To Live Is Christ, To Die Is Gain

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[0:00] This evening we're going to continue our study in the book of Acts, Acts chapter 12.

! And we're going to read the passage of Acts chapter 12 from verses 1 to 19. However, I'm going to cover verses 1 through 5. And so what you will see is maybe a snippet of what will be covered next week, at least in part, by Pastor Mike.
And it is going to be an exciting part that's going to be covered, a great miracle that will be happening, or that did happen with Peter. And so it's a great passage of Scripture, one talking about great faith.
So let's, I'll read this and you all can follow along in your copy of God's Word. This is the Word of the Lord. About that time, Herod the king laid violent hands on someone who belonged to, or 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.
[1:22] 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. 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 second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city.
[2:36] 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 am 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.

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 to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the 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 happened to Peter.
[3:58] I can imagine. And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the centuries and ordered that they should be put to death.

Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea, or Caesarea, I should say, and spent time there. All right. May God add a blessing to the reading of his word and also to the preaching of it.

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So we're going through the first five verses. That's such a fascinating passage of Scripture. That miracle after miracle after, you know, kind of a humorous thing going on.
And an interesting thing of, you know, leaving Peter at the door and saying, Hey, it's Peter. I don't think so. That kind of stuff. It's interesting stuff. It's interesting read.
That's for sure. And so Pastor Mike will be preaching on that in the next week or two. And that will be an exciting thing. Definitely going on. I want to cover the first five verses.
[4:58] And this is the book of history, the book of Acts. And it's something that's worth remembering when we study history in God's word. We are studying a history that is not a comprehensive history.

It's purposefully not a comprehensive history. It's not covering all of the basis that's going on, even in the area that the history is happening.
It's just not covering everything. There's a lot of things that are not said. However, when we study a broader view of history that's related to what Scripture is saying, we actually get to understand some of the things going on in the history that's happening here.
And one of these is this guy, Herod the King. Herod the King, there's lots of Herods in the Bible. They're all related, by the way. But there's Herod the Great that was during the birth of Christ, known for that.
There's Herod Antipas, who would be Herod's son, who was at the trial of Christ. Pilate sent Christ to Herod Antipas. And then there's another Herod later on, called Agrippa, later on in the book of Acts.
[6:10] He's Herod Agrippa II. This is Herod Agrippa I. And Herod Agrippa is Herod Agrippa II's father and the grandson of Herod the Great.

Now, I don't think he really knew his grandfather very well, and that's probably good, because he would have been dead if he did. Herod the Great was just a violent, ruthless king who was jealous about his kingdom.
I mean, we see that in the birth of Christ and the narrative of the birth of Christ. We see that the wise men traveled, the magi traveled. They talked to Herod and his family, and they talked about the king of the Jews.
And, of course, Herod is the king of the Jews, as he says. And he was jealous of that. He killed, slaughtered all the male babies, two years of age and under, because of that.
And just a massive, massive death, not even close to the first people he ever killed. Matter of fact, he killed a good portion of his family.
[7:21] He was afraid that they were going to overtake him in the throne. Eventually did. But anyway, he was very afraid. He killed sons. He killed grandchildren.

He killed all kinds of people. And one of the people he killed was Herod Agrippa I's father. His father was killed.
And at that point, Herod, or Agrippa, who was three years old at the time, fled to or was taken to Rome by his mother.
And they lived among the Roman Empire. They lived among the royal family, basically, of Rome. And so he grew up amongst people.
He grew up amongst a guy who would eventually become emperor. His name is Caligula. They were around the same age, I guess. But they grew up. They were friends. And so he grew up.
[8:18] He kind of lived a pretty lavish life. I mean, all of them did. I mean, that's just kind of how the royal family was, even most royal families today. And yet he lived such a lavish life that he overextended himself.

He got into a ton of debt. That debt got him in trouble. That debt became a problem to the Roman Empire because they had to deal with that themselves. So they were about to put him in prison. He fled back to his homeland, his ancestral homeland, which was Edomia, which was south of Jerusalem, kind of where Edom is from the Old Testament, the land that Esau started, the nation Esau started.
And so he fled there. He stayed there until an emperor named Tiberias gave him asylum to come back or to live back in the empire as a free man until Tiberias got mad with him and put him back in prison.
And he stayed in prison until Tiberias died. Caligula took over as emperor, freed him, and immediately gave him a kingdom. And his kingdom was north of Judea and Samaria, the area

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around Galilee, modern-day Syria and Lebanon, that area he got to serve as kingdom.
And his goal, his goal all along was to get the kingdom that Herod the Great had, his grandfather. You know, he wanted to serve that entire kingdom. And eventually, as Herod Antipas passed away, he was exiled, actually.
[9:50] He took over that Judea and Samaria. And so for several years, he had control of the entire land that Herod the Great had control of.

