

# The death of James - Rev. Ewen Matheson

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[0:00] Seeking the Lord's blessing for a few moments, let's turn together to Acts and at chapter 12. Acts and chapter 12.

Acts chapter 12, reading again from verse 1. About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who long to the church. He killed James, the brother of John, with the sword. And when they saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. And especially verse 2, Acts chapter 12, and at verse 2, he, Herod, killed James, the brother of John, with the sword.

The book of Acts is a quite fascinating read. The fast-paced narrative captioned for us the snapshots of the exciting time in the history of the early Christian church.

One of the most exciting times throughout the history of the world. As we have recorded for us in God's word, the gospel spreading far and abroad.

[1:17] The book of Acts records for us the different people and places. The book of Acts records for us the different people and places.

The snapshots of the early Christian church. And displays to us and records that sense of vibrancy that was part of the church.

The reality of the obedience of God's people. The advancements of the kingdom of God and the cause of Jesus Christ. The difficulties and challenges and trials both within and outwith the church. And through it all, the greater theme of the progress and power of the gospel through the world. In the book of Acts, we find that the apostles take on the role of leadership.

They are leading and engaging in this manner. They recognize the privilege of the opportunity and the great depth of the responsibility.

[2:34] And they are empowered, of course, by the Holy Spirit. And empowered by the events of the resurrection. When we read of the apostles and the gospels and the apostles in the book of Acts, they seem to be quite different.

And the event that makes all the difference is the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Savior. That empowers them and enables them and encourages them to a new sense of boldness.

And the reality to seek to fulfill what God has called them to be. As leaders in the church. And what he calls the church to be as well.

We come time and again to the book of Acts because there's so many relevant instructions and teaching for us. Of what the Christian life looks like. And of what the Christian church looks like as well.

When Martin Lloyd-Jones began his study in the book of Acts, he called it authentic Christianity. And that's quite significant and important for us to think of too.

[3:41] It's an encouragement to us as well as we continue to engage in that great commission. And to seek to fulfill the purpose and calling of God's people here in this world.

To bring and promote the life-changing message to a world that is in need. When we go through the book of Acts, we come to different points of great significance that are markers for us.

Certain watershed moments in the life of the church. And here is one of them. A very significant moment.

Where we have the death in verse 2 of James. The martyrdom of the first apostle. Not the first Christian martyr. That is Stephen, as we already refer to in reading and reflected upon there.

But the first of the apostles and the apostolic band. To give their life for the cause of Christ. And to wear the martyr's crown.

[4:47] And James is put to death by this man in verse 1. Herod, the king. I want us just to reflect in three ways with regards to what we have here in verse 2 or verses 1 and 2 specifically.

But just to refer to different elements of the context as well. First of all, we recognize the confrontation. The confrontation. Verse 1.

About that time Herod, the king, laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. The first thing that we have here in the book of Acts in chapter 12, verse 1.

Luke gives to us a marker. About that time. And he is rooting this in the desire to give an accurate summary of the things that occurred.

And he speaks of about that time referring to the events of the previous chapter. And the things that occurred in these days. And in reference in verse 28 or verse 11.

[5:50] In the days of Claudius. Claudius was the emperor. And he speaks of the events that are going on. And he is recording historical fact. And we made notice of that in the morning.

The Bible records for us historical fact. He is telling us these things happened. And when these things happened. And what occurred here is that Herod the king.

Who has this political position. And this position of administration and government. He laid violent hands on the church.

And what is unfolding in verse 2. Is that first apostolic martyrdom. The first martyr was of course Stephen. Who was put to death by the religious authorities.

The difference here being is. It is a secular power. And it is politically motivated. Rather than religiously motivated. Although Herod tries to cloud this to some degree.

[6:53] But we find in verse 3. He saw it please the Jews. That's politics. He is manipulating the situation. And he is here in this position.

As a position of secular authority. And here is the secular authority. Turning against the gospel in hostility. In a violent hostility.

To persecute the church. To persecute the leaders in the church. To seek to do damage to the cause of Christ. And the church of Jesus Christ.

And the man who is responsible in verse 1. Is called Herod. This is a familiar name to us in the New Testament. It speaks to a family or a dynasty.

