

“Making Progress In The Real World”

Acts 12:1-25

Series: Book of Acts [#17]

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Theme: **Christ’s Unlimited Power Builds His Church.**

Introduction

Today we come to the end of Part 2 in the Book of Acts. This section deals with *The Church on the Move in Judea and Syria*. Part 2 began in chapter 8 with Philip going north to Samaria and the church expanding there. Then he went south on a God-arranged meeting with the Ethiopian court treasurer and the gospel moved forward again, back to the official’s country.

In chapter 9 we saw Saul’s conversion. God transformed the greatest persecutor of the church into its greatest pioneer. Then, in chapters 9 and 10 God sent Peter to Caesarea to meet with the Roman centurion Cornelius. The church moved forward to the gentiles.

In chapter 11 we saw believers fleeing persecution in Jerusalem preaching to gentiles in Antioch. The gospel moved forward once again. Before long the center of the church moved from Jerusalem to Antioch. From there missions began with Saul and Barnabas, which we will see at the beginning of Part 3 of the book.

We have seen *The Church on the Move*, the church “*Making Progress in the Real World.*” In those first years the church was not a comfortable, solemn, secure institution meeting in great cathedrals. It was *people*.

- People knowing Jesus.
- People sharing their lives with each other and those around them,
- People living in *the real world*—facing real pressures, challenges and dangers. Most of the first Jewish believers were rejected by friends and family, and treated as outcasts and heretics. Many were jailed, beaten and even killed for their faith.

These were the Christians who *Made Progress in the Real World.*

Now in chapter 12 we see a lesson that can be traced through the entire book—*the early church made progress because they knew and relied on Christ’s unlimited power to build His church.* Jesus promised, “I will build My church.” These early believers knew these words, but more than that they knew the truth, the power of Christ as they moved forward. That lesson is graphically portrayed in this chapter. It is truth that must be the foundation for our lives and ministries. The truth that *Christ’s unlimited power builds His church.* Here in Acts 12 we see this truth displayed even as the faithful believers faced dangers.

Faithful Believers Face Dangers.

The dangers are real. There are some people who see dangers in almost everything, people who are hard-pressed to find anything good, positive, or peaceful. We may describe some people as paranoid, others as having a persecution complex, and yet others as having a martyr complex. Some of you may remember the old comic *Lil' Abner*. A regular character was a small old figure of a man always dressed in black. A black cloud always followed him. Whenever anything bad happened, it happened to him. Some people see themselves like that.

In chapter 12 the dangers were not imagined nor exaggerated. They were real, all too real. Let's look at the opening lines of the chapter,

“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. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread.” (1-3)

Some were jailed, mistreated, beaten, tortured. James was killed, the first Apostle to be martyred. Peter was jailed again. This time he faced the same sentence as James.

The persecutor was Herod Agrippa I. His was the first government to persecute the church. Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great, the man who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth. Herod Agrippa's mother was a Maccabee—the *freedom fighters* who gave Israel independence for about 100 years, from the mid second to the mid first century B.C. Because of his grandfather's paranoia (which extended to killing many of his own family), Herod Agrippa was raised and educated in Rome. He made a number of good political connections there.

Through his connections he was first a governor and then by the year 41 A.D. ruled over Palestine, the same area that his grandfather had ruled. Unlike his grandfather, he was popular with the Jews and did all he could to keep it that way, including this persecution of the church. Yes, the dangers the believers in Judea faced were very real.

There have always been and always will be real dangers for faithful believers. We should be thankful for the religious freedoms we have. We do not face being beaten, tortured, jailed or killed simply because we are Christians. Many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world face unrelenting persecution and death. One writer estimates that 70 million Christians died for their faith in the last 2,000 years, and that over 45 million, or 65%, were killed in the last century. He estimates that on average 160,000 Christians have been killed every year since 1990.

[Project picture on screen]. Meet Pastor Vic Vicera and his wife Beth. On April 15, less than six weeks ago, Pastor Vic and Beth were meeting with another pastor in their home in Mindanao, Philippines planning ministry in a Muslim tribal area when a man stormed in and started shooting. All three were hit. Pastor Vic died.

The dangers are real and serious. Why? We are involved in a spiritual battle. Remember Jesus' words about this in John 15,

“If the world hates you (*and it does*), you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.” (18-19)

Sometimes it is clear and violent, at other times it is murky and subtle. Faithful believers always face real dangers.

The results are varied. In the real world both good bad things happen to good people, to God's people. Sometimes the results are difficult and even impossible for us to understand. We see a striking contrast here in the results of persecution for James and Peter.

- James is killed by Herod while Peter is miraculously saved.
- James' imprisonment and death is handled briefly in verse 2, while Peter's arrest, imprisonment and release are detailed in verses 3-19.

I am sure some then, and ever since then, have asked,

- “Why was James killed and Peter rescued?”
- “Why didn't God save both of them?”
- “Was something wrong in James' life?”
- “Was Peter more important or better than James?”

These are fair questions, but they reflect our own limited, imperfect perspective. There is much we will not and cannot understand about God and His sovereign ways.

Jesus drew back the curtain a little on some of these *inequities* (as we see them) before His return to heaven. Jesus told Peter something about Peter's life and death. Then Peter looked back over his shoulder at John and asked, “Lord, what about this man?” Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!” (John 21:21, 22)

The results are still varied today. At this moment there are believers who are suffering deeply for their faith, being tortured, beaten, abused and even killed. If the figure of 160,00 Christians on average being killed for their faith each year is accurate, that means on average over 438 are killed each day, or 18 per hour, or one every 3 minutes, 18 seconds. That would mean that during the amount of time of our worship service here today, on average 27 Christians in our world are martyred. Yet, we are here in peace and safety.

