

WHAT'S YOUR PLAN?
ORIGINS SERIES PART 3 - IT'S NOT ABOUT US
Dan Burrell

Good morning Life Fellowship. This has been a super busy season for me, and sometimes it just seems in all of our lives we go through a period of time where life seems sane, and then it just goes off the rails, and you just become beyond busy. Last Sunday afternoon we dropped my youngest son off at the Met Station here in Charlotte, and he was escorted to Parris Island, where he now begins 13 weeks of him questioning his biggest life decision up to this point, apart from trusting in Christ.

So we did that on Sunday afternoon at 5 o'clock, and then at 6 o'clock I went to the airport to catch a flight that would take me eventually to Cuba where I go once or twice a year. One of the things that we do in our missions program is provide training to national pastors. There is a group of us who have been doing this for 18 years, and some of what you all have contributed has helped make this possible.

We met with 35 national pastors in Cuba on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of this week. This was the first time that our entire team had been able to get together. So for those of you who give to Above and Beyond, and those of you who have made private gifts knowing that I have a passion for this, I want to thank you very much. And thank you ladies who made up little gift bags for each of the pastors and their wives. That is such a big deal for them and it is so appreciated.

For some of these Cuban people it was the first time they have ever stayed in a hotel. And let me just tell you that when you think of a hotel, and when they think of a hotel, it is two completely different things. If you think about a Red Roof Inn in the worst place of town that would be for most of them the very best place you could ever be.

What we were able to do was spend two days training, and then we gave them a day where they could just be together as husband and wife and as a team just fellowshiping. And the tears and comments and the gratitude was just overwhelming. I came back on Thursday from there. And by the way I had a horrible time in Customs, and I really believe it was because I forgot to get my prayer team together to pray for me for when I would go through Customs. I had taken all kinds of things in my suitcase for the Cuban families, and it was like three hours of grief and negotiations at Customs, and I still didn't get everything through so I had to bring it back. Hopefully I can get it through next time. Anyone who tells you that Socialism is the answer just doesn't know what they are talking about.

I got back Thursday evening and Friday morning I drove to Ashville, because I am chairman of the board of a group called The Institute for Biblical Leadership. This group counsels pastors and churches in crisis all around the world so I had to attend that meeting yesterday. And then I came back here to preach today. Then Wednesday my wife and I and another family are going to go down to Boca Raton, Florida where we are

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going to be part of The Timothy Initiative annual conference. And that is where I will be presenting the check from Life Fellowship. And by the way that video that said we had raised \$35,000 is out of date already. I don't know what amount we are going to end up with, but my goodness, you folks believe in church planting! Thank you so much! (*Applause.*) I am just so excited about that and to know the impact that will bring about.

When you get to travel the world a little bit like I do, particularly in these third world countries, you see the huge impact small amounts of money can make to the difficult circumstances these people live in. My pastor friends in Cuba live on two dollars a day and that includes their ministry funds. That is what they get - two dollars a day, and that includes ministry funds as well as providing the needs for their family.

So the bang for a buck around the world just is tremendous. And I want to thank you again for your generosity. I never dreamed when we talked in March about having monthly emphasis the way we have on church planting and putting Bibles in people's hands that you all would step up and be so generous. I knew you were generous and I knew you all wanted to be a part of what God is doing around the world, but you have done it in spades. You have done it with excellence and with the value that our church has of being extravagant toward the things of God. Thank you so much and I hope you are encouraged. I know I certainly am, and I know that the people our help touches around the world will be encouraged as well. And the brothers and sisters in Cuba have asked me to express that to you repeatedly as well as again this week.

So today is an important day on the calendar. I don't know whether you pay attention to the different days on the calendar or not, and I am not talking about the fact that apparently today is National Sandwich Day. That is not the day I am talking about, though I would urge you to have any kind of sandwich that you would enjoy other than a Chick-fil-A sandwich because they are closed on Sundays. But any other sandwich you wish to enjoy do so with the acknowledgment that you are experiencing National Sandwich Day.