We noted earlier today of Pilate. Who was there as the governor. As the representative of Caesar. But the Romans allowed the different rulers.

[7:50] And kings to have some element of influence. Still in the places where they conquered. They were themselves to serve the emperor. And to serve the governor. But they allowed these local kings.

And these local rulers to still exist. If they committed themselves to obedience to Rome. And the Herods did this. The Herods themselves.

Come from Herod the Great. Who we find in Matthew chapter 2. As the king who put to death the little children. When he heard about the birth of the Messiah.

That wicked and cruel and evil act. And it was that man Herod the Great. Who was the grandfather of this Herod.

And he was himself engaged in great acts of evil. Herod the Great. The Herod we have here is referred to in history. As Agrippa the First. And he is a nephew.

[8:52] A grandson of Herod the Great. A nephew of Herod Antioch. Herod Antioch. Antioch is the Herod that we find in the Gospels. Who puts John the Baptist to death.

This Herod. Herod Agrippa. Grew up in Rome. And he grew up in Rome. After the death of his father. His father was called Aristopolis the Fourth. His father was put to death by Herod the Great. I think that tells you all you really need to know about Herod the Great. That he put to death his own son. Aristopolis the Fourth. Here is Aristopolis the Fourth's son.

Grandson of Herod. And after the death of his father he is sent to Rome. And he grows up and he is reared and educated in Rome. And as he is, he befriends two future emperors.

To his own benefit. The first of the emperors who he had befriended was Gaius. Who gave to Herod Agrippa. The region and the reign that had belonged to his uncle Philip.

[10:02] And so he begins by ruling over this same region. And then this area territory is added to him. And he maneuvers politically.

And he maneuvers politically. Until the point of where we have Claudius. The second future emperor he had befriended. In AD 41. Who gave to Herod Agrippa.

A region and a role. That was comparable to that of his grandfather Herod the Great. And none of the Herods had come to that point.

That this man had come to. And it communicates to us something. Of how he was a highly skilled political motivator. And maneuvering in that different sphere and situation.

He engaged himself in that way. And unusually for the Herods. He was largely well received by the Jews. Most of the Herods were not well received.

[11:03] They were seen as being taken from the Edomites. And were very unpopular. But this man knew how to engage politically.

He knew how to deal with people. He knew how to drive his own self-exaltation. By dealing with people. And favoring them for his own benefit.

And here we see this in verses 1 to 3. Where he is exploiting here. The tension that existed between the Jews. And the Christians.

And he begins the persecution of the Christian church. By the state. Something that is going on throughout the world. And will continue going on throughout the world.

Christians all over the world. And in different countries in the world. Are being persecuted. By administrations.

[12:03] And governments. And monarchs. And what we find here is how expendable. The Christian church. Is viewed by ungodly rulers.

The willingness to persecute. And hear this great turning point. In the history of the world. In the history of the Christian church. In verse 1.

It's recorded by Luke in this way. The king laid violent hands. On some who belong to the church. And this continues to go on. To this very day.

And to the end of the age. It's quite challenging for the Christians. Quite challenging for the church. For we know that our call. Is to be positive. And to be salt and light.

To be good citizens. And be part of our communities. To shine. To pray. To give obedience as much. As we possibly can. To our rulers.

[13:01] And our authorities. But not to be naive. Or to think. We're to understand. We're to discern where we are.

In the world. So often. People in the church. Think that. They belong to a different place. To where they belong in the world. They want some kind of comfort.

And affirmation from the world. Jesus told us. That the world is hostile to us. That we're on the outside. Jesus spoke of.

The enmity of the world. Against the church. We are to discern danger. And we are to be very careful. With regards to politics.

And rulers. And authorities. And a different kind of motives. That they have. And their willingness to turn. Against the gospel. For their own ends.

[14:02] Yet. It cannot in any way. Diminish from us. Our responsibility. To shine. To pray. And to seek.

To do good. And to witness. Of grace. We have the confrontation. Secondly. We have the execution. In verse 2. He killed James.

With the sword. Herod's persecution. Focuses. First of all. On two people. One. In verse 2. James. And then. Secondly.

