

# Passing the Baton

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Preacher: Niels van de Kastele

[0:00] Today's scripture reading is taken from Acts chapter 12 verses 1 to 25.! Please follow along in your Bibles. If you don't have a Bible, please do still grab them from the front of the stage or at the back near the door.

Our passage is found on page 866 of the Church Bible. Hear then God's word to us today. About that time, 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.

[1:13] Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and centuries before the door were guarding the prison.

And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, Get up quickly.

And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, Dress yourself and put on your sandals. And he did so. And he said to him, Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.

And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city.

It opened for them of its own accord. And they went out and went along one street. And immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, Now I'm sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.

[2:39] When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy, she did not open the gate, but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate.

They said to her, You are out of your mind. But she kept insisting that it was so. And they kept saying, It is his angel. But Peter continued knocking.

And when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord has brought him out of prison.

And he said, Tell these things to James and to the brothers. Then he departed and went to another place. Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.

[3:47] And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. And they came to him with one accord and having persuaded blasters, 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. Then 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 lust. But the word of God increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

[5:02] Let us believe and respond to God's true and living word. Great testimony.

Sorry, that's the mute button. Great. Thanks so much, Annabelle. Such a great reading. Yeah. Thanks for the testimony. Such an encouraging time. And now, yeah, let's look at this passage together.

Please keep it open so we can see what God is saying. Let's pray that he would speak to us.

Father, thank you for your true and living word, words of life, words of encouragement.

Would you speak to each of our hearts today, no matter where we're at. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Great. Well, it's the end of March. And so this is the end of our March missions month.

Maybe you're visiting today or some of the youth. You maybe don't know if you were talking. You talked about it in youth the past few weeks. But, yeah, we've tried to have a real focus on mission and outreach for the past few weeks.

[6:09] Now, I don't know how that was for you. Maybe some of us here are very encouraged, right? Because maybe you were helping and you saw things happening. Or you invited friends who came to the whiskey tasting or to Alpha.

And then maybe you're here because you came to one of those events. And, yeah, it's really great to have you here. Then again, there's others maybe. And it was more discouraging, right? Maybe you invited people, but they didn't come and not much happened.

And the whole thing kind of passed you by. Or maybe, actually, you're a bit tired of it because this is March. It's not just missions month. It's the end of the text year. And work is just crazy at the moment.

And then you have this stuff at church. And, I don't know, there's a war in the world and personal issues. And, you know, there's all this stuff going on. Man, maybe you don't really – it can feel like a distraction, right?

Something you're tired of. I think it's really great to look at this passage today because, yeah, it's the final sermon in this series. We're going to take a break from Acts next week when we have Easter.

[7:10] But I think it will speak to us, especially when we're discouraged, tired, distracted to see, yeah, what God is saying. Because in some ways, I mean, I don't know if you followed the chapter.

It's a bit of a mix, right? In some ways, it's not the happiest chapter. We're looking at the church in Jerusalem. And they're facing persecution. King Herod, he laid violent hands, verse 1, on some who belonged to the church.

Right? They were facing persecution. I don't know. King Herod, maybe you wonder. He keeps showing up. They're all called King Herod. This is not the King Herod from when Jesus was born. That was his grandfather. And it's also not the King Herod who killed John the Baptist.

That was his uncle. Anyway, here is – yeah, it's the Herod family. They were around for – yeah, around the time of Jesus. But they were not popular.

And so this guy, he wants to, you know, make the Jews like him. So what shall I do? Let me kill some Christians. And that's what he's doing, right? So he kills James, verse 2, right?

[8:11] He killed James, the brother of John, with the sword, one of the apostles. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also and wanted to execute him too.

Of course, then the chapter actually becomes more positive. The church prays for his release. And God sends this angel who rescues him and all these miracles, right?

The change is falling off his feet. And the door is just opening magically. Peter can't believe it. He thinks it's just a vision. It's just when he's suddenly outside, wait, this is real. And then, yeah, and

then the story gets so funny, right?

Because he goes to the place where the church meets and he knocks on the door. And, you know, the servant goes, he's so excited that Peter is here. She goes and tells people. But actually, she forgets to open the door.

