

Part 22: Who Sustains the Church?

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If you stop and think about it, the existence of the Christian church is a mind boggling reality. As we've read in the book of Acts, right from the get-go, it was a persecuted minority. It was initially Jewish persecution which scattered it across the Middle East. Then, in the 60s AD, Nero's persecution of the Christian church put to death Apostles like Peter and Paul. By the year 200, it was illegal to be a Christian and hold a government office. In 303, empire wide persecution, known as the "Great Persecution," was what one Roman called, "a festival" of "termination" as churches were burned and Christians were hunted down and forced to offer sacrifices to the Emperor or face instant death.

But then in 313, a young Emperor named Constantine issued "the Edict of Milan," issuing a call for toleration of the Christians. This edict led to the "Christianizing of Rome," as Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the empire.

When it seemed the church would dissolve again from political pressures a century and a half later, King Charles the 8th was given the title that every British Monarch still bears: "Defender of the Faith." The founding of America was largely due to the preservation of the church, and while not an explicit rule, even our most recent Presidential inauguration comes with tones of hope that the church might be favored and protected by the powers that be.

Because of such a history, many secular scholars contribute the life of the church to such political happenstance. But is that true? God has shown us in his word that worldly powers ought to rule in a way that represents his will—but is the church dependent upon worldly powers?

Is the outcome of your faith, the sustaining comfort of your walk with Jesus, dependent upon an alignment and pleasure with whatever the power of the day is? This is not a question for historians, this is a question for Christians.

Today in the book of Acts, we see the death of the first apostle, we see ongoing political persecution, and we see the general hardship of a famine. But what we see most clearly is the unique sustaining power of the church which shapes how we view ourselves as the church, how we care for each other in the church, and how we interact with the world at large outside of the church.

Our passage today includes weighty political decisions, powerful miracles, and nation changing deaths—and yet the real story of this passage today is this: "Area church provides canned goods for a church in need." And yet in this simple provision, God means to show each of us the immense work of God that stands behind the ministry of the church and the comfort of the Christian. We read this story and it's the death of kings and the breaking of prison doors that stand out to us—but this work is no harder, and less influential, than God's gracious gift of a sandwich to a hungry church.

Our main point today is this: **God sustains the Christian by His hand, through His word, and in His church.** Home Depot has lots of hammers on the shelves, but hammers don't build houses. Hammers are tools that master builders use—but they aren't capable of building anything. So too, God uses many means—but he is the builder, the power, and the promise behind the Christian. We will look at the way

in which he reminds us of this by seeing those three chief tools today: **The Power of God's Hand, The Provision of God's Word, and The People of God's church.**

As I mentioned, our text begins and ends with a canned food drive. Saul and Barnabas are up north in Antioch serving the church, but as God reveals to them the needs of the church in Judea, they respond with simple, yet radical generosity: **Acts 11:27-30** "Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul."

But there's more than famine to be feared by the church! Luke continues:

Acts 12:1-5, "About that time, Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church."

Here we see our first point this morning: **The Power of God's Hand.**

Here, we are reintroduced to King Herod Agrippa. He was King of Israel, and yet he was nothing more than a puppet of Roman rule. But we can see how Luke is showing us what real authority Herod did have.

He was the king. He used the official authority of his sword to put to death the apostle James, the brother of John. When he saw how it raised his political clout—he arrested Peter in a cascade of power: he seized him, he put him in prison, he commanded four squads of soldiers to guard him, and he had his own timeline as to when and how he was going to deal with Peter.

To use a modern term, Herod was flexing. And yet, the same church that he was persecuting wasn't bowing to him! The church didn't appeal to Herod for help, but instead to God for mercy.

This isn't a question of permission, but of priority. We can and should appeal to our government when wisdom would have us. Yet, notice how the pattern of the early church was always, "God first and others later."

This is an easy pattern to see, and to say, but it's harder to apply than we would think. I'm ashamed to think of how often my response to problems is: "Check your bank account first, then pray." Or maybe in seasons of anxiety it is, "Netflix and chill first, pray if that doesn't work."

The problem of sin is that it flattens our humanity to only what is physical. We are made body and soul. Sin tells you that when we feel afflicted, turn to what is real. Turn to what you can feel in your body, or to another body that you can see. But Jesus tells us in Luke 17 that if we are looking for evidences of God's power in the world, we will never find it.

He says the Kingdom of God is coming in ways that cannot be observed. The powers and peace of this world are like tufts of cotton candy—they look large and comforting, but the smallest shower causes it to melt away.