In verse 3. Peter. And he. Engages in this. Persecution. And we are told. In verse 2. That he kills James. With the sword.

Now. This is. A turn of phrase. To describe. In that kind of language. That the executioner. Comes out. With the sword.

[14:54] And cuts off the head. Of the condemned man. And beheads him. The charge.

That Herod has. Is that. He's claiming. James is. Guilty. Of leading astray. The worship. Of God. The Jews are pleased. With this. In verses.

2. And 3. He saw. That it pleased. The Jews. This was during. The days of unleavened bread. Which ironically. Was a time. In which. Capital punishment.

Could not be enacted. And yet. Here are the Jews. The population. Stirred up. And James. Pays the price.

With his life. James. This is. Verse 2. Spoken to us. And described for us. As the brother of John. And that's to distinguish. And for us.

[15:51] To be clear. In our minds. Who it is. Here. Who has been put to death. And not to be confused. In any regard. Because there are two. Apostles. Called James.

And not only that. But as we continue through. The book of Acts. In chapter 15. And also. In one of our New Testament. Testament letters. We have there. The letter of James.

And that James. In Acts 15. And the letter of James. Is the brother. Or half brother. Of our Lord Jesus Christ. This James. Is the fisherman.

The brother of John. The son of Zebedee. He is one of the men. Who Jesus came to. Very early. In the public ministry.

And he said to them. To leave their fishing nets. That he would make them fishers of men. He said to them.

[16:47] Come. Follow me. They had been partners. Together with Andrew. And Peter. And their father. Zebedee. Was involved too. And these four men.

James. John. Andrew. And Peter. They leave the nets behind. They leave their work. And their livelihood behind. They leave it all behind. And they follow Jesus. And they become part of this. Apostolic band. And. Twelve men. Who follow Jesus. Day by day. Week by week. Month by month. And year by year. Who were with him. In all the different experiences.

Of his public ministry. And even within the context. Of his public ministry. Amongst the twelve.

There was a group. That became an inner circle. And that inner circle.

Became very prominent. And they took positions. Of great privilege. And amongst these three. We have Peter.

[17:47] James. And this man John. They are there. The three disciples. Who come with Jesus. To the Mount of Transfiguration. Who see Moses and Elijah.

And then have that great experience. In which they are overwhelmed. And then they lift their eyes again. And they see only Jesus. They are there. As part of that.

Private healing. Of Jairus' daughter. Where everybody else. Is left outside. But Jesus takes with them. These three men. And they are there. Close to him.

In Gethsemane. He takes the disciples. With him. Then he takes Peter. James and John. Then himself.

Into his anguish. These three men. Are closer than anybody else. Jesus calls. James and John.

The sons of thunder. To speak something.

[18:43] With regards to the kind of seal. They demonstrate. It's recorded for us. Again by Luke. In chapter 9. Of his gospel. In verse 54. When his disciples.

James and John. Saw it. That's the Samaritans. Not welcoming Jesus. They said to him. Lord. Do you want us to tell the fire. To come down from heaven. And consume them. This is the kind of seal. They had. James and John. When the Samaritans. Are not receiving Jesus. Not welcoming Jesus. They say to Jesus. We'll take fire.

Down from heaven. And we'll destroy them. This is to display. That seal. They have. They're quite close to the Lord. In another way too. Because we learn.

At the crucifixion. Of our Lord. That their mother. Is a sister of Mary. And we read of her plea. And we'll note this in a moment. In Matthew chapter 20.

[19:39] How she seems to have an access. To Jesus. And to be able to ask them. Here now.

James. John. Peter. And Andrew. They've taken a position.

Of leadership. And here. Herod recognizes this. And he sees. James. And Peter. Taking a significant position. And they become.

The subject of his interest. In the midst of a growing. Christian church. As we read together.

Through the book of Acts. We see thousands. And thousands. Gathering.

Hearts of many people. Being interested. People. In all kinds of different places. Responding to the gospel. A great deal of interest. A great deal of seal.

And vibrancy. To the proclamation. Of the way. The resurrection. The savior. And Herod. Focuses on these two men. James.

