


ACTS 12:20-24

MEN WHOM GOD KILLED! STOLEN GLORY!

“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.

“But the word of God increased and multiplied.”¹

tolen valour is a despicable crime that has become somewhat prevalent in Canada.² “Stolen valour” refers to an individual who claims to have served with the military, usually claiming to have served during combat, when in fact there was no such service. Most frequently, the individuals wear ribbons and/or medals indicating meritorious or valorous service. They are usually tripped up because the decorations are improperly displayed or the individuals are unable to relate the details of their supposed service.

Among the professed people of God, there is often observed a form of stolen valour. Individuals may inflate their service before the Lord or they may claim spiritual qualities that are not evident in their lives. God does expose such individuals—some sooner rather than later. More serious than divine discipline of His own people is the harsh and immediate judgement often meted out when an unbeliever exalts himself or herself to equality with God.

Throughout Scripture are found warnings reminding God’s people that He is a jealous God. Consider a few instances when God speaks thusly. Admittedly, the passages to which I appeal are found primarily in the Old Testament, but it does not lessen the import of the warnings that are provided.

Weigh the stern words written in Exodus, as God speaks through Moses, and thus speaks to us, even in this day. “Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods” [EXODUS 34:11-16].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² For information on this crime, see the following sites and/or news items: <http://stolenvalour.ca/>; Ian MacAlpine, “Canadian military imposter turns in uniform after years of pretending to be officer,” Toronto Sun, February 22, 2017, <http://www.torontosun.com/2014/02/05/canadian-military-imposter-turns-in-uniform-after-years-of-pretending-to-be-officer>, accessed 22 February 2017; Kristy Kirkup, “Soldier impersonations ‘all too common,’ group says,” CBC News, Nov 14, 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/soldier-impersonations-all-too-common-group-says-1.2835550>, accessed 22 February 2017; Cayley Dobie, “Stolen Valour: A Burnaby RCMP officer makes it his mission to find out the truth behind one man’s tales of wartime bravery,” Burnaby Now, <http://www.burnabynow.com/news/stolen-valour-1.1527994>, accessed 22 February 2017

Again, God warns His people as Moses writes in the Book of Deuteronomy, “Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” [DEUTERONOMY 4:23, 24].

Soon after giving this warning, Moses iterated this selfsame truth when he wrote, “It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you—for the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God—lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth” [DEUTERONOMY 6:13-15].

Near the conclusion of the days when the Messiah should be revealed, God spoke through a prophet named Nahum. As that ancient prophet opened his prophecy, God warned:

“The LORD is a jealous and avenging God;
the LORD is avenging and wrathful;
the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries
and keeps wrath for his enemies.
The LORD is slow to anger and great in power,
and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty.”

[NAHUM 1:2, 3a]

God does not tolerate stolen valour when the valour stolen is actually an attempt to rob Him of the glory that is due His Name. Herod was a bad man who overstepped the boundary between mankind’s deserved humility and praise that should be reserved solely for the Living God. There is a lesson for each of us in the events surrounding a day when a king accepted praise that should have been ascribed to God, making himself guilty of stolen glory.

THE SIN — “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’” [ACTS 12:21, 22]! Necessity often imposes humility upon people. Tyre and Sidon had in some way angered Herod; however, they sought peace “because their country depended on the kings country for food.” It was one of those cases of discretion being the better part of valour.

Take a moment to consider how modern governments compare with Herod. I don’t mean to imply that modern government is tyrannical; I do mean that all governments tend to migrate toward oppression of those governed. Western society does not differ from the people of Tyre and Sidon as much as we might imagine. Presidents and prime ministers are often quite vain; they are not interested in hearing the truth concerning their actions. They have power, and they are prepared to use that power to compel obedience to their wishes, perhaps even their whims.