He had arrived. Now, the Bible declares him as being an evil man. And, you know, it's right, definitely. However, when you study his history with leading the Jews, it's a little more complicated than that.
And so, really, by outward appearance, he was a pretty good Jew. Now, you know the old adage, when in Rome, do as the Romans do.
Is that right? Okay, well, he did that really well. When he was in Rome, he was a good Roman. He was metropolitan. He was very good. He did what the Romans did. He ate bacon in the morning, I'm sure.
Who knows? He was a good Roman. But when he came to Jerusalem, when he came to Judea and Samaria to lead them, he started to develop the traditions of the Jews.
[10:53] And he was faithful in those carrying out those traditions, at least by outward appearance. Really, his wife was even more so than him. There was a phrase in the Jewish tradition, history book, it said the king is guided by the queen, and the queen is guided by Gamaliel.

Now, Gamaliel was a great teacher that the Bible talks about. He was Paul's teacher, we believe. So, or, you know, Saul before his conversion.
So his newfound Jewish customs even extended to Rome. The emperor Caligula had a desire to basically be worshipped as a god in Jerusalem.
And he was going to erect a statue right there in the inner court of the temple. So the men, as they went into the inner court, were to worship Caligula, the god of, or a god, I guess, of Jerusalem.
And that was his desire. And however this happened, I'm not totally sure, but Agrippa persuaded Caligula to not do that. And, matter of fact, persuaded him to treat to treat Jerusalem and the Jews more humanely than that.
[12:09] And so, he had really good rapport with the Jewish leaders. They were loyal to him. And, of course, as they were loyal to Agrippa, they were compliant with Rome. And so, really, even with Caligula not putting that statue in there, it was a best-case scenario for him not to do that because it really made Agrippa look really good that he had fought for the Jews, without a doubt.

And now, I say that, I don't know how Agrippa convinced Caligula not to erect the statue in the temple, but there actually is a decent clue. There's a name that the historians gave this Roman period.
Pax Romana. Now, that literally means Roman peace. Really, what it actually means is toleration. But, there are many nations conquered by the Romans in about 200-year period.
Started right before Christ, about 20 years before, and then followed into, like, the 150s, 160s. And so, they conquered many nations during this time, many people, groups, many cultural traditions and customs that would come with that.
And they didn't overtake those customs and traditions for the most part. But, they were, they just, they basically tolerated those customs and traditions.
[13:30] Some exceptions, of course, but that was the norm. And so, one of the primary characteristics holding the Pax Romana idea together was the preservation of status quo.

Not status quo of Rome, necessarily, but status quo of the area in itself. So, again, the old adage, when in Rome, do as the Romans do, that's pretty much the definition of status quo right there. So, when in Galatia, when in Syria, when in Judea, you do as those people do. That's just the way the Pax Romana idea goes.
And that was kind of Agrippa, according to historians, that was his way of dealing with his kingdom. Just basically, you know, the majority rule, that kind of thing.
So, Rome championed this cause with a massive army, and they stationed that army anywhere they needed to where there was going to be dissension. And so, we come to the New Testament, and we see a lot of Roman soldiers in Israel.
[14:36] So, guess what there was in Israel? Dissension, without a doubt, to the Roman Empire. And so, anyway, Agrippa carried out that tradition in a pretty hard way.

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I mean, you know, the other Herods carried that tradition out. Pontius Pilate carried that tradition out before him. And so, he used the units that were at his disposal of the army to suppress dissenters, support the majority, or preferred people within the land.
And, of course, the preferred people would come from people most loyal to the crown. You know, most honoring to the crown. Catch my drift.
You know, and there's some examples of these dissenters. Barabbas is a good example of that. You know that Pontius Pilate brought Barabbas out to say, okay, we're going to free either Barabbas or Jesus of Nazareth.
Well, Barabbas was an insurrectionist. He committed murder. And the insurrection is what it says in Scripture in Mark 15. The Jewish teacher, Gamaliel, visit him again.
[15:47] They referred to two men when he was talking about Peter and John and freeing them and trying to not be on, you know, not be against the Lord just in case that happened.