We so often look to human hands to help first, but God would have us lift our hands in prayer to him. In fact, this passage is highlighting for us how ineffective human hands are. Herod confined Peter to sixteen guards, bound him with two chains, behind two sets of doors. Moreover, Peter didn't go full Rambo. He's asleep. In fact, an angel has to tell him four times to put his clothes on because Peter assumed this was a vision. Deliverance in this way was not possible in his mind.

But while Peter slept, God didn't. While Peter's hands were bound, God's weren't. In **Acts 12:7**, "An angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side (circle that word, "struck") and woke him saying, 'Get up quickly.' And the chains fell off his hand.

Man's chains, Herod's guards, and the prison doors were nothing to God. Look at **Acts 12:10-11**, "When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, 'Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.'"

Those who wait expectantly on the hand of Herod and the world—are always disappointed when the morning comes. Herod's hands weren't strong enough. His doors weren't big enough. His power not capable enough. The doors opened on their own accord.

Brothers and sisters, there are no such thing as automatic doors in the whole world. Something always triggers a door. Today it's mats, sensors, cameras, apps and keys. But for most of human history you know what opened doors? Hands. And here we see how the invisible hand of God is the surest hope even in the most unbelievable of circumstances.

Notice how this work shocks even the church: **Acts 12:12-16**, "When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, 'You are out of your mind.' But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, 'It is his angel.' But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed."

Do you see the irony here? Peter ran into two gates in this passage. The first gate was the iron gate of worldly power—but that one flew open before him. Yet it was not the gate of human bars that most often keeps us, but the door of human unbelief.

This little door of a small home in Jerusalem—was impenetrable to him. Why? Because the praying Christians didn't believe their own prayers! What a warning this should be for all of us! Appealing to God's power, and trusting in God's power are two different things.

Now, remember this church had probably just gathered to pray like this for James—who was not released but killed. Maybe they were disheartened, maybe they had given up hope—but if we believe in the power of the God we pray to then we must always answer the door.

The story of James is a reminder that God has not promised to deliver us from the door of persecution, but it's not that gate that poses the biggest threat. It's the gate of unbelief. It is not dungeons which threaten our souls—but doubt.

Yet God has sent Jesus to the cross, and caused him to rise, so that all of us might be set free from unbelief and to rise in expectant hope to God. In a bit we will sing “And Can It Be,” and it picks up on this very passage but applies it not to our deliverance from Herod's prison, but from the eternal prison of unbelief.

If God can give us new life in him, if God can give us eyes to see the glory of Jesus—then we know God's hand is able to do whatever he wants here on earth. Sometimes that looks like Peter's deliverance, and sometimes that looks like James' beheading—but each received entrance into the Kingdom—no prayers were unanswered.

But God's power drives us to our knees in prayer, and it drives us to our feet in hope. When we pray to God, he will call us forward and we are to expectantly go and know that whatever is behind that door—it is God's sovereign hand at work.

We might feel foolish answering the door at times. We might feel silly trusting God over worldly comfort. But it is Herod who looks most foolish here. In vain he and the guards look for the prisoner they lost but they cannot find him.

In verse 19 he goes to Caesarea and here we see our second point: **The Provision of God's Word.**

Why does Luke record for us Herod's trip to Caesarea. I think it's for two reasons.

First, I think Herod ran there for comfort. His grandfather had built a magnificent seaside palace there. Josephus tells us it was a testament to the character and power of the Herod's. Just like we often do when we are disappointed, Herod ran to worldly comfort, a vacation at sea, a reminder of his heritage to try and provide himself a sense of peace.

But secondly, we see it moves him closer to the neighboring towns of Tyre and Sidon which sets up this encounter: **Acts 12:20**, “Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food.”

Herod ran to the sea for peace, Tyre and Sidon ran to Herod for peace.

For whatever reason, Tyre and Sidon had become displeasing to Herod but they need his grace why? Because of the famine! They depended on Herod for bread.

So here, everyone can get what they want. Herod in a display of his showmanship can remind himself of his power and provision—he can feel good again. The other towns can appeal to the king and get their own provision of food and feel safe again.

After they cajoled Herod's butler for a meeting, we read this: **Acts 12:21-22**, "on an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, 'The voice of a god and not of a man!'"

It's going perfectly. Everyone is getting to provision they wanted. But the falsity of Herod's grandiosity and his power is quickly shown, and so too the false hope of Tyre and Sidon. And here we see how subtle but how dangerous idolatry is. Should these people appeal to the government for food? Yes, probably! But do they view Herod as just that? No! They view him as God.

So the true God corrects both errors: **Acts 12:23-24**, "Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. But the word of God increased and multiplied."

Here is why I love the Bible from simply a literary perspective. Herod provided food. From his substance, there was a rich abundance. But it wasn't bread for his people. Instead, it was Herod's corpse which fed the worms.

