

Sermons—August 28-29, 1999
Rich Nathan
Powerful Encounters in the Book of Acts
Acts 12:1-28

Nothing's Going to Stop the Lord

Last week I told you that it is the custom of people in England, apparently, to begin their talks with some humor. I told you some jokes about Christian denominations and light bulbs. I actually received a number of emails requesting copies of the light bulb jokes that I told.

Well, since it is vacation season, I thought I would share with you another joke.

A husband and wife were driving down the road when the husband sees in his rear view mirror the blinking red light of a police officer as he is pulling him over. The police officer comes up to the car and says to the man, "Sir, do you know that you were just going 70 in a 45 mph zone?"

The man responds, "No, officer, that can't be. I know I wasn't speeding. I couldn't possibly have been going more than 45 mph."

The man's wife said, "Oh yes you were. You were going way faster than 45. In fact, I looked at the speedometer and I think you were going more than 70."

The man shoots his wife a dirty look.

The officer says, "And I am also going to have to give you a ticket because your right rear tail light is out."

The man says, "Really? Is it out? I didn't realize that it was out. That must have just happened."

His wife says, "Harry, you know that it has been out for weeks. I told you about it over and over again. You said that you would get to it, but you never have."

The man shoots his wife another dirty look.

The officer said finally, "You know here in Ohio, you are required to wear your seatbelt. And sir, I see that you are not wearing your seatbelt. So I am going to have to ticket you for that."

The man says, "Oh, officer, when I saw you coming, I took the seatbelt off, but I was wearing it the whole time."

His wife pipes up again and says, "Harry, you know you are lying. How many times have I told you to wear your seatbelt? We fight about this all the time. You never wear your belt."

The man finally explodes and says, "Woman, why don't you shut up? Why do you always have to go shootin' off your mouth?"

The police officer leans into the car and says, "Does your husband always talk to you this harshly?"

The woman says, "No, no. Most of the time my husband is really kind to me. He only yells at me this way when he is drunk."

Well, if you have a joke that you think is hysterically funny and also is appropriate to tell in public, you can email it to me. I don't promise that I will use it, but people enjoy good humor.

I am going to be wrapping up a series that I have been doing over the summer from the book of Acts. It is a series that I have called, "Powerful Encounters in the Book of Acts." And throughout the summer we have been exploring the supernatural dimension of our Christian faith. It is a profound tragedy that at a time when people are really hungering and thirsting for the supernatural, there are many, many churches whose theology and practice virtually prohibits any supernatural intervention from God from taking place.

Oh sure, God could do anything, a church might say. We don't prohibit God from doing whatever he wishes. But we believe those gifts of prophecy and tongues and the other supernatural gifts in 1 Cor. 12 have passed away. And we certainly don't expect God to heal very often. We certainly don't train people to pray for the sick. And any kind of report of demonization is probably false. Probably what people are witnessing when they claim to see demonization is a psychological problem, some kind of mental illness. Beyond that, we don't expect here in America to have to deal with the demonic because all of that stuff is for the mission field anyway.

At a time when America is hungering and thirsting for connection with the supernatural, there are many churches that are positively slamming the door in people's faces and refusing because of their theological framework and their worldview (we talked about worldview last week), there are many churches who refuse to satisfy the thirst that so many people have for the supernatural. Unfortunately, what has happened in the US, especially in the last 2-30 years is that the thirst for the supernatural, something beyond our senses, something beyond this world and what we can see and touch and taste, something beyond what science

can produce and what technology can master, that thirst for the supernatural has taken, often, a false path and sometimes a really silly path.

Nowhere do you see the thirst for the supernatural manifested more than in the current explosion of interest in angels. Who would have thought that when we started the decade of the 90's that so many million Americans would be preoccupied with and fascinated by the subject of angels?

If you look back at American movies, we do find even back in the 1940's Frank Capra's Christmas classic, "It's a Wonderful Life" with Clarence the angel helping Jimmy Stewart. But you see nothing like the explosion of movies about angelic visits—The City of Angels; Michael with John Travolta as an angel; The Preacher's Wife; Angels in the Outfield; the television show Touched by an Angel.

Surveys indicated that more than 70% of Americans believe in angels. Five of the ten best selling paperback books 2 years ago were about angels. People have all types of bumper stickers on their cars about angels watching over their car and the driver. Books on angels take up several shelves in Barnes and Noble and in Borders.