But today is also one of two Sundays that we set aside on the Christian, or church calendar, to remember our persecuted brothers and sisters in churches around the world. This week I heard from our missionaries, Rick and Diana Wilson, who have just come back from Myanmar. Myanmar was a closed country for many years, and now there is great revival going on there. And by the way we are having part of that because we were just finishing up details on getting them - I think it was eleven thousand dollars that we raised - for printing Bibles in their dialect, so that people can have a copy of the Word of God. And we are going to be responsible for getting that translation printed out of Life Fellowship which is such a cool thing.

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And all around the world, whether we are talking Cuba, or Myanmar, or these different places, it is vitally important for those of us who live in a free country, particularly spiritually, that we remember that from the Gulags of North Korea, where right at this very moment there are Christians sitting in forgotten isolation, who have been there literally for years and have no hope of relief; to the oppressed nation of China, where literally they are making people file out of churches so a bulldozer can move in immediately to raze the church to the ground; to the holding cells of the Middle East where believers are awaiting execution at this very moment at the hands of the religious and political Muslims leaders; to the fields of Ethiopia and Sudan and other northern African countries where the ground is still stained by the blood of slaughtered believers; to the dear friends I spent the week with in Cuba, who this morning are worshipping in the living rooms and bedrooms of their homes because they have not been allowed since the date of the revolution to found or construct any new churches, so they have to meet in homes; to even the fact that there are some Christians in America who have lost their businesses and their livelihoods because of matters of religious conscience in areas such as abortion, or the definition of marriage, and their participation level in that.

We ought to remember these. We ought to pause today and think about and pray for those of every generation since the church at Jerusalem who have been called to suffer for the sake of Christ, for the power of the gospel, for the institution of the church, and for the battle for truth. We need to remember them. So let's do that now in prayer.

Father, we do remember, we do think of those who today sit in darkness or in fear, and wonder what is next. And Father, we who enjoy the freedom of this great land, the privileges of something that was completely out of our control, remember those today who have been assigned by you the glorious suffering for the hope of mankind. And Father, I pray that wherever they are, that right now they would sense your presence, your provision, your love and ours as well. And Father, whatever we might be able to do today or in the future to alleviate their suffering or to magnify their message, Father, let us be willing to do that and to remember them today. We thank you for what we enjoy in this country. For it is in Christ's name I pray. Amen.

Ironically today we are in Acts Chapter 12, and we are looking at a passage of Scripture that deals with one of the original tyrants who rose up against the Christians in the first generation of the church. And he did what he could do to oppress the gospel and to promote himself. Last week we looked at this and began our examination of Chapter 12, and today we get to the very concluding verses of this chapter. Last week Pastor Ben began leading us through it as he talked about the power of God, the authority of God, and the control of God. Now as we close out this chapter we are going to look at one of the most dramatic and interesting tales that deals with the demise of this oppressive ruler,

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this vigilante of sorts, who had taken it upon himself to put his heel on the necks of the early church, this uprising band of Christ followers, who are now literally being called Christians for the first time.

We see here in this passage we are about to read the death of Herod Agrippa. And in fact this occasion was so dramatic, so rattling to civilization and the culture at that time, that Josephus, the great Jewish historian, recorded it in his work to give us context of what was going on. I want to give you just a little bit of background, a little bit of detail about Herod Agrippa. Herod Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the king who killed all the babies during the early days of Jesus, trying to get at the Messiah.

Maybe you are thinking grandson - why would it not have been his son? And the reason is because Herod the Great literally murdered his son, rather than see him ascend to be king. He was threatened by him, and jealous of him. This is the kind of blood line that we are talking about. This was someone who was so intent on having power that he would murder his own flesh and blood rather than share the power, or to avoid having conflict with them.

So after Herod the Great died, Herod Agrippa came upon the throne. Herod Agrippa was a wily politician. He was the kind of guy that was trying to please his Caesarean overlord, the Roman Caesar, and at the same time because he was of the Jewish descent he needed to keep the Jewish people happy too. He was a man between two cultures. He had been assigned to rule over the Jews, to expand the Roman influence, and to collect money for the Roman machine. He was also assigned to keep the peace, and these Jews did not like the presence of the Romans in their area. So through negotiations, intimidation, acts of war, through alliances and bribery, and all different kinds of things we have Herod Agrippa working to keep peace between the people he ruled and the king or the emperor who ruled him.

