



OUR RIGHTFUL PLACE

Acts 12:18-24

Dan Claire

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Being a practicing Christian is increasingly considered to be not only absurd, but downright offensive. There's a steady drip of public animosity towards Christianity and the church.¹ Non-conformity with popular opinion often has an enormous social cost. In particular, the younger that you are, the more it hurts. Students are under enormous pressure at school, where kids can be so hateful towards those who are different, and teachers sometimes look the other way. In so many settings, at school and at work and in our neighborhoods, it's exhausting to be the only believer or one of the few Christians there. Sometimes it feels like we're witnessing the last hours before the church's extinction.

Things are not as bad as they seem, however. Throughout history, going all the way back to the early church, most Christians have experienced some measure of opposition and public disapproval for their faith. Nevertheless, God's kingdom has continued to expand, the church has continued to grow, year after year after year. How does this continue to happen? As we'll learn in this message, it's because it is in our weakness that Jesus is strong. As we walk with him through the valley of the shadow of death, the power of his resurrection shines forth the clearest.

Traditionally the full name for the book of Acts is "The Acts of the Apostles," particularly the acts of Peter and Paul. The first half of Acts (chapters 1-12) is mostly Peter's story, and the second half (chapters 13-28) is primarily the story of Paul. With this message, we're wrapping up Peter's story and this sermon series on Acts, part one.

Throughout this sermon series on Acts 1-12, one of the biggest takeaways has been that the traditional title—"The Acts of the Apostles"—is a misnomer. A more accurate name would be something like, "The Continuing Acts of *Jesus* After His Resurrection from the Dead." The four Gospels describe the acts of Jesus before his death and through his crucifixion and resurrection. Acts is the sequel, and yes, the Apostle Peter has indeed been in the foreground throughout chapters 1-12. Nevertheless, everything Peter has done and said has been *in Jesus' name*. So in a deeper sense, it's really been the continuing story of Jesus after his resurrection from the dead.

¹ "I'd be happy if all Churches, Mosques, Synagogues, and all other religious buildings were turned into Condos or torn down. Maybe if organized religion ceased to exist, the World could stop all the wars/bigotry/killing done in the name of religion. Cities and states could also start collecting property taxes on all that valuable land as well." Comment by DCWarrior, September 23, 2016 on washingtonpost.com, following "[Converting churches to condos brings logistical, social challenges](#)," by Amanda Abrams

When we began this series, we started in Acts chapter 1 with Jesus' ascension—signifying his enthronement as King—and with Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit. By the power of the Spirit, Jesus promised that believers would take him with them wherever they went. Jesus' ministry would now multiply as his people went out in his name, first to Jerusalem, then the surrounding region of Judea and Samaria, and ultimately to the ends of the earth. Jesus had conquered death, and now nothing would stop the expansion of his kingdom.

As we've worked our way through these first twelve chapters, what we've seen since then is that Jesus really is the Lord of all. "Lord" in Greek—*kyrios*—occurs more often in Acts than in any other book in the New Testament. And it's really the main point of Acts: Jesus is Lord, and absolutely nothing will stop the growth of his church.

In Jerusalem, the Temple authorities tried to stop it. In the first several chapters of Acts, the same people who called for Jesus to be crucified kept arresting his disciples and trying to silence them. Make no mistake, the Temple authorities were very powerful people. They controlled the city of Jerusalem through their wealth and their religious authority and their political authority. They shaped public opinion throughout the city. They had the power to have people arrested, beaten, and killed. Yet despite their enormous power, Jesus was stronger. The Temple authorities weren't powerful enough to stop the growth of Christ's church. Eventually the authorities put Stephen to death and persecution broke out, but even that couldn't stop the Lord Jesus and his church. On the road to Damascus, Jesus arrested Saul the persecutor, and he gave Saul a new mission as his ambassador. Jesus is Lord, and absolutely nothing will stop the growth of his church.

The Temple authorities weren't the only threat that the church faced in those early days. There were also internal challenges, like with Ananias and Sapphira, wolves in sheep's clothing, whose greedy, deceptive practices within the church were a real threat to the community. Here in Washington we're well aware of the manipulative power that wealthy individuals and corporations exert on our government. That same kind of power tried to take control of the early church, but the Lord Jesus was stronger. He cannot be fooled. He acted decisively to remove Ananias and Sapphira from the fellowship. Jesus is Lord, and absolutely nothing will stop the growth of his church.