For eight years, the United States had a President who revealed that he was quite petty; he was quick to take out his anger on reporters and news channels if they failed to pay him proper homage; not even leaders of other nations were exempt from his caprice. To verify his presidential caprice, one need but inquire of Middle Eastern leaders, both friendly and hostile. Under this President government agencies were weaponised to punish individuals and groups who disagreed with him, and he used the power of office to reward those who flattered him.³

³ E.g., Raven Clabough, “Obama Calls His Critics ‘Enemies,’” New American, 26 October 2010, <https://www.thenewamerican.com/usnews/politics/item/3439-obama-calls-his-critics-enemies>, accessed 9 March 9, 2017

Influenced in no small measure by the pettiness of the President of whom I speak, voters responded by electing a President from another party. However, the man they chose is proving to be as vain, as petty and as capricious as the one he replaced. Perhaps a different set of people are immediately outraged by the antics of this President, but all Americans should be outraged and concerned at the disgrace brought to the office when it is permitted to be used for unworthy goals. We are no longer surprised when leaders reward their friends or punish their enemies. The little people are silent, keeping their feelings to themselves, just going along to get along.

Herod Agrippa I was a tyrant; he was noted for his cruel, vicious, avaricious nature. Shortly before the events in the pericope before us today, Herod had initiated a persecution against the faithful in Jerusalem. Go back to the opening verses of this chapter where we read, “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 that 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” [Acts 12:1-5].

You do recall this story of how Herod ordered James, the brother of John, to be executed. James was likely beheaded. Herod, seeking to be recognised as Roman, is known for aping the Roman style of execution. He had been educated in Rome, and in time became a confidant of Caligula, and later with Claudius. After he had ordered the execution of James, Herod realised that his despicable action pleased his Jewish subjects, so he ordered Peter jailed. Herod’s intent was to execute Peter. However, not wanting to offend Jewish sensibilities, he was compelled to wait until after Passover. After all, one could not desecrate a holy day!

There followed that spooky business of a late-night jailbreak. No one could give an adequate explanation for how Peter, the prisoner, had managed to break out of jail the night before his scheduled execution. Despite being chained to two soldiers and with sentries posted in front of all doors, Peter had disappeared. Despite searching for the prisoner, Peter was not found. Herod had no problem ordering that the sentries were to be examined. Examination would be by torture. If these soldiers had any information, they would tell everything. However, despite “examination,” Peter was not found. So, Herod order the sentries to be executed.

Sometime after this, Herod had a spat with the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. Though it had been destroyed by Alexander, Tyre had been rebuilt, regaining its position as a centre for international trade. Likewise, Sidon was a prosperous city noted as a commercial centre.⁴ However, the cities were dependent upon the Judean territories for grains. Angered by these independent city-states for an undisclosed reason, Agrippa withheld trade; and since the cities had allowed themselves to become dependent upon Judean grains, Agrippa’s economic embargo worked. The republics sued for a trade agreement, tantamount to an economic nonaggression pact. While Tyre and Sidon were sufficiently wealthy to pay the increased prices for grain from other venues, it was the course of wisdom to find accommodation with Agrippa.

The pompous ruler had won his economic battle. In order to implement the treaty, Agrippa was invited to deliver a speech before the assembled dignitaries of the two cities. Reading the text, one can only wonder why Luke is so careful to include such a minor detail as the fact that Agrippa donned his royal robes. A contemporary source reveals the reason for this curious inclusion of such a minor detail.

⁴ See Craig S. Keener, **Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Vols. 1 & 2: Introduction and 1:1-14:28** (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2012-2013) 1958-1959

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The date was August 1, 44 A.D., five months after Peter's escape from prison.⁵ Josephus explains that Herod donned a robe woven with threads of silver. Coming into the amphitheatre early in the morning, he stood so that the rising sun would reflect off his body. The spectacle was overpowering for the audience. However, leaving nothing to chance, Agrippa had planted sycophants throughout the audience. When he appeared, they began to shout that he was a god. Josephus affirms that they were shouting out that he was a god, adding that they also shouted, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature."⁶ This serves as independent confirmation of Doctor Luke's observation that the crowd was shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man [ACTS 12:22].