So he made deals. He made a deal with the Roman Emperor Caligula, who wanted to have a big statue made in his likeness, to be placed in the Jewish temple to be worshipped. Herod Agrippa knew that would cause big problems, the people would consider that a desecration, and there would have been turmoil throughout the land. So Herod persuaded Caligula not to do that, but later he changed his mind and was going to do it anyway. Luckily for Herod Agrippa Caligula died before he could get it done. There were even plans to destroy the temple causing lots of turmoil. So the pressure and stress that was going on in Herod's life caused him to seek vengeance on any who would rise up against his authority.

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So it was Herod Agrippa in the early part of Acts Chapter 12 who murdered James the son of Zebedee, James the brother of John, James the faithful apostle. He was the first of the apostles that was executed because of his allegiance to Jesus Christ. Herod then put Peter in prison as we saw last week. And he probably would have executed Peter had things not changed the way they did. Herod's intent was to stamp out those who were following Christ.

At this point let's read what happened here in Acts Chapter 12 and beginning in verse 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. 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.’ 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.*

Then I want you to look at verse 24. *“But the word of God increased and multiplied.”* Here we have this dramatic story of a king who stood before his people, gave an oration, then grabbed his belly and bent over in pain. And when you read what Josephus described it was death by worms. Now we don't know for sure whether ‘worms’ was kind of a colloquial term like we might use for some kind of an expression, or whether there really was a Mediterranean type worm that would get into the intestines of people where it would grow until it became problematic.

Now I know it is kind of gross to talk about dying with worms, and it would probably not be our death of choice. But eventually this ball of worms would get so large that it would burst out like a tumor and it would cause a very painful death. According to Josephus it took Herod Agrippa five days to die, and he died publicly. So people were literally standing around watching him in agony. They would not have had all the medications and pain relievers we have, so for five days he writhed in pain, holding his stomach, moaning and groaning, and then died an ignominious death by worms.

In the midst of all of that in this dramatic story look what you see in verse 24: *“But the word of God increased and multiplied.”* Now before I get into this, may I ask your forbearance just a little. As much as I have wanted to avoid this, I just think there are so many things that apply to where we are today, that I kind of need to explore a little bit of that with us. We do not talk politics in terms of who you should vote for, or which party to vote for, and so forth in this church. We are not going to do that this morning either. But I do want us to examine our own heart attitude toward authority in light of our confidence in Christ. And I think that because we are exactly one year away from an

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election this week that it is appropriate for us, because I think by everyone's definition, this one is going to be a humdinger. (*Laughter.*)

If we thought the last one was crazy, this one is going to be epic. And I think we need to brace ourselves. I think we need to make sure we are thinking Biblically. And I think in order to do that effectively we are going to have to ask ourselves some really honest and really tough questions in the process. So if I say something early on that provokes you a little, may I ask you to be patient and wait until I get to finish my thoughts this morning.

If I haven't provoked you by the end of this message then I won't feel like I have done my job. And I am not trying to provoke you toward anger; I am trying to provoke you toward Biblical thinking. I am trying to ask you to take a breath, give a pause, and to align our actions, our attitudes, our emotions, and yes, even our politics to the unchanging, immutable, infallible, inherent Word of God, and the perspective that comes with those of us who's feet, intellect and heart are to be rooted in that.

So we have Herod Agrippa and he had a conflict going on in his nation. Some people were afraid of him, some adored him, some didn't like him, and others loved him. It was typical politics. Something happened in two of the regions, and part of Herod's job was to expand the regions of the Roman Empire. He brought Judea back under his authority. He was a conniver, he was a wheeler dealer. He knew the art of the deal, so to speak.