[20:35] And Peter. Seeing them as significant. In this movement. And seeing them. As those. Who he himself. Is going to persecute. And he has.

James killed. By the sword. That's his end. That's his death. That's his time.

On this earth. Come to an end. What a cruel end. For a great man. The hands of the political power. Coming against him. His end. His end is. Very much. Echoing the end of John the Baptist. That great man. Who stood up boldly.

And courageously. Who spoke so boldly. And challenged those. Who were in sin. And whose head. Was taken off.

[21 : 33] And his life ended. This is the experience. And the end. For this man. James. And speaks to us.

Of the reality. Of the experience. Of his life. Of what we refer to as. Our cup. We believe that the Lord. Has a cup.

For us. And that cup. Is symbolic. Of God's providence. And will for us. In our lives. And we believe that this is. What the Lord has.

And he calls us to drink. Our cup. And to live the life. He calls us to live. This is. This man's cup. And what we find here.

Is that. In a reading. In Matthew chapter 20. That his mother. Had asked Jesus. To give him honor. In Matthew chapter 20.

[22 : 30] In verse 20. The mother. Of the sons of Sebedee. Came up to Jesus. With her sons. And kneeling before him. She asked him. For something. She said.

Say to these two sons. Of mine. That they're to sit. On your right hand. On your left hand. On your kingdom. And then Jesus says to her. You do not know. What you are asking.

She brings her plea. Her prayer for her sons. To Jesus. She's asking Jesus. To give them honor. Honor in his kingdom.

And thrones. And Jesus is saying. You don't know. What you're asking for. How often we pray. In that manner as well.

That is filled with a certain degree. Of ignorance. Where we don't really know. What we're asking for. And the request here.

[23 : 32] Is a request for honor. And the question. Then is. What does honor look like. In the kingdom of God.

What does it look like. Jesus answered. You do not know. What you're asking. Are you able to drink. The cup. That I'm able to drink.

You will drink my cup. But to sit at my right hand. And my left. Is not mine to grant. But it is for those. For whom it has been prepared. By my father. And then Jesus goes on to say.

You know that the rulers. Of the Gentiles. They lord it over them. Their great ones. Exercise authority over them. It shall not be so. Among you. Whoever will be great.

Among you. Must be your servant. And whoever will be first. Among you. Must be your slave. And he's teaching here. That honor in the kingdom.

[24 : 34] Looks very different. To honor. In this world. And he teaches this. By displaying the honor. That belongs to him. And the throne.

That awaits him. That throne. Is a throne. That comes through a cup. A cup he must drink.

And a baptism. That he must go through. And Jesus speaks of this. Drinking of this cup. As the way that he honors the father.

And the cup that he speaks of. The will of the father for him. Is the cross. It's his suffering.

And his anguish. And he says to James and John. Are you going to drink the cup? The same cup I drink. You drink your cup.

[25 : 33] You've got your own cup. And here is the cup. Of James. His head severed. By Herod's sword. And the reality.

That in an instant. He dies. And in an instant. He is received into glory. Received in.

To that great honor. But he had to drink the cup. His brother's cup. Is very different. John will find himself.

As the last living apostle. Persecuted again. By the state. Found in exile. In the island of Patmos. But for James. It's a sword. And the race is over.

And the great wonder. Of the glory. Of being the first. Apostle. To be put to death. In the name of Jesus. For the honor. Of the cause. And then.

[26 : 36] That is befitting. The great men of the kingdom. Like John the Baptist. Like Jesus. A cup.

A baptism. A horror. An honor. That his life. And his death. Dignifies.

The cause. Of the Lord. Jesus Christ. We have the. Confrontation. And we have the. Execution.

And thirdly. We have the escalation. What follows here. Is recorded for us. As well. In verse three. Herod saw it. Please deduce. So he proceeded. To arrest Peter. Also.

He goes here. And he continues. In the same way. What follows. Is the persecution. Of the church. You think it would have been enough. To put this man to death.

[27 : 33] That that would have satisfied. The evil intentions. Of Herod. But the enmity. Against the gospel. Is never satisfied. It just finds. Greater license.

Deeper hostility. Enmity. Growing. Oppression. And persecution. And persecution. Together. When somebody's on.