This was the final straw so far as God was concerned; Herod was judged immediately. Josephus notes, "Upon this, the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery."⁷ What is fascinating about Josephus' observation is that he relates that an owl sat on a rope over Herod's head, noting that Herod "understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him; and fell into the deepest sorrow."⁸ "Angel" is often translated "messenger," indicating a common understanding of delivery of a divine message. I accept the biblical account as accurate, regardless of what may or may not have been witnessed by those watching. God directs Doctor Luke to write, "Immediately, an angel of the Lord struck [Herod] down, because he did not give God the glory" [ACTS 12:23a].

What was Herod's sin? The answer depends upon whether we mean in addition to murder, theft and assault against the faithful; Herod was guilty of all these sins—and much more. Nevertheless, the final sin for which God said, "Enough!" was his failure to give God the glory due His Holy Name. The English Standard Version that I use charges that Herod "did not give God the glory." I appreciate how one translation has dealt with the Greek text, translating Luke's words as, "he had usurped the honour due to God."⁹ Luther employs a striking phrase of this sin, identifying it as "refusing to let God be God."¹⁰

Let no one presume on God's goodness and grace. To be sure, God does not instantly strike down every ingrate nor every individual who usurps his glory. However, He does hold mankind accountable; and He is able to judge when it pleases Him. Everyone is well advised to heed the warning Peter issues, "Do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" [2 PETER 3:8, 9].

Let me pause to warn any who listen that refusal to permit God be God is a grievous sin. Presuming against the grace and goodness of the Lord invites divine judgement. God will not surrender His glory to anyone. When people imagine that they are in control of their lives, they deceive themselves. No man has a promise of tomorrow, nor even of what will happen today.

⁵ See Ben Witherington III, **The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1998) 389-390

⁶ See Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, **The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged, Antiquities 19.8.2:343-52**, Hendrickson, Peabody 1987

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ **The New English Bible** (New York, Oxford University Press; Cambridge University Press 1970)

¹⁰ Philip S. Watson, **Let God Be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther** (Muhlenberg, Philadelphia 1949), cited in Jaroslav Pelikan, **Acts, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible** (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI 2005) 150

Pharaoh exalted himself against the God of heaven [see **EXODUS 9:17**]; his self-exaltation resulted in death for himself and for many of his people. Belshazzar lifted himself up against the Lord God [see **DANIEL 5:22, 23**]; his self-glorification resulted in the overthrow of his kingdom by the Medes and the Persians. Jesus warned anyone who would follow Him, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” [**MATTHEW 23:12**]. Driving home that need for humility, Jesus said on yet another occasion, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” [**LUKE 14:11**]. Remember that “Christ did not exalt himself” [**HEBREWS 5:5**].

God’s response to arrogance displayed by kings and national leaders, self-appointed or otherwise, is swift, ruthless and pitiless. His judgement of self-exaltation is an ugly desecration. Herod becomes food for worms. Hitler perishes in a bunker, dead by his own hand. Mussolini is seized by his subjects and hung upside down. Trujillo is ambushed, gunned down by members of his own armed forces. Saddam Hussein is dragged from a spider hole where he attempted to hide and is shortly hanged. Gaddafi is dragged wounded and bloodied from a storm sewer where he was hiding before he is killed by a bullet to the head. Tyrants have no future; and yet, they continue to exalt themselves.

Doctor Luke writes about positive things that Jesus said concerning rulers, just as he also writes of times when Paul was delivered through righteous acts performed by rulers, know that rulers can overstep the responsibilities that God has assigned. When national leaders forget their responsibility before the Living God, they will fail to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” [**LUKE 20:25**]. Having failed to fulfil what God expects of leaders, they will learn that God shall deal with them, doing so harshly. God always holds demagogues and despots to account for hindering the message of life. Know that self-exaltation, puffing up oneself, is the first step leading to opposition to the Lord God and to His work.

Jesus told a parable on one occasions, warning those who imagine themselves to be important and who treat others with contempt. “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” [**LUKE 18:10-14**].

Apparently, stolen glory is a serious matter in the eyes of the Living God. I warn those who occupy high office within the cities, the provinces and the nation, those who are captains of industry and who are accustomed to deference from others and especially those who wear bright robes of ecclesiastical hierarchy, do not imagine that you can ignore responsibility to honour God. Among the churches of our Lord are many who need to be reminded of the warning delivered by the Apostle, “By the grace given to me I say to everyone among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think” [**ROMANS 12:3**].