Just go on line if you want to be clued in on America's fascination with angels. There are more websites on angels than you could possibly cope with. There is a website that will offer you photos of angels from around the world. Another website is just devoted to Michael the Archangel. Michael the Archangel has his own web page. There is a site called AVN Angel Page, which advertises itself as having all the info you could ever want about archangels, including which in level of heaven they reside. One website is offering a selection of angelic music for sale on CD and

cassettes. You can imagine that recording session! OK, Seraphim, I want you to take it from the top...now, let's hear that trumpet, Gabriel.

There is a website offering classes and products to help you find your inner angel. There is an actual angel mall offering collectibles—t-shirts, music and angelic figurines when you “need an angel in your corner.” You can get a little plastic or ceramic angel.

The website I really loved was called “True Colors Ethnic Angels” from, of course, the Ethnic Angels Company, which offers you angels in any skin and hair color you choose. You don't have to go with those tall, thin blonde looking angels anymore. As for me, I want a bunch of short, stocky Jewish angels.

What is apparent is that this interest in angels is helping people somehow to fill a spiritual void in their lives, a void created by our technical age and, unfortunately, by some churches that withhold from their members and the community healthy contact with the supernatural.

Now, the passage that we are going to be reading today in this last message in the series from the book of Acts has a lot to say to us about angels. But we are going to see that it is not an angel-centered perspective that the Bible calls us to. Instead, the Bible calls us to a God-centered perspective. And in this text what we are going to read about is the triumph of God over all opposing forces that would seek to hinder his activity in this world—not angel-centered, but God-centered. I have called today's talk “Nothing's Going to Stop the Lord.” Let's pray.

This is what we read in Acts 12,

“It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.”

Let's go through some background to this text. We see the Christian church in the book of Acts seeming to go from one mountain top to another—from Pentecost to Samaria; to the Ethiopian Eunuch being converted; to the conversion of Saul, who became Paul the apostle; to the spread of the church in the city of Antioch. But along the way, with each spreading circle of the gospel, you see these counter attacks, this opposition.

And so near the beginning of the book of Acts you have the beatings of some of the apostles. In Acts 7 the martyrdom of Stephen. And here the murder of James the apostle, and the imprisonment of Peter. Throughout the history of the church, you see these periods of expansion and then radical opposition. And the church contracts for a while and then there is further expansion. And contraction. The apostle Paul said in Acts 14:22 that we have to undergo many tribulations. We have to undergo much hardship in order for us to enter the Kingdom of God.

And these first four verses in the book of Acts tell us about a season of hardship for the early church. Churches go through seasons of hardship. This church has in different periods of its history. The church you formally attended, or maybe

presently attend, might be undergoing a season of hardship. Likewise, families and individuals undergo seasons of hardship. This is not unusual or something out of the ordinary or out of the will of God. Paul tells us in Acts 14:22 that we should expect seasons of hardship and tribulation along the way into our entrance into the kingdom of God.

So, we are reading here about the hardship that the early church encountered. Herod Agrippa, who in vs. 1 is called King Herod, was assaulting the church just as his grandfather, Herod the Great assaulted the babies born in Bethlehem around the time of Jesus and made many mothers weep in Bethlehem for a season when he tried to kill the holy family. Apparently, Herod Agrippa, the grandson, has the same spirit as his grandfather. He is willing to use violence to consolidate his political position. In this particular instance, he knew that it would be a popular move to kill one of the practitioners of this unpopular new faith called Christianity. So he puts James to death by the sword and he plans a public show trial for Peter. Dictators love show trials where they can parade out some dissident and consolidate their own power among their supporters and strike fear into the opposition.

Here is the issue that arises in vv. 1-4. We are not told why James is put to death, while his brother, John, lives to a ripe old age and has the opportunity to pen several books in the New Testament. We are not told why James dies in prison and a little later we will read that Peter was delivered, probably, from the same prison.

And we see this same kind of enigma in the book of Hebrews. We read in chapter 11:32, "I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barrack, Samson, Jephtha, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms,

administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead raised to life again.”

Heroes of the faith—shutting the mouths of lions like Daniel. Powerful in battle like Gideon and David. Carried off the battlefield on the shoulders of their comrades. Even when they were dead, some were raised to life, it says. Like the widow of Zarephath, whose son, Elijah resurrected from the dead in 1 Kings 17.

