

Persecution Did Not Stop Yet—Acts 12:1-3—9/20/26
Copyright by Mark Vaughan 9/2026

Today we return to our study of the Acts of the Holy Spirit, the NT book of the beginning of the church & its expansion.

We resume in chapter 12 so let's reading Acts 12:1-3. [READ]

I doubt we read this & instantly feel the pleasure & power of God.

Probably not—or perhaps not yet until we can dig into the context to recall where we've been & the stage this sets.

It may not seem happy to jump into a story where a main character is killed, even one of the 12 Apostles & one of Jesus' inner circle of 3.

When you read that—and maybe also when you get up some mornings—do you feel like saying, *“Really? When does the opposition end?—why does it have to be so hard?”*

Do you ever do that?—do wonder when life is going to get easier?

When you read of abuse of power like Herod did, do you long for a time when the government is trustworthy & not corrupt?

Do you get tired of feeling like unrighteousness never stops?

I certainly have those kinds of feelings & longings.

So as I started back into studying Acts and read those verses, I pondered the pain of one of the 12 Apostles being martyred.

As the one-year anniversary of the martyrdom of Charlie Kirk passed, it was tragic to read of celebrations of that murder.

And it was sad to honor the 25th anniversary of the Islamic terrorist attacks on 9/11/01 & know such murderous false religion is rising.

We lament that the brief rise of prayers to God in unity as a nation did not sweep the masses with lasting revival!

We mourn that our state is ruled again by another governor who aggressively pushes for the murder of babies in the womb!

The war against children continues & we need to be ready to vote “No” on the atrocious state amendments this fall.

On it goes with temptations to discouragement that you could add depending on your news feed & viewing algorithms.

But rather than despair, we need to be ready to speak boldly even when we know it could cost us greatly.

We need recalculate our investments in the real spiritual battle & recalibrate our expectations of how God works when hope seems lost.

We need to be clear speakers of life-changing truth & glad spreaders of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And when we're tempted to lose heart, we need to reset our perspective on who God is & what He has proven & promised.

Such hope-giving reminders are what arise as we ponder Acts 12:1-3 today & find more than we may see at first glance.

As we soak back into the historical context of these verses, we will discover background that resets our perspectives on persecution.

As we meditate on what was happening & how it syncs with biblical history, we'll see trends that can reset our expectations.

As we do, we will walk through 3 reminders about persecution that can give hope to persevere with glad expectations in God's goodness.

The 1st of those to note today is that persecution may be pervasive—or ongoing—until Christ returns.

Point #1—persecution may be pervasive until Christ returns.

Pervasive means widespread, ongoing, far-reaching, extensive.

We could say that persecution **will be** pervasive & that would be true.

The NT makes it clear that trials & tribulations will come, that Christians are strangers not welcomed by this fallen world.

But there **are** brief respites from intense persecution in history in various parts of the world at various times.

So I phrased today's points as probable realities rather than absolute certainties in every detail in every instant.

I make that point from the way that the author Luke opened Acts 12 with kind of a meanwhile statement.

Just in case you lost sight of it, persecution had not stopped.

Read the time indicator to begin verse 1—*Now about that time.*

To see “What time?”, we might look at Acts 11:29-30 about the church at Antioch sending a gift to the churches in Judea.

But that bids us to recall how the church at Antioch began & how Saul & Barnabas even became church leaders sent from there to Judea.

So we back up to where the narrative transitioned to the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles in Acts 10-11 & Luke gave a peek into what was going on in Judea in that time.

Acts 10 recorded how the salvation of Gentiles in Caesarea came with proof of God's plan to build the church with Jews & Gentiles together.

That was pivotal & its proof was vital as Christians that spread under persecution had mixed approaches to sharing Christ.

Read Acts 11:19-21 to recall those differences. [READ]

In Antioch, a new local church of Gentiles was born & it also likely had some Jews as the Gospel continued to advance.

Remember that is the outline of Acts—the spread of the witness about Jesus from Jerusalem to Judea & Samaria & to the ends of the earth.

So the word of Jesus through His messengers was unstoppable.

His Gospel marched on to other people groups as He built His church.

That unstoppable expansion even happened as people scattered because of persecution.

Scattering from persecution was a context for the spread of the Gospel.

That's what Acts 12:1 picks up from Acts 11:19.

And that scattering of Christians was because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen.

But the mention of Stephen reaches back to Acts 8 so turn there to remember what happened in that time Acts 12 refers to.

Read Acts 8:1-5 for a bit of review. [READ]

Remember that?—despite the persecution spearheaded by Saul, the Gospel spread through Philip & others as they scattered.