And he talked about some dissenters as well. He talked about a guy named Theodos. He talked about another guy named Judas the Galilean. Judas the Galilean's a very famous guy in history. And he's, if you ever read like the Maccabees from the Apocrypha, he's all over that. And so, they're famous dissenters.
So anyway, of previous years. And so, in the spirit of peace, the Jewish Christians were considered to be the opposite of that in that land.
They were seen as disturbers of the peace. Rabble-rousers. And we see a lot of examples in the Bible about that. I mean, it starts really before Christ.
[16:47] But even with Jesus, he talks, Mike talks about one on Sunday when he talked about grumbling. You know, the people, the Jews grumbled when they heard that Christ was the bread from heaven.

They grumbled at that. You know, that's dissension. And then later on in the book of John, Jesus says, before Abraham was, I am, thus declaring himself to be God.
They took up stones. We're going to stone him. Jesus called Pharisees all kinds of names that were cruel yet true, very true, woefully true.
And yet, the people shouted later, crucify him. That was the response. In the book of Acts, Peter and John were arrested for healing and proclaiming the Sabbath, as recorded in chapter 4.
And the Sanhedrin threatened to speak and publicly serve the Lord. Threatened to them not to speak, not to publicly serve the Lord. They're not to do that anymore.
[17:53] That was what they asked them to do. Of course, they proclaimed an Old Testament passage later on that really prophesied this kind of thing is going to happen and happened many times over.

It says in quoting from Psalm 2, Why did the Gentiles rage in the people's plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His anointed, saying, Let us break the bonds asunder and cast away the cords from us.
And it goes on and on for 12 verses. And yet, we see a really good example in all of these places and really in the passage of Scripture we're going to talk about too.
And then the deacon Stephen, who was considered to be the first martyr recorded in Scripture after Christ. We're claiming to a mob the history of salvation.
He spoke truthfully and directly. You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears. You always resist the Holy Spirit as your fathers did, so do you.
[19:00] That's from Acts 7, verse 51. For the truthful teaching and application for this and for the application He gave them, they stoned Him to death. Why?

Well, He's a dissenter. And now we come to this passage and we see those rulers believing. They believe they even know that they are doing right by the empire by what they're doing right here.
You know, there's a point of view of how things go across. Yes, the Bible declares Herod the king in this passage to be evil. Without a doubt. I mean, I didn't even read the last part of chapter 12.
how He died. But, He declares it to be evil and certainly was deserving of that gruesome death. Yet, in another point of view, in the view of the ruling class of that day, He did the right thing here.
Now, why do I say that? Well, I say that because every time someone is martyred, you know, about every time, someone is martyred in our world.
[20:12] They have broken a law and they're being punished for breaking that law. A law of the land, a law that goes against God's word without a doubt, but it is a law of that land that they're

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living in and they've broken that law.

And we're seeing that today. today in the United States of America. Without a doubt. I know we have this illness going on and it's serious without a doubt, but does that mean that we have to stop doing what we're doing right now?
I don't think so. I think we have the freedom to do this. We have the freedom to gather together, even socially distanced, and to share in God's word and worship together and preach the gospel. And that is our freedom. And matter of fact, it's not the Constitution that gives us that freedom, it's God that gives us that freedom. And that's a freedom that all Christians have all over the world, regardless of the laws of their land.
They have that freedom. And many engage in it, even the ones who get in trouble for it. And so there's a pastor in California by the name of Rob McCoy.
[21:26] He was an elected official in his town. And he resigned back in March because he knew that he wanted to lead his church in taking communion and in public worship.

And he did that. He started having communion services in April. In May, he began public worship again. And now, he is, and their church are being fined.
And he is having threatened charges of contempt. Basically, of going against the court telling them to stop. Which will put him in jail.
That could potentially happen. There's another church in California, North Valley Baptist Church. They were fined $10,000 last Sunday for doing exactly what we did last Sunday.
Meeting on Sunday morning and Sunday evening. So can you imagine? We had a sermon on grumbling. Do not grumble. And then after that saying, we just got fined $10,000. That would be a tough way to learn about not grumbling, wouldn't it?
[22:35] It really would. And we need to pray for those churches. And then of course we know about John MacArthur. And we know about Grace Community Church. And, you know, they have a lot more funding and are able to get good lawyers.