And Peter is still outside, maybe wondering if any guards are at. And then he goes to them and he says, hey, guys, Peter is at the door. No, he's not. He's in prison. We're praying for his release.

[9:09] It's kind of funny, right? Come and pray with us. We need to, yeah? And anyway, finally they get it. Peter is there. But it's kind of funny. But still, overall, it's not necessarily happy, right?

I guess it's good for Peter and not for James. I think that's something to think about, right? Here are two apostles, both in prison. One gets executed. The other gets rescued.

Sometimes we just don't know what God's will is for us. Maybe you apply for a job. Will you get it? Will you not get it? But that's, yeah, we need to trust God sometimes with these things.

That's not what this chapter is about, so I won't go into it. But it's, yeah, if we place too much hope in certain expectations, that's maybe not a good thing. But what is God saying through this chapter? Well, one thing you might notice is that it seems so random. Because last week we talked about the Antioch church and we talked about Paul. And they were going on this trip to Jerusalem to, you know, to give famine relief.

[10:12] And then we get this chapter. And then it continues again 1225, right? And Barnabas and Saul returned. So if you left this chapter out, it didn't actually need to be there. Why is it here?

Especially, you know, Luke gives a lot of historical details. Chapter 12 happened three years earlier than the end of chapter 11. Why has he put it out of order here?

Well, it's for literary reasons. And I think we get closer to the meaning when we see that actually what happens to Peter, it's supposed to remind you of something.

Right? You know how some clever writers, they make you think about something in the way they write. And I think that's the case here. I don't know if you noticed any echoes of a very important biblical event.

Maybe let me retell the story and then you will notice. Right? So this is at Passover time. And, yeah, Peter's going to get executed. Right? By someone who wants to please the Jews, by some political leader.

[11:17] And so he's basically as good as dead. He's in this dark place underground. Right? He's as good as dead. But God does a miracle. And he gets out. And he is alive.

He's no longer dead. Right? He's not dead. And then he goes to his friends. And the first witness is a woman. She tells the men. And the men don't believe her.

But anyway, and finally they see him. And when they see him, yeah, they do believe. And he gives them instructions. Gives them a message to pass on. And then he goes to another place.

I mean, does it remind you of something? Yeah. Once you, you know, like they say on the internet, right? You just can't unsee it once you see it. Right? This is Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.

Right? Jesus, he died on the cross. And then he rose again from the dead. And he appeared to his friends. Again, first to Mary. And then she told the other disciples they didn't believe. Et cetera.

[12:15] But finally they saw him. They believed. He gives the message. And then he ascends into heaven. Right? This is, yeah. When you see it, okay, this is just Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.

But why does Luke do that? Well, we have to remember we had one of these before. And if you were here a couple of weeks ago, we were in chapter 7.

And chapter 7 was the same thing. That's when, well, another Christian being killed, Stephen. But there were so many details, again, just like Jesus' death. And back then this was a transition to a new stage.

It had been only in Jerusalem. But now the gospel was going to go out. Right? This is a new stage. Maybe you remember last week if you were here. Right? So Dan preached really well.

He preached. And part of kind of the context, what he said was, okay, hey, we have these three stages in Acts. Right? Stage, there's chapters 1 to 6.

[13:14] And then, can we have the next slide, please? Chapters 1 to 6. Chapter 8 to 11. 13 to 28. Right? Jerusalem, Peter to the Jews, Judea and Samaria.

Okay. Now, sorry. When I made this, there were some lines in the middle. Can we go back? But, yeah. Dan had these kind of lines between each stage, which for some reason don't appear. But, yeah, you have a line between each. Well, what is that line? It is a Christ-like death. Right? Chapter 7. Between stage 1 and 2, there was someone dying like Christ. And now, again, we have someone dying like Christ. Right? So, I mean, that's how people did things back then. I mean, how do you mark a chapter? I mean, we do that a bit like you see in the next picture.

Right? How do you see a chapter? Right? You have some white space. And then, you know, you have some title on the next page. That's how you know you're going to go from chapter 13 to 14.