We tend to think that opposition to the Gospel is unexpected or always undesirable or completely bad or to be avoided at all costs.

But that's not what we find in Acts.

Rather, we find it as a consistent norm, as a realistic expectation that actually accompanies the spread of the Gospel.

The Jewish & Roman authorities had crucified Jesus, but He rose & ascended & began His church with the Spirit's coming.

And that did not stop the opposition to Jesus, did it?

The church grew immediately in Acts 1-3 & yet the healing & preaching in Acts 3 led to the arrest of the Apostles.

Acts 4:1-3 says "*the priests & the captain of the temple guard & the Sadducees ... laid hands on them and put them in jail.*"

That's the same language used in Acts 12 for what happened with Peter again as the opposition persisted.

After threats & release of Peter, the church kept growing, but the persecutors did not learn to give up on fighting against God.

Then Acts 5 recounts another arrest & a miraculous prison escape & Gamaliel warning them not to fight against God.

Despite the warning alongside of more miracles, persecution ramped up further with the stoning of Stephen that scattered Christians.

And that brings us back to that time noted in Acts 12:1.

The conversion of Saul in Acts 9 & then Peter going to Cornelius & Gentiles being saved in Acts 10-11 did not cause persecution to stop.

Luke was saying, in case you forgot, persecution did not stop.

That's the point of the first 4 words of Acts 12:1.

We need to remember that historical context as we return to our study of Acts after a break.

We also need to remember it because that historical context that the author Luke alludes to in Acts 12:1 that is vital to understand.

We must understand that alongside great spiritual victories & church expansion was wave after wave of opposition.

It's easy to romanticize stories of Gospel advance into dreams of mass popularity & societal acceptance & widespread appreciation.

But that's typically not the case—instead, the attempts to threaten or weaken or poison the church usually never stop.

I think we can easily miss or forget that the church in Acts did not expect everyone to love them & praise them—they expected hardship.

And when they forgot that, the NT letters reminded them of it.

For example, recall how Paul wrote in 1st Thessalonians 3:2-4 that he had sent them Timothy *to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know.*

In other words, Paul sent Timothy to be sure they were not surprised or shaken up by their sufferings.

Or listen carefully to the words of 1st Peter 4:12—*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you.*

Think on that—my problem when I'm tempted to grumble or despair is that I've allowed myself to be surprised by something that God has already said **not** to be surprised by.

1st Peter 4:12 says not to be surprised by painful suffering as if it was something unfamiliar happening to you.

I think what set apart the church in Acts was that they knew their Lord Jesus Christ had predicted trials for them.

They knew that Jesus had been hated & opposed & slandered & falsely accused & crucified & yet He was victorious anyway.

And they knew that Jesus had predicted victory for them.

For example, He began the Upper Room discourse in 14 by saying, *Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God; believe also in Me.*

Then He promised a heavenly home & answered prayer & greater fruitfulness & the coming of the Spirit & more.

Then in John 15:18, Jesus said, *If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.*

The Apostles had heard such things from Jesus' own mouth & they had passed it on to those they taught.

Jesus went on in John 15:20-21 saying, *Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me.*

And Jesus added more in that setting & at other times.

In John 16:33, Jesus closed that section by saying, *These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.*

With just that small sample of verses applied today, you might think that I would not be surprised by trials that test my faith.

And with the many more verses we could add, you might think that we should expect that persecution may be pervasive.

So let's state the obvious—persecution was ongoing in Acts & it still is worldwide & we should expect that.

And that's not a passive shoulder-shrug that says we don't try to speak against persecutors & stop it where we can have influence to do so.

A passage like Hebrews 13:3 reminds us to *Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.*

And that refers to those in prison or ill-treated because of the Gospel.

We remember them in prayer & we aid them in ways like the gift from Antioch to Judean churches at the end of Acts 11.

We pray for boldness to stand firm & faithfulness to finish well.

We don't assume we can't make a difference—we trust we can

But we fix our hope of Christ saving sinners & we set our hopes on Christ's return as the time of His perfect reign in His kingdom.

Until then, we will have to deal with the sins of leaders in government & the troubles of the masses who oppose Christ.

We surely speak up & vote & influence others at every opportunity in relation to all aspects of life.

But we trust the Gospel as the true power to change hearts & we trust Christ as the true King who will bring righteous rule.

And that can help us the next time we're tempted to whine, can't it?

That can reset my perspective the next time we're tempted to throw up our hands in despair or complain or react in anger.

Whether such temptations come from a news feed or in our family or job stresses or evangelistic or ministry efforts, this reminder can help.

Recall that persecution may be pervasive until Christ returns.

And then you know what else can be encouraging in this context reset?

