

God's Politics

Acts 12:20-25

Main Point:

Amidst the world's political chaos, the Lord Jesus continues to demonstrate His just and merciful reign over kings, rulers, and His people.

Introduction:

Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 12. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 12 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John...).

Jesus is still on the Throne! The Importance of the Ascension for Times We Live In

During my growing up years, my parents would always make my sister and I stop whatever we were watching on TV so they could watch the six-o'clock news. This always frustrated me because re-runs of the old batman sitcom were on during that time (my favorite shows). But the deeper reason I didn't like the 6 o'clock news (beyond interrupting the show I wanted to watch), was that the top news story of the hour was always something terrifying. Now this was the 1980's, so every episode was something about a conflict in the middle east, starving children in Africa, the street crime in big cities like LA or New York, the latest developments of the Soviet Union, and the constant threat of nuclear war. For me as a young child growing up in a very loving, but not an evangelical/bible-believing home, the world outside my little world in Bellevue, WA, was on the brink of constant destruction.

Over time, the 6 o'clock news evolved into the 24-hr. news cycle that we have today with major networks like CNN, Fox News, and otherwise. So even today, when I call my father we go through the same routine – he has to turn off CNN or whatever news he is watching. But the content has not changed much: while the politics and scenarios are different now, the feeling is still the same: the world is spinning out of control, growing worse by the day, and the future is as uncertain as ever. In the midst of the challenging days we live in, and the constant bombardment of troubling news, it can be difficult to understand and discern what exactly is God up to. Now as people who believe the bible to be true, we know that in the grand scheme of things all things are under God's control. But what does that mean for us in everyday life, especially in light of the constant bombardment we live under with the 24-hr. news cycle?

As we continue in our study of Acts, it is important to remember that one of Luke's (the author) goals for us to learn to see history, and our contemporary circumstances, from God's perspective. So as an inspired writer of the bible, Luke is not only recording history for us (telling us what happened) but how to understand history as all moving in a direction towards God's greater purposes for our lives and the world. Specifically, what Luke wants us to understand is that the Lord Jesus is not an absentee landlord, but is actively ruling over the earth from His heavenly throne and is eagerly awaiting the moment when He gets to reveal Himself in His glory for all to see.

Now some Christians, and many pastors, will speak about our present circumstances and the future of the world as if Jesus really is absent, and the one the Bible calls Satan (the evil one opposing God), is really running the world. In other words, the power of evil always seems to have the upper hand over the power of good. And the best that Christians can do in the present age, is to just hang on for dear life, until Jesus comes back again.

Despite the way things appear on the news, Luke offers us a very different perspective. And as one who holds to the authority of the bible as the supreme source of truth in the world (which I do, and I hope many of you do as well), I believe Luke is not just giving us his own perspective and his opinion, but is opening up to us a glimpse into the what life under the Lordship of Jesus, and in the present kingdom of God, is supposed to look like. So in our text today, Luke is going to show us what God's politics are about. And my hope is that as we continue in our study of Acts that our minds and hearts will be shaped more and more by God's perspective, and less and less by the anxiety and fear perpetuated by the 24-hr. media circus that inundates our daily lives. Let us pray...

Orienting the Text: Where we are in the story

A brief reminder on where we are in the story of Acts so far. After the Lord Jesus is resurrected back to life, He appears to His disciples and other followers for 40 days, teaching them about the Kingdom of God. They ask the burning question that any faithful first century Jew would ask (one that many are still asking today): is now the time that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel? Jesus answers the question by redirecting them to the wider purposes God has for them: they will

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receive power of the promised Holy Spirit, and when they do, they will be witnesses of Jesus's kingship for not only Israel, but for Samaritans, and eventually the ends of the earth (Gentile people).

And so, Luke has taken us on a geographical journey, from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria (Philip), and now to Gentiles (Cornelius). We are getting ready for another major historical transition from the activity of Peter to Paul (next week). You may recall that in Acts 9 we have the conversion of Saul/Paul, from being a rabid, enraged Pharisee and persecutor of the church (really, a terrorist), into a follower of Jesus. We haven't seen much of Paul since chapter 9, but he will become the dominant personality for the rest of Acts.

But the last few weeks, we have seen how Luke focuses on Peter's ministry and the expansion of the gospel to Gentiles, with the conversion of Cornelius. Last week, Pastor Michael took us through the bulk of chapter 12, where Luke comes back to the church in Jerusalem, which had been experiencing another intense wave of persecution thanks to the leadership of a new king, Herod Agrippa I (the first). We will meet another Herod Agrippa later in Acts (26); but this Agrippa is the grandson of Herod the Great, the one whom we meet in the gospels at the time of Jesus's birth and who tried to kill him.