Among the faithful, many fellow believers must be reminded frequently, “Get along with each other; don’t be stuck up. Make friends with nobodies; don’t be the great somebody” [**ROMANS 12:16, THE MESSAGE**]. It is not just those who wear a mitre and gold chains with symbols of their office who exalt themselves; many who occupy the pew are puffed up, thinking they are somebody and looking down on others among the faithful. Let Herod serve as a warning.

THE SENTENCE — “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” [ACTS 12:23]. Despite speaking of divine judgement, it is necessary that we should think about judgement in a personal manner. Paul was haled before Felix and Drusilla where he was called to give his apologia for the Faith. I might have imagined that the Apostle would speak of peace, of joy, of the goodness of the Lord. Instead, I read that Paul “reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgement” [ACTS 24:25]. If we are ever to make an impact on the hardened hearts of mankind, it will be imperative for us to warn the lost of eternal death that awaits the wicked. People do not simply and automatically go to the Elysium Fields at death. Despite the popular thought that everyone goes to Heaven, no such comfort is afforded in Scripture.

The Master warned frequently that the most of mankind would miss the path to heaven. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned, “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” [MATTHEW 7:13, 14].

Soon after pronouncing this stern warning, Jesus pointedly warned against presuming against grace when He said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” [MATTHEW 7:21-23].

I am quite aware that people often become irritated when we preachers speak of death. “Why don’t you quit talking about dying,” I’ve had some complain. My answer to such complaints has always been, “I’ll quit talking about dying when you quit dying.” I understand that we have migrated from funerals that focus on the great issues that ultimately face each one in order to remind ourselves how good everyone is. Reality intrudes on our idyllic reveries to compel us to prepare for what must surely come.

One of the more sobering warnings found in the Word is that included in the Letter to Hebrew Christians that warns, “Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” [HEBREWS 9:27, 28]. There is a day when each one listening to my voice shall draw the last breath. There will be no appeal on that day, for when the death angel comes, we must answer.

It is the knowledge that death is coming that impels us Christians to warn the lost. We are convinced that all must die; and we are equally convinced that “after that comes judgement.” Everyone must stand before the Judge of the universe. Jesus, in JOHN 5:22-29 warns all who hear Him, “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement.”

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Perhaps one could console himself or herself if death was all there is. However, it is this knowledge that we must give an answer for what we have done that terrifies. Indeed, the Apostle is correct when he warned, “[God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” [ACTS 17:31].

The text before us tells of Herod, who because he was a wicked man must face judgement before the Risen Christ. There, before the Great White Throne, he shall give answer for his failure to believe the message of life. Nevertheless, in the text, he is judged immediately. There are instances when God sends an angel to hold people to account. How awful when God holds an individual to account because of the wickedness that individual has performed. Judgement in this life is never pretty.

I’ve often read the dark words of **ROMANS 1:18 ff.** Clearly the warning points to soul death, to eternal death; however, throughout the chapter it speaks repeatedly of present judgement. That passage begins with the dreadful warning, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...” [ROMANS 1:18]. Throughout the dark descent into behaviour that is always more alarming, more abominable, God throws up roadblocks even as people insist on having their own way. So, we read, “Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity” [ROMANS 1:24]; “God gave them up to dishonourable passions” [ROMANS 1:26]; “God gave them up to a debased mind” [ROMANS 1:28].

When I allow sin to reign unchecked in my life, there is death. The greedy suffer the death of joy and contentment even as they yearn to possess a little more. Those about them suffer the death of love as the compulsion to acquire destroys the capacity for love and happiness in the greedy person. The individual addicted to pornography experiences the death of love and the joy of sharing life as he chases a pixilated phantom, an airbrushed apparition. He soon loses the ability to delight in the wife of his youth. Similarly, the sexually immoral may imagine they are fulfilling fantasies; however, the ability to love—both giving and receiving love—dies in such a person. The drunkard and the drug addict is ruled by a demonic craving that destroys all satisfaction and ensures that no pleasure is left in life. Ultimately, the cravings become so strong that they steal health and strength and even destroys relationships as the addict engages in a fruitless pursuit of a greater high. Death becomes the immediate companion of sinners, “and after that comes judgment.” Let the wise take warning, for indeed, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God” [HEBREWS 10:31].