But Hebrews 11 doesn’t end with the beginning of v. 35. The chapter goes on to read, “Others were tortured and refused to be released so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned. They were sawed in two. They were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them and they wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.”

Some are carried off on the shoulders of their comrades and some are carried from the field of battle on their shields, dead. We are not told why some Christians like John get to live to a ripe old age and other Christians, like his brother James, is murdered at a young age in prison. People love to speculate about the reasons behind suffering. Why God allows tragedy to fall on one family and seems to protect another. How one young man might be killed by a drunk driver, and his friend is miraculously protected.

But you know the Bible does not indulge our curiosity regarding why God ordains things the way he does. Most of our attempts to plumb the mind of God, especially when it comes to suffering, are woefully misguided and unhelpful. Job's friends in the book of Job, thought that they understood the ways of God. That if Job was suffering, it was probably because of something that he did, some sin against God. So as good friends, they were trying to urge their suffering companion, Job, to repent and acknowledge his sin so that the suffering would lift. They thought they were doing good to Job and vindicating the justice of God.

It is true that we often reap what we sow. That's good Bible teaching. But Job's friends wrongly applied that Bible teaching in Job's life. Job's suffering was not the result of his own sin. And it is absolutely wrong to conclude that someone is protected and lives to a ripe old age because they are somehow favored by the Lord and another dies at an early age or suffers in their family because they are somehow not favored by the Lord. We are simply not told why in any particular instance hardship comes to one and not to another. We are told in the book of Hebrews that all of the heroes of faith, those carried off on the shoulders of their comrades, and those carried off dead from the battlefield on their shields—all the heroes of faith, are commended by the Lord.

We are told by the apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians that there is a mystery in iniquity. There is something unfathomable, human speaking, about sin and about suffering. And Jesus warned the people in Luke 13 not to imagine that the 18 who died as a result of a tower falling on them, don't imagine, he says, that they were worse or more sinful than any of you who are listening.

So we don't know why James died in prison and Peter was delivered. The Bible doesn't tell us. Nor does the Bible tell us exactly which combination of secondary causes God uses in bringing his will to pass. God can use Satan. He can use evil men and women. He can use drunk drivers. He can use hurricanes, fires, economic downturns, and crummy bosses. We don't know which secondary causes God will use in bringing about his will in an individual, family, or church's life.

What we do know from the Bible is that God is all knowing, all loving, all powerful and in total control of all that comes to pass. You may not ever look at suffering and in your mind limit the love, the knowledge, or the control of God. We don't know why this particular event. But, friends, you may be absolutely certain that the purpose of God in everything is good.

You write this down. Here is a statement that you need to have just driven like a stake into your heart. You write this down. I know that God uses the worst things for my best. Why he chose this or that, how he can use it, I do not know. But I know that God uses the worst things for my best.

There is a passage that is a favorite of mine, and maybe some of yours, from the book of Genesis. It arises from the life of Joseph, who as some of you know, was hated by his brothers. They threw him down into a pit where he was later sold to some slave traders. He is a slave in Egypt for many years. He is unfairly accused of a sexual indiscretion that he was completely innocent of. He is thrown into prison for a couple of years. He is lied about. He is slandered. He experienced great difficulty in life. At the end of his life, he reunites with his brothers and he says this in Genesis 50:20, which I think sums up a great deal of the purposes of God in the midst of

hardship and difficulty. This is a great verse for you to underline in your bibles. Perhaps put it on a little index card to memorize especially when you are undergoing hardship. But it says, “You intended to harm me. But God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

The drunk driver, the unfair boss, the ex-spouse, the slanderous boyfriend or girlfriend, the abusing parent, the persecuting government—they may plan something for evil and go about doing something purely out of malice or envy or vengeance or jealousy or lust, or stupidity, or cruelty. But God uses all of that and intersect with that purpose for good, for the saving of many lives. God uses the worst for our best.

There are a couple of verses from an old hymn that go this way:

“Beyond our life the weaver stands

And works his wondrous will

We leave it all to his wise hands

And trust his perfect skill.

Should mystery enshroud his plan?

And our short sight be dimmed

We will not try the whole to scan

But leave each thread to him.”

Nothing is going to stop the Lord because he is in control of the life of someone like the martyred James just as he is his brother, John, or Peter. Nothing can stop God’s purpose in your family’s life, this church’s life, your individual life because He is in control.

