

Words and Deeds: Found Wanting
By Jason Huff
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Daniel 5 (excerpts); Mark 9:33-37; Acts 12:20-24

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 12:20-24. May God add His richest blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “After Herod had a thorough search made for Peter and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to increase and spread.”

There are plenty of stories and books and films that I love that I can't recommend from the pulpit. Some of you might have overheard a conversation about movies and TV series after church a couple of weeks back, and it was peppered with phrases like, “You might like it but...” Thing is, most of us are not that easily offended. Yet the world has a tendency to say, “If you weren't offended by that, how about this?” It's unfortunate because we sometimes can't enjoy a smart and well-written story because it's entangled in so many things that make us cringe.

Today's passage is a little like that. I don't wonder that sometimes we don't invite people to church more often because we don't know what the topic of the day will be. Jesus' love for us? Great day to invite folks. Day when Herod is eaten by worms and dies? Not so much. The truth is, the is far from the most troubling Scripture passage we'll ever find. Scripture is full of truthful stories that are, nevertheless, difficult for us and our modern sensibilities. Why does God's sacred word get so earthy sometimes, so graphic or gruesome? It's because our God doesn't shy away from reality. He created us, and He knows everything we're capable of, not only great goodness through His Spirit but also unspeakable evil.

I am convinced, however, that every difficult passage has something to teach us about God and His ways and His viewpoint on things that we need to know. We may not always like every difficult passage or the message we receive from them. The reasonable explanations for some of the wilder things in Scripture may not satisfy us. But God is not here to cater to us and our desire for a simple, controllable Scripture or a simple, controllable God. He is who He is, and the more we understand of Him, the more we will come to love Him. And as we'll see, some messages in this passage teach us a great deal about Jesus and why we worship Him as God the Son.

The best place for us to start is with a reminder of last week's passage. Herod Agrippa, trying to keep his populace in Judea happy, started another round of persecution against the Christians in Jerusalem. This movement led to the execution of the apostle James and the imprisonment of the apostle Peter. Miraculously, right before his trial and almost certain death, Peter was freed from prison by an angel, and he escaped to parts unknown.

Herod was furious about this, seeing that he'd had Peter locked up with four sets of four guards to make certain that he couldn't get away. When it was clear that Peter had indeed escaped, he had them all executed themselves. While this was brutal, it was actually standard Roman law at the time. A soldier who let a prisoner escape was to receive the punishment the prisoner would have received if found guilty. Herod could have been lenient on them, but again, his cruelty was on full display.

Then Herod has to deal with a situation in Tyre and Sidon. These two cities are north of the far edge of Israel's territory in Galilee. They are on the coast, and as you'd expect, they were seafaring traders. The people of this region has been importing lumber and other goods down to Israel for over a thousand years at this point. While they could get all sorts of things, they were almost totally dependent on Israel for their food supply – and this had been the case for centuries. Long and short of it was, there was a trade dispute with Herod, and they needed to get it resolved to keep their families fed. They made the right connections and approached Herod for a peaceful resolution to their clash.

So Herod relents, and he travels to Caesarea to honor a special holiday for Caesar and to announce to the public the "agreement" with Tyre and Sidon. This festival went on for a few days. As it turns out, the Jewish historian Josephus gives us even more details about this particular event that fill in the gaps. Apparently, Herod liked putting on a show, so he had pure silver sown into the fabric of his royal robes. You can imagine him getting up in front of the crowd to speak for many of them to be near-blinded by this shimmering monstrosity. They don't just praise Herod because he's a good public speaker; it's because, to them, he's got the kind of radiance around him they attribute to the gods.

Both Josephus and the Bible agree that the people were becoming worshipful, that they were saying that they were hearing the voice of a god, that this was no mortal man who was before them. And Herod did nothing to stop him. According to Josephus, roughly halfway through his speech, Herod was hit with incredible abdominal pains, enough that he eventually had to be carried off the platform. He suffered with them for five days before he died.