This Herod came to power in roughly AD 41 and reigned for 3 years (to AD 44). Now, if you were a Jewish resident in the first century, you likely would have seen this Herod as a blessing and political savior of your people. Having endured the corruption of the previous Herod's, this Herod actually was going to lead the nation into a time of prosperity and safety, despite still being under the occupation of Rome. Listen to how the Jewish historian, Josephus, celebrates the reign of Herod:

Now this King was by nature very beneficent and liberal in his gifts; and very ambitious to oblige people with such large donations: and he made himself very illustrious by the many chargeable presents he made them: he took delight in giving; and rejoiced in living with good reputation. He was not at all like that Herod who reigned before him. For that Herod was ill-natured, and severe in his punishments; and had no mercy on them that he hated: and everyone perceived that he was more friendly to the Greeks, than to the Jews...But Agrippa's temper was mild, and equally liberal to all men. He was humane to foreigners, and made them sensible of his liberality. He was in like manner rather of a gentle and compassionate temper. Accordingly he loved to live continually at Jerusalem: and was exactly careful in the observance of the laws of his country. He therefore kept himself entirely pure: nor did any day pass over his head without its appointed sacrifice.

According to Josephus, this Herod is righteous, full of benevolence, and a just ruler. He has won favor with the people, with the Romans, and will bring the nation to a time of greater security and prosperity than previous rulers. Life under this Herod looked very promising!

However, Luke gives us a radically different portrait of Herod Agrippa I. Instead of being pious, just, merciful, benevolent, Luke shows us a king who is wicked, violent, and (like Saul of Tarsus before his conversion), intent on stamping out the church in Jerusalem. He already had James executed; he imprisoned Peter, and threatens the believers!

Given these two very contrasting portraits of Herod, we have to ask the question: which account do we believe? The typical first century Jewish resident or this follower of Jesus named Luke, who claims to be speaking on God's authority. Now the answer for us, living 2,000 years later, seems really is: obviously Luke, right?

But again, think about what it would have been like to be a Jewish Christian, recently having come to faith in Christ and part of the church in Jerusalem, who is also hopeful for the prosperity of your own people, the fate of your own nation. Can you imagine, that maybe, some of these early followers of Jesus, were maybe tempted to think: man, if Peter and James would just tone it down a little bit, we wouldn't be under so much political pressure. We finally have a good ruler, who seems to really care about the fate of our people, and the future of our country! Can't we find a way to maybe see if we can be people of faith in Jesus of course, but also maybe work with a political leader who seems to be a reasonable person that wants to help.

I imagine that these were the tensions that probably existed in the church in Jerusalem between allegiance to Jesus as the true King – true Lord! – and the ethnic, community, and political allegiance that a first century Jew would have towards their own people. Sometimes as readers of the bible, we too quickly gloss over the historical details Luke gives and forget

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the tensions that existed at that time, and don't realize the lessons and application which these tensions that existed back then can actually help us with the ones that we live with right now.

Exposition of Acts 12:20-25: *Herod is hailed as a "god"*

Acts 12:20-21 - Again, pay attention to Luke's details! Tyre and Sidon are coastal cities near Syria, and had long been trading partners with the rulers of Israel. We don't know what exactly the conflict was about, but something happened that upset Herod and he imposed an embargo. Given that there was a famine in the land, this put a political noose around the throats of these other countries and so they came together with some kind of agreement. In doing so, these communities put together some kind of a political rally announcing the agreement and did so in honor of the greatness, the splendor, the kindness of this king. Again, from the perspective of a first-century Jew, this is a good thing, for it shows that Herod Agrippa is a strong, courageous leader, who is putting Israel's national interests first, and not allowing himself to be bullied by these other Gentile, pagan rulers.

Acts 12:22 - Wow! This Gentile crowd is so enamored with Herod, that they are calling him a "god"! Now, no first-century Jew would have done this. But, you got to think that at some level, there might be a little bit of satisfaction that these superstitious Gentiles, under whose thumb Israel has had to live, are willing to recognize the greatness of Herod. Now, keep in mind that this was a common belief among Gentiles; that their political rulers were in fact endowed with divine power and blessings from the gods. Even Herod seems to be enjoying this moment; basking in the glory of their praise and adoration of him.

Watch what happens... *The Lord strikes Herod down*

Acts 12:23 - Friends, God is not impressed with Herod. An angel of the Lord strikes this wicked king down, showing the people – both Jews and Gentiles alike – that Herod is not only a mere mortal, but that he has no favor with the one true God. Luke describes his death as being eaten by worms, which simply could be descriptive metaphor of what happens to the body when it dies. According to Luke, Herod's death is painful, grievous, and deserving!

However, according to Josephus, the Jewish historian, this event was a great tragedy for the people.

Josephus: *[A.D. 44.] Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city of Cesarea. At which festival a great multitude was gathered together. On the second day, Herod put on a garment made wholly of silver, and came into the theater early in the morning. The silver of his garment was illuminated by rays of the sun, and shone out in such a manner that those who looked upon it were in awe. And his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another (though not for his good;) that "He was a God." And they added, "Be merciful to us. For although we previously thought of you only as a man, yet now we recognize your divine nature." Upon hearing this, the King neither rebuked nor rejected their impious flattery.*

He looked upon his friends, and said, "I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life: while providence reproves the lying words you just now said to me. And I who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what providence allots, as it pleases God. For we have by no means lived ill: but in a splendid and happy manner." When he said this, his pain was become violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace: and the rumour went abroad every where that he would certainly die in a little time. But the multitude presently stayed and besought God for the King's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the King rested in an high chamber: and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground, he could not himself forbear weeping.