And in the midst of hardship, trial and tribulation, God uses the prayers of believers. V. 5, "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. 'Quick, get up!' he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. Then the angel said to him, 'Put on your clothes and sandals.' And Peter did so. 'Wrap you cloak around you and follow me,' the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, 'Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating. When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, 'Peter is at the door.' 'You're out of your mind,' they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, 'It must be his angel.' But Peter kept on knocking and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison."

This little story has a number of ironies in it. There is the church praying like crazy for Peter, while Peter is sleeping like a baby between two prison guards. That's what we are like with our Lord Jesus; He always lives to make intercession. And there is Peter knocking at the door as an answer to the church's prayer, but nobody can believe that it is him.

Now what you see in the text are two communities that are at war and are wielding the weapons available to them. On the one hand, you have Herod wielding the weapons of governmental power, the weapon of imprisonment, the threat of capital punishment. On the other hand, you have this little group of people called the Christian church who don't have available to them all the leaders of government power. They don't have swords or money or influence. They don't own newspapers or have Hollywood celebrities doing benefits. The only weapon that this little group of people had was the weapon of prayer.

You have this onslaught of government persecution, what looks like one of those old Soviet missiles with a multiple warhead that they used to drag down the streets of Moscow in their May Day parades. A huge weapon. And against it, what seems to be the tiniest little peashooter. The most ineffective little thing—the prayers of the church.

It is reminiscent of the fight between Goliath, who was ten feet tall, who was wearing this huge bronze helmet and scale armor. He was carrying this enormous spear. There is David, a teenage boy, coming up against him. David is not wearing any armor. He has just five smooth stones and a sling. A total mismatch.

What weapons right now are arrayed against you? What spears are pointed right at your heart? Or right at the heart of your home? Who's gunning for you now? A jealous coworker? An in-law? A disgruntled ex-employee? Ex-spouse? Another church member?

Or maybe the weapons pointed against you are a negative diagnosis from a doctor—another round of chemo, arthritis. Maybe the weapon that is pointed at your heart is financial disaster, bankruptcy, and humiliation in front of friends and colleagues. The threat of divorce, a lawsuit, or an unwanted pregnancy. What weapon is pointed at you right now?

What weapons are arrayed against the Christian church—slander in a gay newspaper? Cynicism and mocking in media and on sitcoms? Intellectual ridicule at universities? Physical persecution, imprisonment, torture, even death in some countries? What weapons are arrayed against the church?

Add up all the weapons that are arrayed against you; all weapons that are arrayed against your family; all the weapons that are arrayed against the church; get all the multiple warheads parading by like one of those old Soviet May Day parades—what weapon do we Christians have against all of this? This little secret weapon called prayer.

It says in v. 5, "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him."

That word "earnestly" was used of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he was to go to the cross. Jesus was wrestling in prayer, praying that God would take this cup from him. The word "earnestly" literally means to be

stretched out. The picture is of someone straining, stretching themselves out before God, stretching out their hands, their will, and their heart before the Lord. When someone earnestly prays, they are praying intensely. They are praying perseveringly. It means that the early church was deadly serious. They kept going and they didn't give up.

One of my great heroes, John Calvin, said that we must repeat the same prayer not twice or three times only, but as often as we have need—a hundred, a thousand times. We must never be weary in waiting for God's help.

Why do we pray? Well, we pray because we are grateful. Because God has done so much for us and has done so much in us. We pray because we want to go back to God as people who don't take blessings for granted and say to God, "thank you." We pray because we are grateful. We pray because of who God is. We want to worship him.

But mostly we pray because we have needs. We need forgiveness. We need God. Because we need help. Because life is too big and too overwhelming for us to handle on our own.

Why do we pray? Because we need help and God promises to be our helper. Because the weapons arrayed against us are too large for us to contend with on our own. And God is bigger than all of them put together. We pray because people we love have needs. Because the weapons arrayed against people we love are too long for them to handle. We pray as Richard Foster once said because we love people and what they need is beyond our power to give them.

Listen, we have million excuses why we don't pray.

The problem I have is too small to pray about or ask for prayer. After all, there are so many starving people around the world.

God is so busy and he has a universe to run.

I have prayed about this over and over again. God doesn't want to hear the same old stuff from me.

God is probably groaning when he sees me coming.

I had better clean up my act before I go to the Lord.

I'll pray about this later.