The god of prideful orations was breathless, the god of the people fed worms. But the word of true and living God increased and multiplied.

In one sense this should show all of us our humble state—we are not God. It doesn't matter how rich you might be, how powerful you might think you are, or how morally generous you seem—you will die. And apart from faith in Jesus, you will die unto eternal damnation. Your wealth might buy you a good headstone, but it can't buy you heaven. It can't give you life. This also warns us that every human institution we place our trust in will inevitably find the same end as Herod. It will die.

But this humility is meant to lead us into what is more helpful.

We are a needful people. Life is hard, life is a vapor, life is fragile. We need a provision of peace. And that ultimate peace is to be saved by Jesus and transferred into that new Kingdom, that new Heaven and Earth where there is not disease, famine or death.

But we in our sin have made that King angry. Herod was petulant and petty. But God is holy and righteous and we have really, truly, scandalously sinned against him. He is just, good, and angry.

We need his provision, but we have our own problems. But our true help comes when we see God has sent his son. We don't need to persuade a butler to give us an audience. The Father sent his Son so that we might approach him with confidence!

Jesus hasn't sent to make an appeal to God that he might love us. Jesus is the certainty that God loves all who come to him. The provision for sin is here, eternal life is here! And where do you find such certain confidence? In his word.

Consider Peter's word: **1 Peter 1:22b-25** saying, "...love one another earnestly and from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God for, (quoting Isaiah) 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.' And this word is the good news that was preached to you."

And what provision does this gospel offer? Consider again **Hebrews 4:14-16** “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Do you trust that in Jesus God has provided richly for you unto salvation? Then if you have, trust that you need no other word of confidence to bring you peace in this world. That means we can appeal to our bosses for raises and promotions, we can appeal to people for love and marriage, we can appeal to rulers for benevolent laws and aide—but we never have to see those as appeals to God.

They are all secondary, which allows us to trust in him when we don’t get the peace we want with the world.

Now, you might say in all of this: “Yes, but what of real hurt? Real trials, real need?” Well remember as we saw last week, Barnabas was most helpful when he was most holy. Look again at God’s provision: **Acts 12:25**, “And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.”

There's no such thing as transition sentences in the Bible. Because while that might seem to be all this is—what do we see here? As the church trusted in God, God cared for the church through the church. Holy people, people who rely on God’s spiritual provision will always be the most helpful people for worldly provision. Why? Because we trust in God, not things.

This is our last point this morning: **The People of God’s Church.**

Herod had powerful hands, but the church had helpful hands. It’s true that God sometimes uses big people of power to serve the church, but since day one, God has set to use small people of promise to sustain the church.

The people through which God’s word goes out, and the place in which God’s hand is most often felt is in the church. The church in Antioch took to human measures, they sent two humans, carrying human money—but their trust wasn’t in the power of any of those things. Their trust was that God would use those fragile and limited measures to accomplish his sovereign and powerful work.

When we trust God’s word, and God’s hand, we are able to open up our own hands and hearts with greater ease. Trusting God’s provision for the church challenges our own ideas of provision in the world.

But trusting God’s provision for the church also frees us up to see God’s provision differently. Notice how Peter was arrested and freed, but James was arrested and killed. So who did God love more? Did Peter please God, but James didn’t? Did God provide for Peter but not for James?

God has not promised to endure Peter, James or Tyler in this world. But he has promised to endure the church. God has not promised to endure this local body, Sovereign Hope until he returns, but he has promised to endure local churches until he returns.

When we see that God has provided for individual saints in our own salvation, then we are content when in God's sovereignty some live and some die. Sad as it was for those who remained, James wasn't jealous of Peter. It's only a Christian who knows it's better to be struck in prison and see God than to be struck comfortable on the throne and not see him. James would tell you what Paul tells us: **Philippians 1:20**, "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not at all be ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death."

We only find hope when our lives are lived in light of the glory of God. It's only in light of the glory of God and our eternal reward in him that we can say with Paul, "To live is Christ, to die is vain."

And here's the beauty of how we live when we see God's provision and care for the church: we live sacrificially with eager hope. Do you remember what the people were doing when Peter knocked? They were praying. But they didn't expect God to answer in such a crazy way.

We'll look at how Paul teaches the church to pray later on: **Ephesians 3:20-21**, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

Dear church, our prayer requests are always smaller than God's answers to prayer. When we pray God's promises, God wants to amaze you. Don't domesticate God at the door.

William Carey, the missionary to India once said, "Expect great things of God and attempt great things for God." It is precisely God's sovereign hand which reminds us of our expectations. And it's precisely the glory of God that reminds us that our attempts will never fail.