There were also social divisions that threatened the early church. Among the Jews, there were upper-class Hebrew-speakers, and there were the lower-class, Greek-speaking immigrants. Class divisions, of course, are profoundly difficult to overcome. But the Lord Jesus is stronger. He acted to bring everyone together, by appointing seven Greek-speaking believers to oversee the distribution for the poor. Then came the Samaritans, whose mixed ancestry made them outcasts in Jewish circles. You may remember Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, or the time that Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well, and in these stories the animosity between Jews and Samaritans ran deep. But the Lord Jesus is stronger. He poured out his Spirit on both Samaritans

and Jews, and they fully embraced one another as brothers and sisters within the Kingdom of God. Then in subsequent chapters there was the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, whose ethnicity and his castration made him doubly taboo. Then one of the greatest enemies of the church, a Roman centurion and his entire household converted. Then came the city of Antioch, the fourth largest city in the Roman empire. Again and again, these people and places represented formidable barriers to the expansion of the church. Even though some of the religious taboos may be unfamiliar to us, we certainly do feel a sense of powerlessness to overcome the racial divisions that plague our society today. Yet throughout the book of Acts, Jesus is stronger. Ethnic boundaries and social divisions are no match for him. Jesus is Lord, and he welcomes people of every race, from every place, around the world. Nothing will stop the growth of his church.

One more example: there was even a famine throughout ancient Palestine, briefly noted by Luke in Acts chapter 11. Other historians from the era corroborate that a severe famine devastated the region between 45 and 47 AD. But of course the Lord Jesus is stronger. Just as he warned Joseph before the famine in Egypt, Jesus also led the ever-expanding church in sharing their resources in order to provide for the believers in and around Jerusalem. Jesus is Lord, and absolutely nothing will stop the growth of his church.

But there's one more way to try to stop Jesus, if the religious authorities couldn't do it, and wolves in sheep's clothing couldn't do it, and social divisions couldn't do it, and famine couldn't even do it. There's one more way, and that's the story of Acts 12. The last power to stand against the Lord Jesus is the power of the state. Monarch vs. monarch, and only will remain standing in the end.

On September 25, 2016, Miguel Lau spoke to our church about the first half of Acts 12, in which King Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great, began persecuting the church. "He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread" Acts 12:2. Then as the story goes, the church was praying, and the Lord Jesus answered their prayers. He sent an angel to rescue Peter, who escaped from prison and joined the other stunned believers at prayer. From there, Peter was able to continue his ministry as an ambassador for the Lord.

All that remains for us in Acts 12 is a small footnote to the story: the fate of King Herod Agrippa. Through ingratiating himself to two consecutive Roman emperors, the king had been given responsibility for more and more territory, and had become a pretty big deal in the eastern territories of the empire. But two important cities up the coast—Tyre and Sidon—remained outside of his rule, and that made the king angry. He flexed his muscles and blocked their food supply, knowing that sooner or later they would come begging. Sure enough, v 20, they sent a delegation to seek an audience with the king in his coastal palace at Caesarea.

As Josephus the historian tells it, the king agreed to speak to them in Caesarea's great seaside amphitheater. On the morning of the appointed day, Herod Agrippa emerged into the theater wearing clothing woven of silver. When the sun hit it, the king shone like a tin man. So then the delegation from Tyre and Sidon acclaimed him as a god, saying, "Although we had formerly revered you only as a man, yet we shall henceforth regard you as superior to mortal nature." Or, as Luke records it in v22, they shouted, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!"

At this point we ought to pause and talk about some of the cultural assumptions in the ancient world of that time. There was a well-known and widely accepted mythology of divine visitation in many Mediterranean cultures in that day. Both Jupiter and Mercury had been known to disguise themselves as mere mortals and walk among them from time to time. That's why, during their visit to Lystra (Acts 14), Paul and Barnabas healed a paralyzed man and then were genuinely mistaken for Zeus and Hermes.²

It's not out of the realm of possibility that the delegation from Tyre and Sidon could have sincerely believed that King Herod Agrippa was a god. Yet that's not the most plausible explanation. The king hadn't healed anyone, and it's not as if he were going about in disguise. On the contrary, he was trying to impress his visitors with as much pomp and circumstance as he could muster. Meanwhile, the visitors were desperate. Their people were starving back home. They were more than willing to flatter the king so that the embargo might be lifted, and they could all eat again. It's much more likely that that's what they did.

All our problems began when the serpent tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit and become like God. It was a wicked lie, since she and her husband were already like God, made in his image, and given authority to rule over the earth as his agents. But she ate, and he ate, and together they fell. Instead of becoming more like God, they became less. God's image in them was marred, bent, and disfigured under the weight of sin. It's been that way ever since.

Thankfully God did not abandon us forever to sin and death. He had a plan to set the world to rights, and instead of us reaching up to him, it involved him stooping down to us. It was a true divine visitation. Jesus, the son of God, humbled himself by taking on human flesh. He lived the life that we could not live, and then he accepted a death that he should not have died, so that we might be restored to our rightful place as human beings, made in his image. That's where Jesus wants us. He puts us in our rightful places, where we serve him best, where we feel the greatest satisfaction, living the lives he intended for us.

² Their immediate response was to exhort the people not to worship them, saying, "We are men just like you, of like nature with you. But we bring you good news about the one true God."