And they're fighting some court cases and winning many of those. And of course all that's still ongoing and continuing. And of course those are the three churches that are known.
I mean, who else is out there? What other states even? It's hard to say. And so, what's going on here? Though a lot more severe than what we're dealing with of course.
Well, there are people in the United States who are beginning to deal with that. That is. And this may be, you know, a wonderful place to live in Oklahoma. But, will it come here someday? someday? In some fashion, I guarantee it. In some fashion. Alright, so I look at this passage of scripture. This first five verses of chapter 12.
[23:44] And I see two overarching principles in this passage. Very simple principles. Any of you can preach this message. God's sovereign will.

You see it all throughout this passage. And then the importance of intercessory prayer. The importance of intercessory prayer. So, where do we see the sovereignty of God in this passage? Well, look no further than verse one. Time of Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.
We see sovereignty of God in the work of Herod the king. We see that work done. You know, we may think how in the world will God move in the work of a king laying violent hands on his people? Well, he does it all the time. He continues to do that today. I just go to the voice of the martyrs and see all kinds of examples of the way people have been touched by martyrs.
[24:47] And how many people have given their lives to Christ even if it meant death for them. Because of seeing someone be martyred. There's a Puritan preacher back in the day that's William Grinnell that said, Paul was Nero's prisoner but Nero was much more God's.

I saw that today on Facebook. The guy was applying it to what's going on today. But it can apply here too. You know, Herod, Herod Agrippa, you know, I mean, these guys were his prisoners but much more God's.
Herod Agrippa was God's prisoner. And, you know, that's the reality. God was moving in this moment. We see the sovereignty of God in the martyrdom of James. We do.
He died. Peter got to live. And we see this, the verse that Paul declared to the Philippians laid out here. Very well, to live as Christ to die is gain.
You see that right here. To live as Christ to die is gain. You know, James got to die and be executed for the cause of Christ. And Peter got to live for the cause of Christ to continue to serve

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the cause of Christ.
[26:06] So we see that in the martyrdom of James. We see the sovereignty of God in Peter's arrest. You know, he knew and trusted in God through all of this.

And yeah, you look at the details of this arrest. It's ugly. And yet, in verse 6, he was sleeping. How can you do that in that tough time if you don't trust in God?
If you can't have some peace. He found his peace in God. And we will see the will of God in powerful men and in the tight security as next week Pastor Mike gets into this passage of Scripture starting in verse 6.
We'll see that miracle that's happening. And you read it, you'll see that too. You know, these tight security and the powerful men and all these decisions that are going on, they don't hold a candle to God's will.
You see, these four squads of soldiers now, a squad during the Roman times, that was at least four men, four to six. You know, somewhat like our squads, maybe a little smaller perhaps, in the army.
[27:15] You know, so each of these squads took a shift, most likely, and you see evidence of the squad itself in verse 6. Peter was bound by chains between two soldiers and then there were sentries before the door guarding the prison.

So, two next to him and the rest of them were guarding the prison. That's a squad. And they were able to stay fresh. So, can you imagine, you know, four squads like that could be 20 men that are given to the task of guarding Peter.
I mean, it's just like he's a murderer or something. What's going on here? But yet, there's a special purpose for Peter and you see that spelled out as well right here in verse, starting in verse 3.
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 or soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.
So, the feast of unleavened bread. What does this remind you of? The arrest, another arrest. It reminds you of the arrest of Jesus. That was happening during the days of unleavened bread.
[28:31] That's happening during the Passover and you know that Pilate had another prisoner to bring out and say, you know, which one do you want? Giving that to the people.

Who knows what's going on in this situation if he just wanted to bring Peter out and show him to all of the Jews to make them excited and to make them love him even more and support him even more.
I don't know what's going on there. But still, it was happening here for a special time. So special that he gave 20 men or about 20 men to that charge.
Valuable, valuable soldiers just to guard Peter throughout the clock. It's crazy. All right, so, you know, we can look at all these, all these, all these things and see where the sovereignty of God, you know, when we see our nation right now, we don't see a lot of, we don't have a lot of answers right now.
You know, there's a lot of people, you know, the coronavirus stuff. There's not a lot of answers out there. You know, when is there going to be some help? When's there going to be a medicine or a vaccine or whatever?
[29:42] There's not a lot of answers out there right now. A lot of, well, no, we're working on it. And I'm sure they are. But still, not a lot of answers. And, you know, right now with where the country is heading spiritually, there's not a lot of answers.