Faithful believers face real dangers. The results vary greatly. But in all cases, in each and every case, *Christ's unlimited power builds His church*. We also see this here in chapter 12 as *faithful believers experience God's powerful care*.

Faithful Believers Experience God's Powerful Care.

First, note that God's powerful care as He restrains evil. We see God restraining evil in Peter's miraculous release. Peter was jailed earlier by the Jewish religious leaders as we saw in chapter 4. Now Agrippa jailed him because he thought this would please the Jews just as his execution of James had. The night before the intended execution ...

- Peter was in jail sleeping, chained to guards.
- The church was praying fervently for him as he slept.
- An angel woke Peter up—although at first he thought he was seeing a vision or dreaming—and told him to get up.
- Think about Peter sleeping just before his scheduled execution. While we can't push it too far, it is possible that he had peace because Jesus promised him that he would “grow old” (John 21:18).
- Peter stood, the chains fell off (the guards didn't wake up) and the angel whisked him out of jail with locked gates opening on cue as they came to them.
- Peter went straight to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. The servant girl was so excited to see him that she left Peter standing outside knocking and ran to tell the people who were praying for Peter.
- They thought she was crazy, and so a debate began. Now, a good number of people have criticized those believers for this (e.g., “praying but not believing or expecting”). But when we step back and place ourselves in their place, I am sure we can picture ourselves reacting the same way at this miracle.

God intervened. He *restrained the evil* intent of Herod by springing Peter from Jail.

We also see God restraining evil in a very striking way in Herod's death. Let's pick it up at verse 20,

“Now [Agrippa] 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. 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.” (20-23)

Tyre and Sidon were coastal towns, north of Galilee. They depended on the inland areas for grain. They had a dispute with Agrippa but, because they really needed that grain, they came to settle with Agrippa by showing honor and respect for him, even though it was not genuine. Verses 21-22 record a festival when Herod was dressed in some of his finest royal

attire to make a speech.

The first century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that Agrippa wore a robe of silver threads and that when he came into the amphitheater the morning sun reflected so brilliantly off the robe that the people were shocked and amazed. His supporters called from all sections of the amphitheater that he was a god and that from now on they would honor him as a god (cf. *Antiquities of the Jews, Book XIX*). Josephus' description squares with Luke's account. Josephus also commented that Agrippa "did neither rebuke them nor reject their impious [or, insincere] flattery." Verse 23 tells us an angel of God struck him "because he did not give God the glory." He died five days later.

Agrippa was self-centered and vain. He used and abused others. He executed James and decided to execute Peter simply because he thought it would make the Jews happy. On this day, God in effect said, "Enough is enough!"

God actively restrains evil today just as He always has. Yes, with so much evil and wickedness it sometimes seems like evil is not being restrained. Most, if not all of us have gone through heart-searching and soul wrenching questions about this. The New Testament describes the Holy Spirit as *The Restrainer*. We cannot fathom how terrible it would be in our world if the Holy Spirit were not restraining evil.

The Bible gives us a glimpse of life on earth without the Holy Spirit restraining sin. The apostle Paul wrote that when Christ comes for the church the Restrainer will be removed, or will remove Himself. That is, the Holy Spirit will withdraw His work of restraining sin (2 Thess. 2:6-7). The book of The Revelation describes some of the evil mayhem that will take place at that time.

So, even with all the sin-sick evil and perversion in our world, thank and praise God for his restraining evil.

Then, we see God's powerful care as He gives growth. Here in Acts we see growth right in the midst of persecution and death. Drop down to verse 24,

"But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark." (24-25)

The Word grew. More people heard the gospel and came to know Jesus Christ as Savior. Barnabas and Saul, having delivered the contribution from Antioch to the persecuted and poor church in Jerusalem, went back to Antioch and continued their ministry.

Christ's unlimited power builds His church. Neither the worst or best circumstances can stop God giving growth to the church through faithful believers. When the going has been tough, have you ever asked yourself, "What's the use?" God's answer today is the same one He gave Paul over 1900 years ago, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:19).

Yes, God “is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power [His power] that works within us” (Ephesians 3:20). God’s unlimited power is more than able to work in and through you in any circumstance to not only build you up, but to build up the church of Christ.

Wilson Chen served as an officer in the South Vietnamese army during the war between North and South Vietnam. When the United States pulled out and the South fell, he was ordered to report to a “ten day political and labor course.” It really was prison and torture which, for most, ended only with death. He was there not for ten days, but five long years at hard labor, living in filth and disease, watching his friends being killed. There were some Bibles, but if they were found they would be destroyed and their owners killed.

After his release he said during that time he “grasped like a drowning man for the promises of the Word of God. I promised the Lord I would serve Him if He would give me the opportunity. ‘You have opportunities right here,’ the Holy Spirit whispered to [him].” He found that was true as he shared the gospel with other prisoners and saw at least three of them accept Christ.

God grace and power was sufficient for ...

- James, Peter, Barnabas, Paul and so many others in the first century;
- for Wilson Chen and so many others in the last century;
- and it is more than sufficient for you and me.

Yes, the dangers are real and the results are varied. But God restrains evil and gives growth.

Conclusion.

The church, Knox Church, you and I can *make progress in the real world, in our real world*. Aren’t you glad it doesn’t depend on favorable circumstances, great talents or tremendous ideas? *It is Christ’s unlimited power which builds His church, and He does that through faithful believers.*

As you reflect on this truth and talk with God about it now, begin by thanking and praising Him for His unlimited power which restrains evil and builds Christ’s church. Thank Him for some of the specific evidence of this that you see in the past and present, and all that you do not see. Reaffirm your understanding and willingness to live for Him regardless of the circumstances. Reaffirm your commitment to use the opportunities you have around you now, each day, to have the part Christ wants you to have in building His church.

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