And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly, for five days, he departed this life...the king was so very liberal, that his expenses exceeded his incomes; and his generosity was boundless.

Now, unlike Luke, Josephus simply tells the story of Herod almost as a tragic morality tale – don't be like Herod!

But Luke tells the story of Herod for a different purpose: to remind his Christian readers that God and the Lord Jesus will not be upstaged by human rulers; and that it is God who ultimately chooses whose thrones will prosper and be taken away according to His own purposes. It's as if Luke is reminding us that only those who fear God will in the end prosper though wicked and ungodly rulers will come and go, in the end, all are accountable to and will answer to the real ruler, King, who is the Lord Jesus Himself. Furthermore, Luke reminds us that God is the avenger of His people! Herod's death shows us that every persecutor of the church will have their day in God's court, either in this life or the next. So as Christians, we

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don't take vengeance for ourselves for the evil that is done to us; that's God's job! And this text reminds us that God will do it.

Now, listen to what Luke tells us next: *Despite opposition and chaos, the church continues to multiply*

Acts 12:24 - In the midst of the turmoil of first century, near-east politics, kings coming to power and then being taken out of power, behind it all here is what's going on, and what ultimately matters: the word of God (the gospel of the kingdom) is continuing to advance, despite opposition, despite persecution, despite ups/downs of the political fortunes of nations (including Israel), God's work carries on. Now, if you have been paying attention to the narrative thus far, Luke's summary here should be no surprise. Luke describes every transition point in the book of Acts with similar wording: despite what's happening on the outside, the word of God increases, the church multiplies, people are being converted, and the kingship and reign of the Lord Jesus extends itself over more and more territory to the glory of God's name.

Luke concludes this section with what seems like an almost inconsequential thing:

Acts 12:25 - If you recall, in chapter 11 we are told how Paul and Barnabas are sent from Antioch (a primarily Gentile church) to Jerusalem with resources to help with the famine. Now they return from their journey. Again, it seems like a minor point, but in light of all that Luke has told us, it's really not: the (predominantly) Gentile church in Antioch ministers to and meets the needs of the (predominantly) Jewish church in Jerusalem. The one people of God, the one body of Christ, in different geographical regions and different cultural backgrounds, are together working doing good, meeting needs, encouraging one another, faithfully doing the work of God while the first century six o'clock continues to report about a world that seems to be falling apart, spinning out of the control, and getting worse and worse all the time.

Main Point:

Amidst the world's political chaos, the Lord Jesus continues to demonstrate His just and merciful reign over kings, rulers, and His people.

Application: God's Politics for everyday Christians

Know your bible better than your politics

Friends, you should know more about the kingdom of God than you do about the kingdom of man. I would encourage you to go to three places: the sermon on the mount (Matt. 5-7), the Sermon on the plain (Luke 6:17-49), the sermon on the hills (Rom. 12:9-21). As a follower of Jesus, and a citizen of His kingdom, you should be intimately acquainted with the political, relational, practical teachings of these texts. If you're thinking, "Yeah, I might know a few verses here and there..." then you need to prioritize them.

Take God's perspective, and not the media's

For every calamity, for every tragedy, for every conflict, for every dilemma, remember that someone is shaping the narrative! Someone is influencing the story. They don't call it "click-bait" for nothing! Be aware! Protect your heart and your mind and your emotions from the ongoing manipulation of the 24 hrs. news cycle. They want your attention, they want your rage, they want your frustration – why? Because it's putting coins in their coffers, and money in their bank accounts! So be selective and discerning, with who and what influences and shapes your thinking/opinions; and always keep in mind that no matter what's going on, the word of God will spread, the church will multiply, and that God's will trumps and triumphs over human plans.

Remember that the Lord Jesus is not an absentee-landlord, but the reigning king who will come again

What does this mean? It means that the LJC is involved in the details of this world, and involved in the details of your life. If you look with eyes of faith, you will see the finger prints of the Lord Jesus and His saving work all over your life.

"GOD'S POLITICS"

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Acts 12:24-25

God's Kingdom continues to advance

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Main Idea: Amidst the world’s political chaos, the Lord Jesus continues demonstrating His just and merciful reign over kings, rulers, and His people.

1) Why do you think God’s judgement against Herod was so swift and severe? What does this tell us about how God views those entrusted with political power?

2) Why do you think Luke continues to emphasize the church’s ongoing growth throughout Acts?

3) Do you find yourself more preoccupied with current events (media) than studying scripture?

4) How might the Lord be calling you to practice His “politics” in your life? (cf. Matt. 5-7; Luke 6; Rom. 12).