We have a million excuses for why we don't pray.

Let me bring this down to earth for you. When my children were little, sometimes they would wake up at night frightened. Maybe there would be a storm outside. Maybe they had a bad dream. Maybe they heard a noise and were frightened. They would wake up like little children to and cry, "Daddy, Mommy, come help me." Or there would be a storm and they would run out of the room because of the lightening and thunder, "Daddy, Mommy, I am afraid."

Any parent, who has any kind of heart, will try to comfort their children. Any father or mother will not go back to sleep until their child is safe and secure. No good father would say to a child, who comes in and says, "I am afraid," "Sorry, son, I don't want to hear about your problems. That is so small on the big scale of things. I have huge concerns that you can't even fathom. I am too busy for you. I have a business to run. I have heard this same thing over and over again about you being afraid of lightening. Don't you think you have come in a few too many times? Come on you're 3 years old, time to grow up and be a man."

Friend, if a father or mother rushes to embrace their children, what is keeping you from going to God, your Father, when you have a need? What excuse do you have that is preventing you from going to your Father for help about the littlest thing or the biggest thing?

I was just reading in John Wesley's journal—the journal of that great founder of Methodism, that he was one time riding on his horse to a meeting when his horse came up lame and began limping and stumbling. Wesley also had a splitting headache and he was just going to endure the misery of this lame horse and his headache, when it occurred to him that he could go to his Father for any need. He thought God was capable of dealing with man and beast. So he prayed for his horse and he prayed for his head and both were instantly healed.

You mean, you could pray for something as little as the healing of your pet or your migraine? Or for something as big as an apostle in prison and God would hear both? He does.

And God uses this weapon of prayer to change things, to change people, to change circumstances, to change the hard hearts of husbands, wives and in-laws and neighbors. If the church had any idea of how big the weapon of prayer was, you would frequently find us on our knees.

The early church loved Peter, but they couldn't help him. It was beyond their power and that drove them to prayer. If you care about someone, pray for them. Pray for relatives. Pray for friends. Pray for the missionaries we send out from here. Pray for the church leaders. Above all pray for me!

I read about a Baptist church that sent a missionary couple into a housing project. It had 200 units and was crime ridden. It was violent and full of vandalism. The couple rented an apartment and turned it into a little house of prayer, where they prayed for the others in the building. And then with the help of other teams from the church, they contacted other people in the housing project and asked them if they could pray for them. People were excited about the prospect of having this little house of prayer in their housing project. 60% of the people invited folks in regularly to pray for them. Violence went down. Vandalism went down. Things were so good that the owners of the apartment complex actually gave the Christians the apartment for free because they were being such a blessing to everyone.

I heard another story from Central America where some people had an interesting approach to evangelism on downtown streets. They set up a little booth and offered free prayer to anyone who wanted prayer. Prayer for free. The results were amazing. Folks on the streets were being prayed for and they came back and said, "My life has been changed."

Maybe some of you would think about that—some of you bold, young people, a few radicals—set up a booth on Broad and High and offer to pray for people for free.

The interesting thing, despite all of the faith and perseverance of the early church, is that when the answer to prayer was standing at the door, they couldn't believe it. But the Lord can't be stopped because of his power over all things and because of the weapon of prayer and because he employs his holy angels to do his bidding.

In v. 7 it says, "Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. 'Quick, get up.'" The angel orders him out, leads him out of the jail.

You know, the Bible has a lot to say about angels. It is not just silly websites where you can get a little plastic figurine of an angel to stand in your corner or they will manufacture an ethnic angel for you with your own coloring, hair color and eye color. There are nearly 300 references to angels in the Bible. There are almost three times as many references to angels as to demons. And most of the church today knows infinitely more about the demonic and is infinitely more preoccupied with the demonic than with angels. You ask the average Christian how many references there are to angels in the Bible, they might say, "Oh, I don't know, maybe 20 or 30." There are over 300.

Angels were created by God. We read in the Bible that there are innumerable angels. It says there are millions and millions, thousands of thousands. Apparently, they go from one place to another. They travel. They are not everywhere at once.

God also treats angels differently than he treats people. When a third of the angels sinned against God and became demons, they had no chance of repentance. God didn't spare the angels when they sinned, but threw them out of heaven. Those sinning angels will one day burn in hell forever.