And something happened where in Tyre and Sidon they got crossways with Herod. They were angry with him and he was angry with them. And so apparently something happened and he began taking some sort of vengeance on these people. Now this was not good for the people of Tyre and Sidon because they needed the food that was grown in the regions that Herod controlled. So when their food supply started suffering, the people of Sidon and Tyre started panicking. And they said, *'Oh, no, we have made the wrong guy mad. He is going to starve us and he is going to starve our children. Where will we go for food? What if he sends an army?'*

And the panic started escalating. So some of the leaders of Tyre and Sidon approached a guy by the name of Blastus, and Blastus was a chamberlain, or a consul to Herod Agrippa. In other words he had Herod's ear. And many times you know that when it comes to presidents and monarchs and so forth, a lot of the power resides in those who have audience with the leader. And this was the case with Blastus; he had the ear of Herod Agrippa. So the people went to Blastus and they said, *'Would you appeal to Herod and let him know that we love him? Would you let him know that we will be loyal*

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to him? But please don't cut off our food and starve our children. Please, we want peace with Herod.'

Now we don't know what happened for sure, I mean there are some allusions to it in Josephus' work, and we don't know what happened for sure, but there was apparently some kind of truce reached between Herod and the people of Sidon and Tyre. And to celebrate the truce, to celebrate some of Herod's other accomplishments, and also to be able to do some things to catch the attention of Rome, Herod Agrippa decided to have this huge festival. It would involve a feast, it would involve celebration, and it would involve all kinds of fun stuff for the people.

In fact Josephus says that Herod had a special robe made. We see an allusion to it here when Luke records it as "***Herod put on his royal robes.***" But Josephus described it in greater detail because he said, "*It was a robe that was made with silver thread, very reflective.*" Josephus describes this festival and said on the morning in question, the one we see recorded here, that they waited until a certain time when the sun was going to be coming up behind Herod, and he then walked out in his regal, silvery, glittery robe, and the sun caught it just perfectly so that there was an aura around him, that almost blinded the people.

Can't you see this in your mind's eye? Can't you just see Herod strutting out like a big peacock with his beautiful silver robe? And they hear the sound of the royal horns. Herod then extends his arms to his people, and the sun catches the movement on the silver robe, and all the people were wowed. Herod then gives a big old speech and he was magnanimous in his regal authority. I mean he was milking this for all it was worth.

When all of a sudden out from the crowd someone starts shouting, "***The voice of a god, and not of a man.***" "***The voice of a god, and not of a man.***" Can't you just imagine this like at a political rally? Everyone is standing to their feet shouting, "***The voice of a god, and not of a man.***" "***The voice of a god, and not of a man.***" And all of a sudden the whole place erupts and there is Herod Agrippa in all of his glory. What a moment! They were saying that he was a god. And this just stroked every part of Herod's ego as you can imagine. This was his apex and he didn't stop them; he didn't silence them; he fed on it.

And then it hit him. Herod collapsed writhing and screaming in pain. He lost his dignity and his moment of glory. And for five days he lingered and suffered until finally he died. He breathed his last. This man who thought he had it all. This man who thought he could stamp out Christianity. This man who had murdered James. This man who took on Peter. This man whose goal it was to tramp on the church to the glory of himself. Wow, that is dramatic. They ought to make a movie of that, right?

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But what do we need to learn from this? Why did God record this? Why so much drama? And then why that little tack on verse, verse 24 that said, “*The word of God increased and multiplied.*” Here is what I want to kind of say. We need to make sure that we understand that what we see here, what we see playing out in our newspapers today, and what we see throughout human history, is the type and clash of worldviews.

Who is not for the abortion - who is the founder of truth -who is in charge - who is in control - versus all others who would say, ‘*My way is better.*’ That is the fundamental battle of mankind. Is God true, or is He a liar? Can you trust Him, or is He pulling one over on you? Does all authority and power belong to Him, or can it come from somewhere else? And whether it was the serpent debating Eve in the Garden, or whether it was Herod saying, ‘*I will take His glory as mine,*’ or whether in some future day we face it with an antichrist, the battle of worldviews is the battle of the antichrist. It is either God is real, God matters, God is the authority, God is the founder, God is the foundation, God is the source, or it is all on the table.