We don't have any of the medical evidence available to us. Some have suggested that Herod died from acute appendicitis. Others think he may have been poisoned with arsenic. Other ideas include something very literal from Luke – that he has some sort of parasites. All we know for certain is that a man impressive enough to have been thought to be an embodied god was dead less than a week later. And from Luke, we know that this was the direct judgment of God.

This gets us to our first major idea of the morning, and it's this: *God will not be mocked*. God forgives a multitude of sins. Jesus died to make that a reality. No one who turns to Him in honest repentance will ever be turned away. But there are many who do not turn. They say, "My will be done," rather than, "Thy will be done." And on the extreme, you have folks like Herod who are willing not only to be self-centered but to accept and welcome the kind of praise, the adoration, the worship of others.

This isn't the first time in Scripture we've seen this happen. We heard in our first reading this morning the story of Belshazzar, the king of Babylon. The Jews, having lost their homeland in complete defeat, had been exiled there, and the items from the temple meant for the worship of God had been hauled away. And Belshazzar had the audacity to have his banquet guests use them in a feast in his honor praising their gods. God had no patience with that, and Belshazzar knew better. His father Nebuchadnezzar had gone all but insane for years until he acknowledged the God of Israel. That very night, for his arrogance towards God, Belshazzar died.

Throughout Scripture, we see people confused for gods on a regular basis. It happened to Paul and Barnabas, to Peter, to angels. Even Christians sometimes made mistakes about who had appeared to them since angels were so radiant and full of the glory of their Creator. But never do any of them accept worship. We know God's position on this: in Isaiah 42:8, He says, "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols."

God forgives idolatry all the time, because that's what we commit most. We make up our own rules and break the other nine commandments because subconsciously, we act like little gods. We act like we are the ones in control of our destiny and we are the ones who get to choose what is right and what is wrong. God forgives that when we ask it of Him and changes our ways.

But Herod was thoroughly wicked. He had Christians hunted down; he had one of their leaders killed and would have killed another if he'd had the chance. His story parallels that of Saul in many ways. But where Saul was blinded and repented of his awful sins, Herod tried to blind his subjects into thinking that he was a god himself. And not only will God not be mocked, He is always just. We do not always see justice carried out in this life. Yet God will set things to rights. Here, we see it in all its grotesque detail.

There's also a striking reality of that phrase that Herod was eaten by worms and died. That's an idea that's come down through the ages – that the dead feed the worms. It's grotesque, but Luke is making his point clear. Herod may have thought he was a god, but he died just like other men and his body decayed in the ground just like everybody else. In comparison, as Peter said in his first sermon in Acts, Jesus' body did not see decay. He was different. As the Holy One, he was no ordinary human. Unlike Herod, He lives on forever.

That brings me to a secondary point, one that isn't directly mentioned but that this passage helps us to understand: *Jesus is divine, true God from true God as the earliest Christian creed says*. You might think, "This passage doesn't say anything about Jesus at all. How can we get from Herod's death to Jesus' divinity?"

Here's why it's important: most evangelical believers do not understand who Jesus really is. Earlier this month, Ligonier Ministries and Lifeway Research released their 2018 State of Theology report. In their interviews, they discovered that a huge portion of the evangelical church is making theological errors that the early church would have called heresy – literally, things that stubbornly believing them after being taught the truth could endanger your faith and relationship with God.

97% of evangelicals believe there is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We got that one right. But 78% believe that Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God. That's where we've got a huge error. Jesus is not a created being. The Father did not create Jesus. The ancient Nicene Creed says that Jesus is "very God from very God, begotten and not made, being of one substance with the Father." If Jesus was made by the Father, then he is not 100% God through and through. We as humans have human children. We cannot "make" humans. God has a son, Jesus. But He is begotten, not made.

