

And Herod may have been trying to garner the biggest applause he could so he waited until the distraction of the holiday was past

Whatever the reason, Peter was put in prison under the watchful eyes of four guards at a time and left to await a certain death

The church gathered and prayed

But we see in **verse 5** that the church gathered together to pray

And we're told that they lifted earnest prayers which means that they were straining and laboring in their praying

There was nothing casual about these prayers and as we will see they were praying through the night

Ultimately, as we know, God intervened and rescued Peter from prison and he escaped being executed

Transition

Those are the basic facts of the account along with a little background and we will look at some more of the detail and the color as we go along

But let's look at what this account teaches us about God

I. God is Supreme in His Preferences

First we see that God sometimes makes choices that don't seem exactly fair from our perspective

Why was Peter spared, even miraculously delivered, while James was beheaded?

And why did James only get one really terse verse that tells us only that he was killed with a sword while Stephen had more than a chapter devoted to his murder?

That hardly seems fair does it? – I mean, Stephen wasn't even an apostle!

The Bible is riddled with accounts that don't appear to be fair

One cannot read through the Psalms without seeing how frequently the Psalmist cried out to God and asked "Why?"

And we often ask "why?" in our own lives as we see things that just don't seem fair – they don't make sense

Why does one person get sick and succumb to the illness in death while another is healed?

How can two groups pray earnestly and one receives while the other is denied?

And the list goes on – I'm sure we all have stories we could share when life just didn't make any sense and what happened seemed to be unfair

If we believe that Scripture teaches that God is all-powerful and that God has the ability to control all things then we must believe that nothing happens that is not a part of God's sovereign will

God didn't somehow forget to protect James

He didn't fall asleep or get distracted when James was arrested and subsequently beheaded

God also didn't love James any less than he loved Peter

God's purposes are always for good

What we learn from this passage is that God has purposes that are not always clear to us and it is not always God's will that his saints should be delivered from the difficulties, trials, tragedies that come into their lives

When God allows those things into our lives he has a reason and he is not required to share that reason with us

Romans 8:28 tells us "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

Notice that this verse doesn't say that only good things will ever happen to those who love God and who are called according to his purpose

No, bad things, unfair things will at times befall us

But we know that as terrible as those things might be that ultimately they will be recognized as having come into our lives for good – because God is in control and he says so

Our perspective is limited

Another fact we need to recognize is one you have likely heard me point out many times

Our perspective is limited and we don't know enough to tell if a thing is good or bad – we only know if it is pleasant or unpleasant in the moment

God is all knowing and he views things from an eternal perspective

Those who knew and ministered with James no doubt thought he had been taken away by death too soon

And when someone dies we tend to make a judgment as to whether their death was untimely

But **Psalms 139:16** tells us that God has known from eternity past just exactly how long each person's life will be and he has it written down

Of course we don't naturally see it this way but the reality is that no one has ever their life cut short and everyone lives 100% of the life that they were created for regardless of the number of their years

The up side of that reality is that we are immortal until our God-appointed time is through

That sort of makes us superheroes of some kind doesn't it?

Hebrews 11

Cheryl read to us just a bit ago from Hebrews 11 which we often refer to as the hall of faith chapter and we saw how some were spared or rescued while others were tortured and killed –

Clearly God chose to see some spared and others not and he did so for his own reasons

God is supreme in his preferences (or his choices) and he is not obligated to explain them to us

However, that shouldn't stop us from asking God to show us his reasons so that we might understand

But the bottom line is that God is working for good and even the tragedies that he allows into our lives are somehow part of his plan to bring about good

II. God is Supreme in His Power

Next we see that God is supreme in his power as he orchestrates the rescue of Peter

The description here shows that Peter was in a serious predicament and that escape was impossible from a normal perspective

We aren't told why but it appears that Herod was particularly paranoid about making sure Peter didn't get away as he took extraordinary precautions to make sure he stayed put

Normally a prisoner would be chained to one guard in the night but Peter was chained to two guards and Herod also put two guards on the door of Peter's cell which was behind a locked, iron gate that led to the outside world

So there would have been four shifts of four guards each during the 12 hour watch of the night meaning that each group would have been on duty for three hours

Peter is sleeping soundly

Herod's plan was to bring Peter from his cell and execute him the next day

Notice in **verse 6** what Peter was doing – he was sleeping!

I don't know about you but I often have difficulty sleeping over relatively trivial things like being too warm or having something on my mind -

I hate to admit it but I have reached the age where an afternoon cup of coffee can cause sleep to be a long time coming

But not Peter, here we see him sleeping so soundly that the angel has to whack him in his side to wake him up

Perhaps you will remember this past summer when we were going through the Psalms how in Psalm 3 David was being hunted by thousands of men who wished to kill him and yet he was able to rest and sleep because he trusted in God's protection

Peter undoubtedly had confidence in his Lord – that he would either be spared or that he would be in God's presence the next day

The comical scene

The detail that Luke includes here is rather comical when you imagine the scene

The angel has to either kick or whack Peter to wake him up

Then he has to tell him to get up, to get dressed and put on his shoes, then he has to tell him to put on his coat

I think it's kind of funny to imagine Peter with bed-head and all groggy and confused and the angel all exasperated, tapping his foot and motioning with his hands going, "Come on Peter! Get a move on!"