King Herod Agrippa could have had such a life. Indeed, he should have had such a life, because hundreds of thousands of his subjects depended upon him for justice and safety and the bare necessities. Yet he couldn't stand the idea of having another Lord over him. That's what it always comes down to, doesn't it? We all want to be our own gods. We want to choose our own places.

In our multicultural society in which there is so much religious diversity, it's easy to forget that we all believe the same thing about this. We all want to be our own gods. Whether you believe in the supernatural world or not, whether you think we're the product of evolution or we were brought here by aliens, whether you believe in Jesus or Zeus or Krishna or Buddha or Sauron or nobody, you just want to be the lord of your own life. So the choice for Herod Agrippa was the same choice that it is for you and for me. It's the choice of who is lord?

We all make the wrong choice again and again, and the Lord Jesus in his mercy permits it, though it is never, ever wise to presume upon his mercy. If you reject Jesus as Lord, if you set yourself up as an alternative god, then God will oppose you. Maybe he'll give you a long leash, maybe not so long, but sooner or later your rebellion will come to an end. That's what happened with King Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel. It's also what happened with King Herod Agrippa in Acts 12:23. The king did not rebuke his flatterers or reject their exaltation of him. So an angel of the Lord struck him down and King Herod Agrippa was eaten by worms. The Lord put him in his place.³

Recently a friend of mine from Zimbabwe cooked a traditional dinner from his homeland for some other Christian friends, and I was invited to attend. Kale greens, salty fish, corn porridge, peanut sauce and—worms! Mopane worms.⁴ It was my first time eating worms, and they're not my favorite dish. But what I did



³ Remember the refrain from Ash Wednesday: “For you are but dust, and to dust you shall return, apart from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

⁴ “[Worms! A look at Zimbabwe’s favorite snack: mopane worms.](#)” Associated Press, January 25, 2013.

enjoy was the fact that we gathered at table eating worms rather than being eaten by them! We were men and women, black and white, married and single, from several different nations, and all of us had chosen to lay down our own god-ambitions and make Jesus Lord of our lives. The Lord Jesus had put us all in our rightful places. And there we were, eating worms rather than being eaten by them, a foretaste of eternal life at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Here's the bottom line: either way, the Lord Jesus puts us where he wants us. Reject him as Lord, and he will put you in your place, a place of your own choosing, outside of his kingdom. Honor him as Lord, and he will put you in your place. That is, he will guide you into those roles and responsibilities within his kingdom for which he first made you. It's what we all truly long for, but we're so often unwilling to accept because it means letting go of our own divine ambitions.

The book of Acts, part one, ends in v24 with the main theme of our entire study thus far. It says, "But the word of God increased and multiplied." Jesus is Lord, and absolutely nothing will stop the growth of his church.

This final showdown between the power of the state and the power of King Jesus ended the same way all the others ended, with the Lord triumphant over all his enemies. And as Miguel pointed out in his message, if you know the story of Jesus, then it's hard to miss the similarities in Peter's story in Acts 1-12. During his ministry, Jesus taught, healed, blessed, and confronted unjust authorities. So did Peter. Jesus was arrested during the days of Unleavened Bread. So was Peter. Jesus suffered torture. So did Peter. And if you go on and read Paul's story in the second half of Acts, you'll see the same pattern once again in the life of Paul. While tradition holds that both Peter and Paul eventually died for their faith, that's not where Luke ends their stories. In chapter 12, it's Herod who dies, while Peter escapes, and the Gospel continues bearing fruit everywhere it goes. The end of Acts is similar. Paul is under house arrest in Rome, but he is freely proclaiming the Gospel to all who come.

So what does all this mean? What are we to make of Peter's freedom and Paul's unhindered preaching at the end of their stories? It all points back to the difference between their stories and Jesus' story. Only Jesus died for our sins. He was crucified, died and was buried, so that we might be restored to our rightful places. Then on Easter he rose again from the dead. So now, whenever and wherever Jesus' followers are to be found faithfully representing him as his restored image bearers, the image that we portray is resurrection. Peter's escape from prison is a snapshot of the resurrection. Paul's Gospel proclamation under Roman house arrest is a snapshot of the resurrection. Our own suffering—whether at the hands of cultural bullies or physical persecutors—all points to Jesus' promise of resurrection life. And all our celebrations are likewise a kind of feasting on the worms, pointing to our resurrection and life forever with him.

So, even though it often feels like we're witnessing the last hours before the church's extinction, things really aren't as bad as they seem. The word of God continues to increase and multiply. The kingdom of God is growing like a mustard seed. And in our weakness, Jesus is strong. As we walk with him through the valley of the shadow of death, the power of his resurrection shines forth the clearest.

While we are never assured that we will be spared hardship or persecution, we can be certain that Jesus is Lord, and one day every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess it. Nothing can stop his church, neither online trolls, nor self-deifying bullies, nor tribulation, nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor humiliation, nor danger, nor sword. Jesus is Lord, and absolutely nothing will stop the growth of his church.