There hasn't been a lot of answers for a long time. It just keeps getting worse. So what do we do? Well, it's a Sunday school answer. We trust in God. Simple as that.
We also see the need and importance of intercessory prayer at this time. I want you to know the church, this early church, was not, did not have some special thing going on any more than any other church has.
You know, it's not like they had great miraculous power necessarily. It's not like they had any supernatural vision or supernatural knowledge beyond what the Lord gave them and beyond what the Lord gives us.
You know, so when they see all this trouble happening, you know, they didn't know what to do either. They didn't know what was going to go on either. So we saw the need and importance of intercessory prayer right here in verse 5.

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[30:56] So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. There's so much we can learn from this early church.

You know, during this time you would think the king is attacking the church. What do people do when they're attacked?
They hide. They run away. They lose heart. This church didn't do that. They simply gathered together to pray.
And it was an earnest prayer, a sincere prayer. It proves a sincere faith. See, those who come to God in prayer must believe, one, that He is. I mean, honestly, you can prove that God is real.
This is the time to prove God is real. You know that God is real. that He lends a gracious and willing ear to prayer and He does it in order that He may in His own time and wisdom and method answer that prayer and do nothing less than answer it.
[32:07] They knew that in faith. It was obvious. You look at this verse and you see an assumption of patience in this prayer. again, like I said, they weren't more powerful than we are.

They're not omniscient people. You know, they had the apostles, of course, but we have the acts of the apostles now. We have it in here with everything else.
That's God's inerrant word. So, even though they didn't know everything, even though they couldn't do everything, they trusted in God's intervention and sovereign will because they knew who knew everything.
And we need to do the same thing at all times, including tonight when we have prayer time. And then a specificity to their prayer and a specificity to their prayer.
That wasn't speaking in tongues, by the way. They came together in one voice to intercede on Peter's behalf for the Lord to protect him.
[33:17] And let's not take that for granted. They actually came together specifically praying for a specific reason. That's important. We don't need to be general necessarily.

We can be. That's fine. But let's be specific when we can. And we generally can. Generally. And so, let's pray for these needs in a specific way.
We have lots of needs in our nation right now. Let's pray for those needs. Riots going on and just continue on and on. One in Wisconsin now.
Let's continue to pray for those needs. And there's a lot of spiritual needs going on too. I mean, there's lots of people that, even people that have had a habit of attending church on a regular basis fallen out of that habit.
I mean, I think an estimate of one out of three active church members prior to this pandemic are no longer actively attending or actively in pursuit of worshiping.
[34:25] They're not even, you know, watching their church services online. That's an estimate. But that's a pretty dire estimate. One out of three. I mean, that's not talking about the people who, you know, don't do church at all anyway.

And so, let's pray for these needs, these spiritual needs. You know, when we come together and pray for physical needs, let's remember to pray for spiritual needs. Let's also remember to pray for the persecuted church.
That's a great need going on in this nation. Right now, we can pray for those churches in California and other churches in our nation that are being affected by government that is getting out of control. But there have been nations, the government's been out of control since the founding of the nation. And there are Christians who are suffering badly and greatly because of that.
Let's continue to pray for them. and remember them in prayer when we pray either at home or here in the church or elsewhere. These are all important.
[35:42] So to conclude, I understand that we in America have been blessed with great freedom, have not come close to experiencing the persecution many have experienced all over the world. You know, many of us may not even feel like we've experienced persecution at all.

Especially when we make comparisons with others. But Jesus Christ lets us know this. In this world, we will have tribulation.
John 16, 33. And also, that verse says two other things too that are promises that are good. We need to find our peace in Him. We don't need to find our peace in anything else in this world.
We need to find our peace in Him. And then we are to take heart even when we know that tribulation is going to come. We are to take heart for Christ has overcome the world.

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That's a beautiful thought. Christ has overcome the world. So let that be our motto that we are to take heart.
[36:51] Because we know as Paul proclaimed to the Philippians, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for this day. We thank You for the opportunity we have to gather together to learn from Your Word, to learn through singing.
Father, I pray for churches right now that are dealing with government overreach, churches that are not even allowed to sing. We take our singing for granted.
It's so fun. It's wonderful. It's great to come together and sing praises to You, Lord, and truth of Your Word. And their churches don't even get to do that right now.
So Father, I pray for them. Father, I pray for the churches that I mentioned in California that have been fined that are being threatened for arrest.
[37:49] And Father, I pray that You keep their pastors and leaders and members strong throughout this entire time. We don't know what's going to happen. They don't know what's going to happen.

But You do. And You can protect us like You've protected so many other people that even if there's death at the door, let us remember that to live is Christ, to die is gain.
Let us remember that to trust in You and that You are our hope in life and in death. I lift up all this in Jesus' name. Amen.
Thank you.

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