God demonstrates his power

Peter's situation looked to be impossible but the locked and guarded door, the four soldiers, the two chains

None of that proved to be the slightest hindrance to God's rescue of Peter

God even provided light in the darkened cell so Peter could locate his clothing

We aren't told how God dealt with the guards but clearly they were unaware that Peter was even missing – perhaps until the next shift showed up to relieve them

And Peter thought it was all a vision until he found himself away from the prison and the angel had disappeared

Remember, Peter had experienced the vision on Simon the tanner's rooftop and so this wasn't the first time he would have been involved with a vision that seemed very real so it doesn't seem extraordinary that he would think he was experiencing another very lifelike vision

At Mary's house

When he comes to himself, Peter automatically headed to the home of John Mark's mother, Mary

It seems he expected to find his friends gathered there – perhaps they had carried out a similar prayer vigil in the same place for James

Mary must have had a large house because it had a gateway which indicates there was an outside courtyard

Perhaps the church may have also met at her home for worship

Anyway, Peter knew where to go and so he went and started knocking on the door

Again, the events as Luke relates them paint a rather funny picture

The servant girl, Rhoda, answers the door without opening it which, given the hour, seems reasonable

Upon hearing and recognizing Peter's voice she doesn't open the door to let him in but in her excitement goes to tell the others that Peter is at the door

They all tell her she's nuts and that it must be his angel – at that time belief in guardian angels who took on the appearance of the person they were guarding was common

And instead of simply going to fetch Peter she continues to try to convince them

And there stands Peter – knocking on the door

Imagine the hubbub when they finally opened the door to find Peter standing there after all!

Given the hour and the fact that he was an escaped fugitive Peter didn't try to shout over them but shushed them and told them the story of his escape

And after telling them to let James the brother of Jesus and the other church leaders he took off for parts unknown

Other than a brief mention in chapter 15, this will be the last we will hear of Peter in the book of Acts

God cannot be thwarted

We learn from this account that there is nothing that is insurmountable to God

When God chooses to deliver, he will deliver

So we see that God is supreme in his power

Luke proves to be a master of understatement when he writes that Peter's disappearance caused "no little disturbance among the soldiers"

I'll bet they were in a high state of panic because they knew what was coming

The account ends with the inevitable result of finding Peter missing as the soldiers on guard duty are questioned and then summarily put to death

And Herod was so upset over the whole affair that he headed to his beach house for a little vacation

III. God is Supreme in His Position

Luke then reports that Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon and it appears that the rift had caused a disruption in the normal commercial trade that they depended on

So they convinced Herod's chamberlain to get them an audience with Herod to try to make peace

On the appointed day, Herod put on his royal robes and mounted his throne to deliver a speech to them

Josephus describes Herod's wardrobe on this occasion and he says that the outfit that Herod wore was made completely of silver so that when the sun striking his garment was reflected so as to make him glow

And his audience began calling out to one another saying that he was a god

Then they pleaded with Herod to be merciful to them because up to this point they had only considered him as a man but that they would from this time on own him as superior to mortal nature

And Josephus goes on to report that Herod didn't make any effort to correct them and how he fell ill with severe pain in his belly and that he died shortly thereafter

Our passage reveals the details that God sent an angel to strike him down and that the cause of his death was some kind of worms – possibly an internal parasite of some kind

And our text also reveals the reason for his death – he took God's glory for his own

God is jealous for his glory and will not share it with anyone

And while jealousy in humans is often a sin, it is never sin for God to demand what he is owed because he alone is worthy

God is supreme in his position and he will not share it with anyone or anything

IV. God is Supreme in His Purposes

Then lastly in **verse 24** we see that God's Word continued to multiply

Herod thought that he could damage or halt what he saw as a heretical, upstart sect but God showed him differently

God clearly demonstrated his supremacy over all circumstances, thwarted Herod's plans, and then judged and punished him

Whereas Herod thought that he could execute the church leaders one by one and halt the march of the church he soon found out who was really in charge of the matters of life and death and the church continued to grow

In **verse 25** Luke sets the stage for what is to follow as he reports that Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark returned to Antioch from Jerusalem

These will be the men who are now going to step onto the stage of Acts as Luke begins to follow the spread of the gospel and the church among the Gentiles

God is supreme in his preferences, his power, his position, and his purposes

Conclusion

Acts 1:1 Luke writes to Theophilus that in his gospel he had "dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach"

In that statement we see the reality that Jesus only began his mission during his time on this earth

Of course salvation was completed but his mission continues until Jesus one day returns

The difference is that Jesus has passed the work on to us

The church is often referred to as the Body of Christ and as his body we are to be about his business

In **Acts 1:8** Jesus charged his disciples and by extension all those believer who follow to be his witnesses to all the earth

In **Matthew 28:18-20** Jesus told his disciples:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Again, nothing has changed from that day to this and it will remain the same until Jesus returns

We as his body are to be his witnesses and we are to be about the business of making disciples

The church needs to be about spreading the gospel message, seeing people saved, and then training them up in godliness

That is the business of the church and that is the business of Brick Church

We have work to do and I know we want to be found faithful

The mission continues

Let's pray