But God has a different plan for people. Before his throne at the end are going to be a mass of people from every ethnicity, from every color and racial group, every country and every language. God treats us better than he treats the angels because

we have a chance to repent when we sin. We have a chance to make things right and be redeemed.

The angels are sent to serve the purposes of God and to minister to us. Hebrews 1:14 says, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve for the sake of those who are to attain salvation."

God sends angels into the world to serve, to minister, to us. How do they serve us? Sometimes angels bring God's messages to people. Sometimes they carry out war against demonic forces. Sometimes they deliver people from danger. We see here that Peter was delivered from prison by an angel. God sent the spirit to minister to Peter in response to people's prayers.

There are examples of angelic deliverances that have been well reported in history. For example, there was a Scottish missionary named John Patton, who was a missionary to the New Hebrides Islands in the South Pacific. One night some hostile natives surrounded his mission headquarters and they planned to burn it to the ground killing Patton and his wife. The two of them prayed all through that night asking God to deliver them. They were earnest, as we read in v. 5 of Acts 12. They were earnest in prayer. They stretched themselves out and prayed that God would deliver them. When daylight came, they were surprised to see their attackers leave.

A year later the chief of the tribe was converted to Christ and Patton had an opportunity to ask what kept them from burning the house down and killing them?

The chief replied, "Well, it was all those men who were with you."

Patton said, "There were no men, only my wife and I."

But the chief said that they had seen hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords in their hands and they seemed to circle the mission station so the tribesmen were afraid to attack. Patton realized that God had sent his angels to protect them. When 5 young missionaries were murdered down on the Amazon by the Auca Indians, the Aucas said later that the heavens opened and they saw all of these angels singing. It was this sight of angels that in part led to the conversion of the tribe.

I heard a story from some friends of mine who were working in Lebanon during the height of the Lebanese crisis in the early 1980's when Beirut was reduced to rubble. Warring factions were hitting one another with missiles and bombs. This little Christian community with their little weapon of prayer was praying through the night for God to deliver them. They climbed out of their shelter only to see a missile coming right toward them. And just then, they said, "You may not believe it, but just then we saw a giant angel catch the missile in mid air." I wasn't there and I don't have it on a photograph. But the Christians I knew were credible. They weren't given to overstatement or hype or exaggeration.

Listen, we need to be careful about these things in light of all the angel excitement in America. We Christians need to be careful. The apostle Paul said that we are not to be given to the worship of angels. We are not to pray to an angel. Christians pray to God. And we don't ever ask God to send angels into a situation. We have no biblical prayer or model like that. How God chooses to work out his purposes, whether by an angel or by the Holy Spirit, or by using another person, that is up to God. So when you are praying for healing, you don't pray for ministering

angels. But God may use angels. If you are praying for deliverance, you don't pray that the angels would come. But God may use angels.

We pray the presence of Jesus Christ. We are not angel-centered. We are God-centered. Nevertheless, we see here the angels involved even in judgment. It says,

"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."

Josephus, a Jewish historian writing at the end of the 1st Century, tracks with Luke's account here exactly. Luke said that Herod was wearing his royal robes in v. 21. Josephus wrote that he wore a garment made wholly of silver, which shone in the sun. He looked like he was glowing, like an angel, and people began praising him. Luke said Herod's punishment was because he didn't praise God when the flatterers shouted that he was the voice of a God. Josephus reports that the king didn't rebuke them or reject their irreligious flattery. Josephus said that he had violent abdominal pains and died five days later. Luke says, "Immediately an angel struck him down." Apparently, he was immediately struck down by a sickness and died five days later.

God sometimes sends angels to execute judgment. And God is able to separate people out in judgment. He separates Peter from the two men that Peter is chained to. In the end, the Lord is going to separate out people. He is going to separate believers on one hand and unbelievers on his other. He is going to separate husbands and wives. He is going to separate identical twins – they will go in different directions sometimes. Brothers and sisters may be separated. Parents and children. Boyfriends and girlfriends.

God sends his angels to execute judgment.

Now listen, v. 24 is the climax of everything that we read. It says, “But the Word of God continued to increase and spread.”

The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod triumphing. The chapter closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the Word of God triumphing. Nothing is going to stop the Lord. Nothing is going to stop the gospel. Nothing is going to stop the church. Do you understand the power of God’s purposes? The power of prayer? The power of the angels? Whatever is arrayed against you, if you are the Lord’s, it will be ultimately defeated.

Let’s pray.