God sent an angel to judge Herod; and how frightful was that judgement. The text asserts that he was “eaten by worms.” The Word of God does not require affirmation from any other source; however, it is amazing how the Word is so often declared accurate when contemporary histories are read. An appeal to one such contemporary report provided by Flavius Josephus affords additional insight into the death of Herod Agrippa I. Josephus writes, “The distemper seized upon [Herod’s] whole body, and greatly disordered all its parts with various symptoms; for there was a gentle fever upon him, and an intolerable itching over all the surface of his body, and continual pains in his colon, and dropsical (sp.) tumors about his feet and an inflammation of the abdomen,—and a putrefication (sp.) of his privy member, that produced worms. Besides which he had a difficulty of breathing upon him, and could not breathe but when he sat upright, and had a convulsion of all his members.”¹¹

¹¹ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, **The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged, Wars of the Jews 1:656**, Hendrickson, Peabody 1987; see also, Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, **The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged, Antiquities 19.8.2:343-52**, Hendrickson, Peabody 1987

I do not want you to imagine that divine judgement is always so instantaneous, so drastic; nevertheless, judgement is sure. Doctor Luke employs as a motif swift judgement of those sins that seek to halt the advance of the Faith. Judas betrays his Master—immediately his conscience smites him and he hangs himself, falling headlong to the bottom of a ravine where his body bursts open. Ananias and Sapphira lie to the Holy Spirit—immediately they fall down dead. Elymas, a false prophet, attempts to turn the proconsul of Cyprus from faith in the Son of God—immediately he is struck blind.

While I would never say that God always judges the wicked immediately, I do observe that when a people are serving God and the Faith is advancing, He is prepared to defend His Name. Whenever a people have sought the face of the Lord, asking Him to work in them, equipping them for the tasks He assigns, He has fought for them. He did so in days gone by, and He will do so today. James observes, “You do not have, because you do not ask” [JAMES 4:2].

If we do not see such divine defence exerted in our behalf today, is it because we are doing so little to advance His cause? God spoke to a witness questioning his service, that God spoke, saying, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you” [ACTS 18:9, 10]. He is the same God who reigns over His people to this day. If you wonder if God is gracious, I remind you that the God who spoke to His Apostle in the middle of a hurricane, saying, “Do not be afraid...; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you” [ACTS 27:24]; I am confident that the same God is with His own to this day when they are in His service.

THE SEQUEL — “But the word of God increased and multiplied” [ACTS 12:24]. While Herod’s body became a breeding ground for worms, it was a different story for the faithful. Luke’s assessment concerning the advance of the Faith is almost laconic. The good doctor writes, “But the word of God increased and multiplied.” The opposition to God’s workers was removed. Now, the faithful are enabled to move forward.

Because the Faith was growing, because the disciples were testifying to the grace of the Risen Saviour, because the faithful were telling others of the life that is found in Christ the Lord, God defended His people. What is witnessed is nothing less than a practical evidence of Jesus promise given in what we identify as “The Great Commission.” Jesus commanded, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” [MATTHEW 28:18-20]. Our problem is not that the Risen Saviour is not with us; our problem is that we are content to stand on the premises rather than standing on the promises. Jesus commands us to “Go!” and we hide within the sacred precincts of the church.

There is a truth here that must not be neglected. The first churches faced unimaginable persecution. The religious and civic leadership were opposed to their message. They were slandered, jailed, beaten and harried continually. Yet, they could not be quiet. Beaten and ridiculed, these believers would declare, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other Name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” [ACTS 4:12]. Threatened again, those same men will boldly declare, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” [ACTS 4:19, 20]. Perhaps this is what is lacking within modern church life—we have nothing that we have seen or heard! Consequently, we are compelled to be silent in the face of opposition and intimidated by the threats of a Christ-denying world.