Why did the Jewish leaders keep on opposing the church?

Because the church was spreading as distinctly Christlike in their testimony & Christ-exalting in their outreach.

So note 2ndly that persecution may be proof of Christlikeness.

Persecution may be (1) pervasive until Christ returns; & now (2) persecution may be PROOF of Christlikeness.

We know that from verses like 2nd Timothy 3:12, which says *all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*

As much as we may wish it said *might be persecuted*, 2 Timothy 3:12 says *all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus **will be** persecuted.*

So being like Christ, even desiring to be godly in Christ Jesus, will inevitably lead to being persecuted somehow.

Being devoted to Christ as Lord above all will make you different.

And that distinctive holiness may make others uncomfortable such that they attack you or try to silence you.

The word for persecute can mean to harass, drive out, or chase away.

And that's what was happening to those who followed Jesus as we've seen continually in Acts.

They were pursued & threatened & oppressed & scattered.

And recall why?—It was because their proclamation of Jesus as risen was an offense to the Jewish leaders who killed Him.

They were so loyal to the living Christ that they defied the authorities who said to stop speaking in Jesus' name.

Their lives had made Jesus Christ inescapable & undeniable.

Even the way they were mistreated was like Christ was mistreated.

Look back at Acts 12 & read verses 1-4. [READ]

The phrase—laid hands on them—was also used of Jesus' arrest in Matthew 26:50 & Mark 14 46 & in Acts 4:3 & 5:18.

It's also what could not happen to Jesus before His time in Luke 20:19 & John 7:30, 44.

But it's what Jesus said would occur with His followers in Luke 21:12.

Verse 2 says James was *put to death* like Jesus in Luke 23:32.

Mention of death by a sword likely indicates involvement of the Jewish leaders in accusing James like they did with Jesus.

The likely charge was leading the city in idolatry as Deuteronomy 13:6-18 called for death by the sword.

The descriptions of arresting & seizing & delivering over also echo what had happened to Jesus as His followers faced similar treatment.

So think of it like this—if you live like Jesus, maybe you should not be surprised if you get treated like Jesus was treated.

Or we should say—you may be mistreated like Jesus was mistreated.

There's intentionality in the similarities of the language used.

There's also intentionality in calling Agrippa I by the name Herod & by noting that this happened during the days of Unleavened Bread.

The days of Unleavened Bread was the week of Passover, exactly the week when Jesus was arrested years earlier.

And this Herod was Agrippa I, who was the grandson of Herod the Great who had male children killed after Jesus was born.

Agrippa I was also the nephew of Herod Antipas the Tetrarch ruler of Galilee, before whom Jesus stood in one of His trials.

Peter named that Herod Antipas in Acts 4:27 among those responsible for Jesus' death.

By using the Herod surname of the royal family rather than the specific name Agrippa, Luke was connecting those persecutors.

Luke was connecting the church to Jesus as the head, with His followers testifying of Him & being persecuted like Him.

Of course, only some of the church were taken & treated badly—it was not everyone.

Apparently, Peter was not arrested in that first roundup that included James, one of the 12 Apostles who was the Apostle John's brother.

James' death by a sword fulfilled Jesus' words in Matthew 20:23 & Mark 10:39 that he would drink of the cup of unjust wrath as Jesus did.

And since Herod Agrippa I was like his predecessors, he did not act by moral principle or the rule of law, but by what helped him personally.

He needed all the support he could gain to guard him from disfavor in Rome & in Judea.

So when Herod gained favor by killing James, he plotted to do the same to Peter but was waiting until after the Jews week of Passover.

As with the Jewish leaders against Jesus, Herod's appeasing of the Jews was fed by corrupt clutching at political power.

So as Jesus had predicted, His followers were being treated like He was treated & it proved their loyalty & love for Him.

When you think of it like that, it makes sense of the Apostles rejoicing that they were considered worthy to suffer shame for Jesus' name, as they did in Acts 5:41.

It can be a painful but powerful encouragement to realize that you may be suffering because you are clearly being like Jesus & honoring Him.

Think of how that can reset our perspective when we battle self-pity or other wrong responses to injustice.

Of course, we dare not exalt ourselves in some martyr complex that claims any mistreatment must be because we are so Christlike.

We do not want to be the kind of person who claims he's being persecuted every time life gets a little bit hard.

We should be careful assuming we've been flawlessly Christlike.

We may even be sure we're not as Christlike as we should be.

That may be true—none of us measure up fully to Christ's perfection.

And even that humble self-assessment may be His good work.

But in whatever measure it may be possible, this point can renew our minds with eternal focus that turns to glad gratitude.

We can have hope if persecution is proof of Christlikeness.