This is the battle of worldviews. This is what Christianity is about. And this is why those who died were willing to die, because they believed there is a God, His name is Jehovah, and He has a plan for you and for me to be with Him. And yet today how often do we fall into the same trap as the people of Sidon and Tyre, who think that there are other ways for us to experience peace, hope, comfort and provision.

Maybe you are thinking, ‘*Oh, no, no, no. Those are just ancient people. They were unsophisticated. Our generation would not say something like that. Our generation would not heap adulation like that on a mere political figure, on a ruler of any kind.*’ And yet I would challenge you, because I heard this not long ago to listen to this comment at a recent political rally: (Audio recording) “*If Jesus Christ gets down off the cross and told me Trump is with Russia, I would tell him ‘hold on a second, I need to check with the president if it is true.’*”

Wow! Do you mean it could still happen today? That was an actual clip from a political rally. And whether you are for Trump, or against Trump, is not the issue here. The issue is this - how many today are willing to put their confidence in a mere man, a system, an office for their protection, or for their provision?

So I want to kind of talk about that a little bit this morning. I want us to consider three things. Number one - we have to see God for our ultimate provision. What was it that drove the people of Tyre and Sidon to the point where they were willing to say whatever it took to be seen as supporters of Herod Agrippa? They were afraid that they weren’t going to get fed. They were afraid their taxes were going to be raised. They were afraid that their houses would be lost. They were just afraid.

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And you know we demonstrate insight into our faith often by what do, or into whom we turn to in our time of want or need. We need to ask ourselves if we are willing to trust in God more than government. We need to ask ourselves who really is the source of our provision, the foundation for our confidence. And I am afraid that many times we will find ourselves experiencing anxiety and other emotional responses due to the events in the world around us that make us feel insecure, or make us feel defeated, or threatened, or unsettled. And when we feel that way is it because we have lost the confidence in God that we actually are supposed to be trusting? Is it that we have lost our confidence that He is our hope and that He is our foundation?

If we, who live in the freest nation in the world struggle with that, how much more do those in North Korea struggle? How much more do those in China, or in the Sudan, or in the parts of the world where living out your faith is going to create conflict with the authorities that be? If we don't get that in our land of freedom and opportunity and privilege, how can we expect to stand if those ever go away?

So we have to ask ourselves - what is the posture of a Bible believing Christian toward our own provision, our own long term care, our own long term needs. And I am afraid that for too long American Christians, and let me just say this real specifically - evangelicals in particular - have bought into to an unhealthy extent that our hope for religious freedom and the survival of values that we believe are based in Scripture, the protections that we have enjoyed for over two centuries in this country, are within the American system, and the American government.

And I am concerned for far too many that we have placed the greater confidence in Washington and the constitution and the American way than we have in Heaven, and the Word of God, and the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And whether we are Americans or Albanians, whether we are French or German, whether we are Chinese or Vietnamese, whatever our nationality, the best and greatest source of confidence and hope and provision in our lives in light of all eternity is never going to be found in a government. It is never going to be found in a system; it is never going to be found in a king; it is never going to be found in a congress; it is best found in the unchanging, unflinching Word of God. (*Amen.*) That's our hope. (*Applause.*)

That is not to say that we shouldn't be involved in and aware of politics. That is not to say that somehow Christians have fewer rights when it comes to enjoying the privileges of our form of government, and as American citizens. It is not to say that we shouldn't vote and be informed and try to see people who hold to the values we embrace from a Biblical worldview are placed in public office. I am not saying any of that. I will be voting.

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Maybe you wonder who I am going to vote for but I am not going to tell you. Half of you would be ticked off and the other half might think I am crazy. And by the way I have not always been this way, but I am far more concerned right now that I am able to talk to you about truth than about politics. Now I love politics. You know some people follow the World Series; I used to follow election night. I would have my computer in front of me, I would have my phone, and I would have at least one television going. And I would always have to have some chicken wings.