And we can know that Jesus is God because He accepts worship. His parents allow Him to receive worship from the Wise Men in Matthew 2. When He reaches the boat after walking on the water, the men in the boat bow down and worship Him (Matthew 14). The man born blind, after being thrown out of his local synagogue, finds Jesus and worships him (John 9). When the women are greeted by Jesus outside His tomb on Easter morning, they fall at His feet in worship (Matthew 28). The disciples worship him at Bethany just a little ways out of Jerusalem after His resurrection (Luke 24), and then again on the mountainside where Jesus meets them in Galilee and gives them the Great Commission (Matthew 28). In John's vision found in Revelation 5, he sees the Lamb of God who was slain to purchase us from every tribe and tongue and nation on the center of the heavenly throne, and the Lamb – Jesus Himself – is worshiped. And the word "to kneel" and the word "to worship" are the same in Greek...so there are several more times that people bowed down before Jesus that could be considered worship that we don't include because they are ambiguous.

Here's the thing – most people today who are not Christians today, and even a fair number of Christians, sadly, think that Jesus was just a good man, nothing more. They might even believe He was a sinless man and that He died for us, but they don't think He was both God and man. If 78% of evangelical Christians, people who believe the Bible is the highest authority for what they believe, who believe in sharing the good news of Jesus and believe He is the only way to salvation, if this large group believes that Jesus is a created being, then He may be more than a man somehow, but He cannot be God and man.

Scripture doesn't give us that option. If Jesus wasn't divine, if He isn't God in the flesh, then His ready acceptance of worship would have been His downfall. Even if Jesus was blessed by God but still only human, remember what we heard before from Isaiah – God will not allow His worship to be given to another. Those who accepted worship rightfully due to God saw immediate punishment for their sins, and their deaths proved they were far from divine. Jesus receives worship, He dies, yet He returns to life and is alive even now. That's why we know that Jesus is uniquely the Son of God...not a creation, not a mere human, but God the Son, begotten of God the Father in the unique mystery of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

With that said, the very practical application I have for us is this: *don't be afraid of the parts of Scripture that are unpleasant*. We absolutely should be humble; none of us should ever even think of trying to take God's glory. I'm always reminded of our friend Virgil who, whenever any of us tried to thank him for something he'd done, he'd say, "Glory be to God!" While I think we can be gracious in our acceptance of praise or thanks – there's nothing wrong with a simple "you're welcome" and leaving it at that – he was on to something. None of us wants to be in the place of King Belshazzar and have the hand of God write that we were found wanting. This passage is good for reminding us to be humble.

And yet most of us, when we oust God from the throne of our hearts, are doing it in subtle, subconscious, and unintentional ways. I doubt any of us would be in Herod's position any time soon. And so what I'd like to take from this is that, when we come across parts of Scripture that disturb us, that seem mean-spirited or in some way unlike what we think of God, there is always something to learn. Sometimes it will just mean understanding a passage from a different perspective, learning something we didn't know. Sometimes it will mean having to adjust our view of God. Sometimes it will mean that our previous understanding of who God is, is flawed. That isn't always easy to change. And yet it's always best. We always want to understand God better, and that means being willing to tear down our old and sometimes simplistic pictures of God for a complete portrait of Him.

A passage like today's passage does not emphasize God's love; it emphasizes God's judgment. It's not hard to want to watch Herod go down after killing James, imprisoning Peter, and terrorizing the church. And yet our modern picture of God is often that of a kindly grandfather waiting for his grandchildren to come around to the house so he can give them candy and pat them on the head and tell them sweet stories, whose is always loving and never cross, never disciplining, never judging. But that is not our God.

Our God is immensely loving – He shows love to creatures that constantly and consistently rebel against Him. His perfect love is matched by His perfect justice. And we need that justice, because when there is no justice, there is no love. Sometimes God's justice comes down in ways we don't like. But we need Him to be just. Our consciences, which He made, demand justice. Our recent hearings for the Supreme Court have shown just how much every side wants justice done. In our flawed failings, we never get justice quite right. But God does. The situation with Herod shows that God will always bring about justice in His timing.

We need passages like today's passage – hard ones to understand, hard ones to stomach – because they show us reality as it really is. Herod thought he was something special, but he died like everyone else. Jesus, though He was truly special, the very Son of God, became nothing for our sakes. And while He died like everyone else, He rose from the grave like no one else. May we live our lives this week remembering that we serve Jesus, our risen Lord, and that we owe Him all our worship and praise for loving us, forgiving us, and bringing us into His Kingdom.