So if you are isolated or excluded or avoided or worse because you clearly follow Christ & not the crowd, then let it be a reason to rejoice.

Turn your loneliness into renewed love for your Savior who has led you out of the world & into a path of holiness.

Remember from Acts 12:1-3 & many other passages that persecution may be proof of Christlikeness & Christlikeness is great gain.

And by the way, if you never face persecution—if you are never mistreated or at least treated differently because you are a Christian—then you might wonder why.

You might ask yourself if you are more like the world than like Christ.

You might question if you are living for the acceptance & approval of those around you more than for the glory of Christ.

Those are not questions to discard or ignore too quickly.

I do not raise them as guilt trips or attempts to coerce change.

I raise those questions because the repeated themes of Scripture are clear about what 2nd Timothy 3:12 sums up in saying that *all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*.

So there are several ways to ponder what we've studied today.

Many applications flow from how (1) persecution may be pervasive until Christ returns & (2) persecution may be proof of Christlikeness.

Then 3rdly consider how persecution may be preparation for Christ to overcome.

Point #3 persecution may be preparation for Christ to overcome.

We don't see that in verses 1-3.

But we know what happens in the rest of the chapter & also what has happened in every situation where it seemed Christ was defeated.

We can know in every situation that whatever others meant for evil, God meant for God, as Genesis 50:20 puts it.

And that's what we'll see in chapter 12 as Christ showed His supremacy over Herod & the Jewish leaders & authorities.

We'll cover more of that as we continue, but it's also the theme we've already seen repeatedly in Acts.

We've seen that Jesus is unstoppable, that the Gospel will continue to advance, & that Jesus will build His church.

And that's a theme we can trust for our own lives today as followers of Jesus.

We can trust Christ to use for good whatever occurs with His people.

We know that from verses like Romans 8:28, but a narrative like Acts 12 illustrates it as God has often done in history.

That does not mean we eagerly anticipate Him causing our oppressors to be eaten by worms like we'll see happened to Herod.

It also does not necessarily mean He will set us free from prison or whatever troubles make us feel imprisoned.

It does not necessarily mean we will get the outcome we think is best, whether that's salvation of souls or freedom from suffering.

But it does mean He will do what is good & what exalts Christ.

It does mean we can trust Him & bow in submission to Him.

As I thought & prayed over this, I remembered what God overcame that Paul spoke of in 2nd Corinthians 11.

In 2nd Corinthians 11, Paul told how God had designed a thorn in Paul's flesh, messenger of Satan, that led that church to distrust him.

But Christ was overcoming something there—He was overcoming any temptation of Paul to exalt himself.

That's what Paul wrote—it was to keep him from exalting himself.

And he wrote that Christ showed that His grace is sufficient.

So Christ was overcoming Paul's self-sufficiency to prove the sufficiency of His grace & to show His power in Paul's weakness.

That was the explanation Christ gave Paul that can inform us in our trials & assure of good work God is doing.

Of course, someone like Job did not know the divine explanation of his suffering until he walked through it.

And we may not know the details of why or what God is doing.

But we can know, for example, that God knows what sins we could succumb to without His wise plan to use our pain.

We can also know that God cares about showing His glory in victory over evil for His people & that He hears our prayers.

We know He has guided some of the most ironic plot twists in history.

In Acts & throughout the Bible & history, we can see the story of Christ's supremacy through displays of His greater glory.

So we can pray for that—we can ask Him for unmistakable moves of His Providence as He has done many times.

But we must not resist Him or run from what He's designed & we should never give up as if all hope is lost.

We don't want to cut short His lessons for us or His work for others.

We may not know what all that will look like, but we can pray like the church did in Acts 12.

We want to be asking God to overcome greatly for His glory.

Yet we recall that His victory may only be visible in the end.

But also realize that we will only see His wisdom in final glory if we bow to Him in faith now as His followers.

We can only apply what we ponder today if we know Christ.

So remember to start there & always return there for the joy of relating to God fully by His free grace in Christ alone.

Though our sins deserve punishment, Jesus paid sin's penalty on the cross for all who turn from sin to faith in Him.

And God freely applies that work of Christ to all who trust Him.

Then we can know He promises to work all things for our good & we can know that whatever we suffer now for His name will be worth it in eternity.

Though persecution may be pervasive until Christ returns, we know He will return & make all things right & welcome His people home.

Jesus is the supreme King & final Judge & He can be trusted.

He will glorify His people to be like Him & He will overcome all evil.

Knowing Him transforms our view of life in this fallen world.

So let's pray for Him to renew our minds & reset our perspectives by the truths we've ponder today.

Pray with me as we close.