You probably have wings on Super Bowl but I had them on election night. I would have my wings, potato chips, diet A&W Root Beer and it was going to be a good evening. (*Laughter.*) But at some point I began questioning my interest level. And I got to the point where I also realized that people were viewing me through the eyes of my politics more than through my faith. And then I realized that my politics had become a door to many and not a window. And then for others they didn't even want to communicate with me; they didn't want to chat; they didn't want to talk. Now you may ask, '*Are you politically opinioned?*' And I would have to say, '*Oh, yeah, I'm very politically opinioned.*'

And from time to time I can be goaded into having a private conversation about politics, but please don't try that. And I am not going to wear that on my sleeve any longer. I want to wear the gospel. I don't want people to see me as Pastor Dan, the closet Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, whatever; I want them to see me as Pastor Dan, the dude who loves Jesus, a broken mess whose hope does not lie in Washington, but whose best hope has always been in Jesus.

We must not lose sight of the fact that it is not government in this world that is more powerful than the gospel. There is no king, there is no president, there is no congress who can prevail against the truth. There is no army, there is no budget, there is no government entity which can equal the power of the Holy Spirit. And so in short I ask you - what's your plan for provision? Is it political power or is it the power of God? Do we honestly believe what is found in God's Word that He knows the number of hairs on our head and that He is aware of every sparrow that falls to the ground? Do we really believe that? Do we believe that means that He knows us and that He will care for us in our time of need? If we do, then we must not rest our confidence in governments, or systems, or kings, or presidents - but in Him.

Peter did not cower before Herod. James did not recant as he stood before his executioners. People did not stop praying and witnessing and testifying and gathering and giving and sharing simply because it displeased Herod and the authorities. There will always be some who look to earthly power for their provision and their protection,

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but we who worship the King of Kings and Lord of Lords must always remember that our help comes from above.

Make no mistake, in the end God will remind every king and every citizen that all real authority rests on Him. Maybe not so dramatically as to afflict a politician with worms; however there may have been a few that if God is taking nominations I might submit them. (*Laughter.*) In the end that is God's purview and not mine. It is His purview.

I would like to know why God permits some to be in power. I would like to know why some of our brothers and sisters will lose their lives this year for the simple crime of loving Jesus. I would like to know how this works out in God's plan. I don't know that. But I do know this - I trust Him. James trusted Him. Peter trusted Him. He slept the night before he was supposed to be executed. Ben was saying last week that if that had been him he would have been up all night long, checking the doors one more time, wishing he could get out of that place. But no, Peter just sacked out.

Make no mistake, in the end God will remind every king and every citizen that all real authority rests in Him. And while Herod succumbed to an agonizing death, everyone who had called him a god just a few days before now saw him for what he was - just a man, and a lost man at that.

Number two - we must submit to God for His ultimate glory. We need to be mindful of the human tendency to take credit for things that are within the exclusive domain of God. And so that makes me want to ask myself this question - am I really living for God's glory in my life? Are we indeed demonstrating our submission to Him by trusting in Him? Does He appear to be a priority to us in any visible manifestation from the way we handle our money, to the way we handle our time, to the way we handle our words? Or is He a mere adornment that we occasionally parade around wearing Him like a regal robe, or that we pick up and put on ourselves like some cheap piece of costume jewelry?

I think we have to be aware that there have been myriad times throughout human history when Christians were asked for the sake of the gospel to embrace pain and suffering and want and even death, so that God could be glorified and the gospel could be spread. From the early days of human history; from the days of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to the time of the apostles, eleven of whom would lose their lives for Christ's sake; from the darkest days of the Spanish Inquisition to the millions who have been murdered and imprisoned by Communists and Socialistic governments; to those who have been slaughtered by flawed and fake and false religious zealots like the Muslims, the Hindus, and the Buddhists in different parts of the world; to idealistic powers who

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have tried to crush the genuine faith of humble believers who would not bend or bow before their threats, and who went to their fates with courage and conviction and a committed love for their Savior that gave Him glory even in the face of their suffering.