[14:21] But back in the New Testament days, they didn't do that yet. Right? And most people couldn't read. They had it read out. So, I mean, this is Acts 12 and 13 and one of the oldest manuscripts of the Bible.

Can you see where chapter 13 starts? No? No. Yeah, you can? Yeah. If you can see. So, someone made a very helpful little, you know, the middle column, almost at the bottom, there is a little 13 on the right.

Someone said, okay, hey, here is 13. They put it in later. But, you know, you can't see where chapter 13 starts. How did they do that? You know, they put something in the text.

They had to kind of, hey, when this kind of thing happens, there's something new. And so, here it's the same thing. It's partly that phrase, right? Verse 24. The word of God increased and multiplied. But also, we get a death and resurrection. We get something like Christ's death. Which means we're going to a new stage. Right? The idea is this should be really exciting.

[15:24] You're reading Acts. You see the gospel going out. And then, okay, Stephen dies. Okay, that doesn't look. But, whoa. After that, hey, the gospel goes to Judea. It goes to Samaria.

And we get Paul converted. And we get the gospel going to the Gentiles. And we get the first international church. And now, we get another death and resurrection. And kind of, whoa, what's going to happen now?

That's the idea. This should be really exciting. Yeah. It's like you watch a movie. And it says, to be continued. Right? End of part two. The apostle Paul will return in Acts 3.

Coming soon to churches near you. I don't know. Something like that. Right? You're supposed to be hyped up for the next thing that's going to happen. That's the idea. And so, yeah, as we, you know, this is the end of stage two.

Going to stage three. You know, be excited that the gospel is growing. And maybe it didn't look so good. Maybe James got killed. And Peter got imprisoned. And there was a famine in Judea.

[16:21] And Christians didn't have the blessed life. But Luke is saying, hey, look. The gospel is expanding. And it's not just expanding. We're going to get something new in the next chapter.

Something exciting. Right? When, actually, it's not just natural growth. They're going to send out missionaries who are going to go to the ends of the earth. It's the next big thing in God's plan. And kind of the gospel goes from Peter to Paul.

Right? So, it should be. Yeah. That's the idea. Maybe. I don't know if I've been able to convey it. But the idea is, you know, this is encouraging and exciting. And, again, how would that speak to us?

Right? Maybe. I don't know. Maybe didn't mission months didn't feel like it for you. Just like maybe for them when Herod was chasing them. They didn't feel great. But, hey, look at what the gospel is doing.

Look beyond the problems in your life. Look at, lift up your eyes. The gospel is growing. That's exciting. Though, at the same time, I mean, Luke could have chosen anything.

[17:21] Right? He could have just put a poem between stages. He could have put some doxology. He could have said, amen, amen. I don't know. If you read the Psalms, how is the Psalms divided in the books?

Well, amen, amen. But, instead, we get a Christ-like death. We get Jesus' death. We get Stephen's death. We get Peter's death. And then we get another death.

Right? Why a death? Is he trying to tell us something? Right? I don't think this means kind of an absolute truth. That, okay, whenever the gospel is going forward, someone is going to die.

I mean, we'd love something big to happen at Watermark. We'd love to plant a church. It doesn't mean that one of our elders will get killed. It's a 20% chance it's me.

Yeah. We'd love to have a few more elders. Any volunteers? No, that's not. No, no. I don't think it's absolutely like that. And yet, this does suggest suffering, right?

[18:23] It suggests that, you know, we talk about following Jesus. What do you think it means to follow Jesus? Maybe we think loving people. That's a great thing.

Maybe spending time alone with the Father in prayer. Oh, how does Jesus define loving him, following him? Well, here's a famous verse that's in almost every gospel.

And he said to all, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. All right?

Following Jesus means taking up your cross, which you do when you're going to your death. All right? It's denying yourself. I mean, the most common description of Christians in Acts is the way. It's not the Mandalorian. The way. What is the way? Well, you look for the way in the gospels. And the way is, well, when Jesus, the thing that ends in Palm Sunday is when Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem.

[19:22] And he's teaching his disciples, but he's going to Jerusalem. He's going to his death. He's going to the cross. That is the way. The way is, yeah. And so, yeah, we should be excited as the gospel is growing.