When those early saints were beaten, “they went to their friends and reported what the [enemies] had said to them” [ACTS 4:23]. Then, together, the disciples “lifted their voices [] to God” in prayer. They asked Him to supply them with boldness and with opportunity to speak. When at last, the inevitable occurred and their enemies began to kill some of the disciples, the faithful were scattered, fleeing for their lives; however, “those who were scattered went about preaching the Word” [ACTS 9:4]. The greater the persecution, the more widely did the message of life spread. The more widely the message was spread, the greater the number of churches, for “the hand of the Lord was with them” [cf. ACTS 11:21].

According to historical tradition, many of the earliest disciples suffered terrible fates. *Matthew* suffered martyrdom when he was slain in Ethiopia. *Mark* died at Alexandria, after being dragged through the streets. *Luke* was hanged on an olive tree in Greece. *John* was put in boiling oil and afterward banished to Patmos. *Peter* was reputed to have been crucified at Rome with his head downward. *James* the Lesser was thrown from a pinnacle of the Temple before being beaten to death. *Bartholomew* was flayed alive. *Andrew* was bound to a cross, from whence he preached to his persecutors until he died. *Jude* was shot with arrows until he died. *Matthias* was first stoned and then beheaded. *Barnabas* of the Gentiles was stoned to death at Salonica. *Paul*, after prolonged imprisonment, was beheaded at Rome.¹² Opposition and persecution did not hinder the advance of the Faith, the Faith was nourished and strengthened!

An unknown writer spoke of the earliest believers, noting what they suffered because of the One Whom they served. He looks back to the Old Covenant, naming many that were persecuted. He speaks in generalities of some of those saints, knowing that he is describing what some of his readers were then experiencing. Some were tortured, others suffered mocking and floggings, and even chains and imprisonment. He notes that they died in horrible ways. His assessment of these suffering saints was that “the world was not worthy” [see HEBREWS 11:1-38]. Nevertheless, the Faith advanced and churches were established until almost all the earth had heard the Gospel message by the end of that first Christian Century. Opposition and persecution have waxed and waned since that time, and the Word of God increased and multiplied while the Lord was standing with His people.

In the Eighteenth Century, the English Dissenters were persecuted and opposed. The year was 1724 when an English Dissenting pastor preached a sermon entitled, “Holy Fortitude or Remedies Against Fears.”¹³ The young preacher had grown to manhood in the home of a deacon in one of the Dissenting churches. That deacon had been imprisoned when the child was born. Though the young man was enticed by wealthy benefactors who offered to pay for his education if he would agree to be an Anglican minister. Like Moses “he considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt” [HEBREWS 11:26]; “he endured as seeing Him who is invisible” [HEBREWS 11:27]. The minister concluded his sermon with a poem he wrote:

Am I a soldier of the cross? A foll’wer of the Lamb?
 And shall I fear to own His cause or blush to speak His name?
 Must I be carried to the skies on flow’ry beds of ease,
 while others fought to win the prize and sailed thru bloody seas?
 Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood?
 Is this vile world a friend to grace, to help me on to God?

¹² Taken from Kenneth W. Osbeck, **Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions** (Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI 1996) 314

¹³ Kenneth W. Osbeck, **101 More Hymn Stories** (Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI 1985), 30–32

Sure, I must fight if I would reign—Increase my courage, Lord!
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, supported by Thy Word.¹⁴

Who doesn't want to be part of this divine assembly? Who doesn't want to be on the side of those with whom the Lord stands, the side which must always advance in victory? There are some who have yet to place faith in the Risen Saviour. Will you delay too long? Will death come before you have at last decided for Christ and for His cause? Others are called by His Name, and yet you wait to begin living whole-heartedly for Him and for His Name. Is it possible that through your delay you will shrink in shame at His coming? Now is the time for each one to decide for Christ and for His cause. Do it today; do it now. Amen.

¹⁴ Isaac Watts, "Am I a Soldier of the Cross?" (Hymn)