John Hus, the great reformer, who when taken to his execution said, “*What I have taught with my lips, I now seal with my blood,*” and then they murdered him. Those acts of courage inflamed the gospel, as those who watched him willing to die for that, said there must be something to it, because only a fool would die for a lie. Beware of those who sell out for safety. Beware of those who would steal God’s glory and wrap themselves in it. Beware of those who use the power of their office, wealth, education, or pedigree to elevate themselves above others, and even above God.

When God gives you blessings, He should be glorified. When God gives you trials, He should be glorified. I saw Damon here earlier; his wife Debbie has been going through immense suffering as she fights cancer. And yet every testimony she gives she says, ‘*Yes, this is painful, this is hard; I would not have asked for this, but if this is assigned to me, then to God be the glory.*’ Every time she writes a blog article it is ‘*to God be the glory.*’ In her suffering she wants Jesus to be magnified. When God permits suffering He can be glorified, as evidenced by the very death of His Son, who in the agony of the cross for the offense of our sins gave glory to God in His suffering. And so we ought to be willing to do the same.

Third - we must trust God to fulfill His ultimate plan. Here is a fact - we don’t get to understand how God performs His will among us. It is a mystery. People speculate about it all the time. Why did God allow things like multiple wives and slavery? Did God destroy the Spanish Armada? Did He approve of the insurrection of the American colonies against Britain? Could the Manifest Destiny theory be true? Please explain the rise of Hitler and the slaughter of the Jews. Was God behind the Jews return to historic Jerusalem and Israel? Where is America in the Bible? The Chinese Communists have murdered as many people as the German Nazis did; why have they not been held to account? Does God divinely ordain who sits in the oval office?

The list could go on and on and on. Where were these things under God’s ordered direction? Were they under His implied approval? Were they permitted for His ultimate plan? Here is my answer - I don’t know. I don’t know. It is fun stuff to talk about in theology and history classes. I enjoy talking with my students about it from time to time, but what I do know is this - God is sovereign. He lifts up kings and takes them down. He controls nature and sometimes gives it free range. His gospel cannot be snuffed out any more than Satan could stop the arrival of Jesus, and to oppose Him is an act of ridiculousness, and arrogant futility.

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Either He is God of all or not God at all. His Word tells us all things work together for His glory and our good. And even when I don't understand it, even when in the midst of it I am suffering, even when in the midst of it my heart questions Him, in this my ultimate confidence must acknowledge that He is in charge. He is good and He loves me. And on that I can cling, I can hang on, I can stand hungry, I can even stand hurting with confidence knowing that eventually I will know Him and His plan.

And for this early church, they needed to hear that and they needed to remember that, because in the midst of seeing James executed and Peter imprisoned, they also had to look up and see this man, Herod Agrippa, who would steal from God His glory but would be brought down as a reminder that there is one God and He absolutely does matter.

Sometimes we want to restrict God to natural law, but the author of the law is never confined by the law. That is why Christians believe in the supernatural. If you are a naturalist today you forget there is a supernatural. The supernatural is what we assign to the things we can't explain naturally. And if there is natural law there had to be a creator of natural law; it didn't just happen, it was designed, it was created and if you can create it you can change it. If you can insist that others obey it, you can change the rules, you can suspend the rules, you can do what you please - that is God - that is the supernatural. And those who refuse to believe in that refuse to believe in God. So as surely as God allowed Herod to kill James and imprison Peter, God took care of Herod publicly and painfully.

And what was the end result? Look one more time in verse 24 where it says: ***“The word of God increased and multiplied.”*** So here are my questions and then we are finished. Are we trusting God above all for the daily basics of our existence? Do you really trust Him? I mean do you really trust Him? Do you trust Him more than the government? Do you trust Him more than that job you hold right now? Do you trust Him more than your IRA, your retirement and your 403b and your 401k? Do you trust Him for your daily provision? What would it take to get you to sell out? A stock market crash, a pink slip, a cancer diagnosis, the betrayal of a friend, a pastor who lets you down, an inconvenience on a Sunday morning - what is your price to make you doubt God, to make you say, *‘Maybe there is someone better.’ ‘He speaks not as a man, but as a god.’* What's your price?

Secondly, are we actively worshipping Him in word and action above all else? Is He a priority? Are we actively worshipping Him in word and action above all else? Above our efforts, our talents, our treasures, all the things that we think are important, do we put Him above those?