But I think Paul wants, Luke wants to say, even though it's hard. It's hard. And maybe if you're not a Christian, I mean, we talk how great it is to be a Christian. Actually, the Bible also says it can be hard.

I mean, think about mission month. It can be a hard thing, right? So part of it could be rejection. Maybe you invited someone. You took a risk and you invited a friend or a colleague, but actually they didn't appreciate the invitation at all.

And actually it soured things a bit and, you know, led to some ridicule. I don't know how you feel, right? That can be hard. You may be still hurt inside. Maybe it's the work involved, right?

So Alpha was great. People put in a lot of effort, but that was a lot of work, right, if you were involved. Just showing up consistently and preparing this and preparing that. And it can be a lot of work.

[20:30] We're having this journey to the cross next week. It's great. But, you know, we have these staff members who are working so hard to build all that. That's trying to get a little organized. Maybe just being a witness, right?

You're in your office and you're an ambassador for Christ, which means, well, you need to behave, right? Maybe everything is so frustrating and your computer doesn't work and you want to just bash it, right?

I feel like that sometimes. But, of course, you can't do that, right, because you're a Christian. And everyone looks to you to see what, you know, for the truth of Christianity. So you can't, right? You can't let you.

You need to fight sin. All those things are hard about being a Christian. It's hard about reaching out. And God knows that. And that's why partly he's saying, as you think about, okay, why the gospel transition?

Well, it's people suffering. There is suffering. There's hard work involved. Now, of course, and in some places it's even worse, right? Hong Kong is a free society.

[21:30] Other places Christians really get killed. But even if it's not persecution, following Jesus is hard. And Luke wants to remind you of that. Reminds me of that. Reminds us.

Although then you kind of wonder if it's so tough. You know, is it worth it? How can we endure this? Well, there's a few more verses that we can look at.

Because, okay, after this we get this story about Herod. Right? We get the death of Herod. So, I don't know. What happens?

He was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. Verse 20. They came to him. And, you know, they were going to have some meeting. And on a pointed day, verse 21, Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne and delivered an oration to them.

And, yeah, the people were shouting the voice of a god and not a man. And then he was struck down. It seems a weird story. Although it's also in other books. I don't know if you have heard of Josephus.

[22:32] He was a Jewish historian. He actually writes about the same thing. So, we know this was in August. The festival to honor Caesar. Apparently, Herod was wearing this outfit with a lot of silver.

He had this big silver robe. And so, he was really shiny in the sun. And everyone, you know, he was so shiny they couldn't. And then they, yeah, that's when they said, oh, you're a god and not a mere mortal.

That's what, yeah, this Jewish historian said. And so, he liked it. But then he saw an owl sitting. And that was, okay, that's bad news. And then he got, apparently he got these very violent stomach pains.

He had to be carried into the palace. And after five days of terrible stomach pains, he died. But, according to history. But, what's the point? I mean, we don't get the death of Pilate or Kayafas or any of the other bad guys that we know from the Gospels.

It doesn't really read like a warning. I don't know. When you heard it read, I hope you felt it was kind of a good thing, right? And not a tragic, sad death. But this guy, he persecuted.

[23:37] He killed James. He tried to kill Peter. And it's not like after that he became a nice guy. No, it should remind us of something. Again, Luke, he's a clever writer.

He wants to remind us of things. Here's an act of judgment. Coming after Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension. Well, it's his return, right? Jesus' return.

This is kind of, I mean, it's not an echo back. It's more of a foreshadowing. But it's kind of Jesus will come back and judge. Right after the death, resurrection, ascension, Jesus will come back.

And so why can, yeah, why is this good? Why can we keep going? Well, because Jesus will return and win. Jesus will come back and win.

I mean, that's the hope of the church, right? One day, Jesus will come back. And he's going to deal with all oppression. He's going to deal with all evil. He's going to make everything right. And then everything will be fine once Jesus comes.

[24:37] That's the great hope. And that is what we're all looking forward to, right? And this story is just, I think it's put here as a reminder that that will happen. And maybe that's new to you.

I mean, we talk a lot about the cross here at Watermark. Maybe we don't talk about as much that, yeah, Jesus will return to come and judge. But they go together.