The kind of course. That Herod's life is on. And he's engaging. In the kind of actions. That Herod. Herod engages in. Only God will stop them.

And he will. For Herod. Herod faces his own judgment. You can read this. At the end of this chapter. A man that is filled. With hatred. Hatred.

Against the gospel. Hatred. Against the cause. Of Jesus Christ. Hatred. Against the Lord. Himself. In verse 23. Of. Chapter 12. Immediately.

[28 : 36] An angel. Of the Lord. Struck him. Down. And for the church. This was a heavy blow. It is a heavy blow.

The loss of. A faithful leader. Who appeared. To have been raised up. At the right moment. The right man. In the right place. Doing so much good.

Having experienced. Such wonderful privileges. As part of that. Three inner circle. As part of the 12. Of disciples. As one who had left. Everything. And followed Jesus.

And not only so. But so much potential. For the kingdom. As the church. Is beginning here. In the early days. Of the Christian church. There is so much to do. And men like this.

So well equipped. To do it. He's gone. In a moment. In an instant. A heavy loss.

[29 : 34] For the church. Personally. Friend. Brother. Gone. But for the church. The influence. He had.

And exposing. The vulnerability. Of how. The Christians. Think. And feel. When their leaders. Are taken from them. And they begin.

To ask questions. Of. How do we move on? Where do we go. From here? Move on? We move on. The same way. Towards that glory. Towards that same. Honor. That we know.

This Lord. And we're ready. To suffer for him. To know. How. To suffer. For him.

[30 : 29] And engaged. In the life. Of the church. Is not just survival. But a flourishing. A flourishing.

Of the gospel. A flourishing. Of the cause. And the church. Being everything. It should be. A church. In mission. A church.

In focus. A church. Even under threat. Living out. Its very. Identity. The mission. Does not stop here. In Acts chapter 12.

It goes on. And it goes on. And it's driven. To all the nations. Of the world. And all the peoples. Of the world. There is a task.

There is a work. There is a calling. There is a message. There is a race. There is an honor.

[31 : 29] There is a cup. There is a glory. About that time. Herod. They had violent hands. And some.

He belonged to the church. He killed. James. With the sword. There are two men here. And they're contrasted for us. There is one man.

Whose focus of attention. Is on temporary honor. And a temporary throne. And an earthly emperor. And to do all it takes. To fulfill his desires. And ambitions. To get on in this world. And there is another man.

And he sees the true king. And the true kingdom. And the eternal thrones. And he gives himself.

[32 : 26] To the greater glory. And greater honor. There is a choice to be made. Of what it is we will live for.

And what the church will live for. And a call for a seal. And a commitment.

To maintain identity. And mission. And to be willing to drink. A cup. And to receive.

The honor. Amen. May the Lord bless our thoughts. Let's pray together. Gracious and most holy God. We give thanks to you. For your kindness. And goodness. The examples of your people.

We give thanks. For the promises of your word. That you are. Let you speak. Of the great blessing. Of being received in. To eternal glory.

[33 : 24] And honor. And we bless you. And praise you. For all of these promises. Help us then oh Lord. We pray. To live to your glory. And to seek what is greater.

And better. Bless us then we pray. And forgive us our sins. In Jesus name. Amen. We'll sing then to God's praise.

In closing. Psalm 16 verses 8 to 11. On page 17. Before me constantly.

I set the Lord alone. Because he is at my right hand. I'll not be overthrown. Therefore my heart is glad. My tongue with joy will sing. My body too will rest secure.

In hope unwavering. For you will not allow my soul. In death to stay. Nor will you leave your holy one. To see the tombs decay. You have made known to me. The path of life divine.

[ 34 : 23 ] Blessed shall I know. At your right hand. Joy from your face will shine. We'll sing these words. And close with a benediction. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Before me constantly. I said, the Lord, our Lord.

Because he is at my right hand. I'll not be overthrown.

Therefore my heart is glad. My tongue with joy will sing.

My heart is glad.

[ 35 : 47 ] Nor will you leave your Holy One to see the tombs decay.

You have made known to me the path of life divine.

This shall I know, my dear, my child, joy from your face will shine.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. Amen.