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Number three - are we willing to acknowledge His authority in the ark of our lives in human history, and not only in the great ark of our existence but even in the larger ark of human history? When you see God's plan in human history you see how He brought His Son, protected Him from those who would have murdered Him before He was ever born, who wanted to disrupt His life from the moment of the promise in Genesis Chapter 3, to His resurrection in the New Testament. Satan wanted to interrupt that, and you better believe today that he wants to interrupt the gospel in your life and the power of the gospel in the lives of the redeemed. And we cannot let it happen. Why? It is because we are the earthen vessels in which God has entrusted the gospel so that others might hear and believe.

And so to this early church He gave this demonstration, this immense object lesson as Herod was struck down. The work of the gospel cannot be impeded by any man or government; we cannot allow ourselves to be held hostage by the whims of politics. We must not let the fear of the unknown paralyze us from speaking the truth. We must not let cultural shifts retrain our theology. We must not let the threat of economic hardship undermine our values. We must not let the intimidation of those who believe in lies to silence us who believe in the truth. We must not let the fear of man overtake our faith in the Word of God. We must not trust in the government more than in His goodness. We must not worship at the feet of temporary rulers and ignore the authority of He who has ultimate control over every king and every kingdom. We must not offer our allegiance to earthly systems and powers that belong first and foremost to He who created them and created us.

We need to have a greater fear of missing God's plan for us than for what the world might threaten to do to us. We must face opposition with courage, ugliness with kindness, and demands of compromise with steely willed conviction. We must worship rightly, speak truthfully, suffer patiently, submit to God willingly, and trust in Him fully.

So what is your plan? What's your plan when the king turns against you? What's your plan when you are in the minority? What's your plan when suffering awaits? What's your plan when fear is rising in you? What's your plan when people all around you are following a lie? What's your plan when seductive words are flattering you? What's your plan when the bride comes to exchange your hope in Him for the promise of comfort or convenience? Don't fear - worship God. Obey His Word. Trust His plan. Follow His lead. Speak the truth. Take a stand. Suffer for His glory if needed. And when we do, look around and watch the Word of God increase and multiply to all who will hear.

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My question for you is - what's your plan? In a moment we are going to stop and pray and we are going to ask ourselves what God wanted us to hear. I hope some of you will walk out of here with your feet more firmly planted on your faith in Christ. I hope if you do not know Christ and you walk around in bewilderment and wonder what life is about and where you are headed, that you will come and pray with me, or you will go out to the prayer room over to the right in the foyer, or go to the Next Step Station and tell them you want to know why you am here, you want to know where you are going when you die, you want to know the meaning of truth, you want to know this Jesus. We will show you from the Bible what it means to be part of the family of God.

Maybe you are in a situation where you are suffering. Maybe you are in a situation where you are curious. Maybe you are in a situation where you are just fumbling around wondering if He is really real, and if you can really trust Him. Maybe you find yourself putting your faith and trust in emptiness and things that you know don't matter, and you would say today you want to realign yourself with this book. And may we see the Word of God take root and multiply and increase because we won't bow and we won't bend. And on this book we take our stand. Let's stand for prayer.

Father, we love you. Thank you for your Word. Help us, Father, in this generation to be as James, to be as Peter, to be as John and the rest of the apostles, who with a quiet conviction spoke with a voice of confidence and said they believed. As Joshua said, 'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.' Father, may we never compromise our values or deals with man, security, prestige, the illusion of power, or temporary benefits. But Father, with the calm confidence that can only come through your Holy Spirit, let us take the gospel to every creature in this country and in every corner of the world. Let us be people of generosity and compassion, let us be people with voices of conviction and courage. Let our lives be modeled to consistency and temperance. And Father, may you be glorified in us as we live out our faith confidently trusting in you. Father, this morning whether we are taking communion, whether we are praying, whether we are worshipping, whether we are speaking counsel, move us to do in us and through us what you want to accomplish as part of your divine plan. For it is in Christ's name I pray. Amen.