I mean, why would Jesus die on a cross? Well, we know to save us. But to save us from what? Not from loneliness or frustration. Why did he come to save us?

Well, the Bible says he came to save us from judgment. Because there he took that judgment. Judgment needs to come. And either Jesus took, take it, but for others it will come when he returns. And punishing sin, I hope you can see from this story, in some ways it's a good thing. The only thing is we're all sinners and we all need to cross. I do. All of us here do. But for his people, suffering oppression, those who don't have to be afraid of the judgment, then, well, Jesus' return is a wonderful thing.

[25:45] For many Christians in the world, this is their great hope. In the New Testament, that's the great hope, that Jesus will come. And so, yeah, I hope that helps you, right?

Why get excited that the gospel is growing and another new phase, even though it's hard? Well, because there is this end. It's leading to something, right?

The things we're doing, it has a goal, right? It's going to work out. It's going to conclude when Jesus comes. That's the idea, right?

So many things that we do don't lead to anything, right? So many things at work. It's actually not going to last. Actually, this is something that will last.

I mean, I need that. I mean, I've mentioned that before. I'm generally very cynical. Someone has a great, someone has an idea, and I think it's not going to work. Then I'm really not motivated to put much time and energy into something that I believe is not going to work, right?

[26:44] Why waste that time? Maybe you feel, okay, being a Christian is hard work. What a waste of time. Well, it's not a waste of time because Jesus will return, and he will win, and the gospel project is all going to conclude.

It's going to finish. It's going to achieve everything God has planned, right? Isn't it great to know that you're part of something that will work, something successful, something that's not going to be messed up by anyone, right?

So what does that mean for us? Indeed. Yeah. Yeah. And so, yeah, what does God want for us? I guess for some of us, press on, endure, right?

Keep going. I think, generally, God wants us, and so what does this mean? We should be, well, let's be involved with the gospel, right? Anyway, as I was thinking of these lines between stages, I don't know if you've ever thought about how Acts ends.

So if you can have these three stages, right? There's not just a line between stage one and two. If you read the book of Acts, there's a line at the end of the book. Paul has another death and resurrection.

[27:54] What's the implication? Well, there's another stage after that. But who's going to do that, right? It's not Peter. It's not Paul. Well, it's us, right?

It's the reader. It's kind of, you know, you are here. I don't know if you know that organization, Acts 29, right? They plant churches across the world. Why do they call it? There's no Acts 29.

Acts 28. But the point is, Acts hasn't finished yet. All right? So if you think about it, okay, here's a death and resurrection after that new stage.

Now you think of the book as a whole, you know, there is more to come. There is another stage. And that is kind of where we fit in. Right? The gospel has reached you.

You have eternal life. That's wonderful. But God isn't finished yet. There's more people who he wants to save. There's a whole world out there. The ends of the earth. I hope we want to get behind that.

[28:49] I know we have many things in our life. We have our jobs. And we have dating and parenting. And all kinds of things that take time. But let's not ignore the big thing God is doing. Right? The one thing that will succeed.

The most glorious thing that we know will ever happen. Even though that will be hard. And so, yeah. I think that's what God wants us to do. If we are excited that the gospel is growing.

And we know it's going to finish when Jesus returns. Well, let's give up our time. Let's serve. Let's take risks. Let's reach out. Even though, yeah.

We might face hardship. Even though we might face oppression. Ever. If that comes. We don't know all the details. We don't know exactly who will be saved. We don't know exactly, you know. If everything we try will succeed. But overall, the big picture we know. Right? Jesus will come. And everything will complete. Let's push for that.

[29:44] Why don't we pray? Father, it's so great that we.

So many things that we don't know the future of. And yet, overall, we do know the future. We know Jesus will come. We know he will make everything right. We know that this gospel project will come together perfectly and beautifully.

Thank you for making us part of that. For saving us. Would we play our part that you want us to play? Lord, we. Many of us are in different places. Some of us are tired. Some of us are discouraged.

Some of us are distracted. Will you bring your truth. Your hope. Your comfort to each and every one of us here. That we would be the church you want us to be. And that we would play our part.

We ask this in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen.