Entitlement Trap

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Acts 12:1-19

November 11, 2018
We live in the age of entitlement. Entitlement is everywhere. Entitlement is the pernicious belief that other people owe us something. Parents owe their children every possible advantage and modern convenience. Companies owe their employees special treatment. Governments owe their citizens entitlements.

Entitlement confuses privileges with rights. When I was learning to drive, my high school driving instructor used to say that driving is a privilege not a right.

Some people bring this entitlement mentality to church with them. I give my hard-earned money to my church. I volunteer my time. I begin to think, while I would never actually say it aloud, that God owes me something. For all my hard work and generosity, I am entitled to certain favors from God. When God doesn’t answer my prayers in a manner I expect, I turn away.

The elder brother in Jesus’ Prodigal Son parable operates out of an entitlement mentality. His hard work and good behavior entitles him to his father’s estate.

Let me set the record straight. God does not owe me anything. I owe him everything.

Jesus does not promise his followers a trouble-free life. He said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

We are now 12 chapters into the book of Acts. The early church has been on a roll. They are growing in numbers and influence. Witness the conversion of an Ethiopian man in Acts 8, Saul’s conversion in Acts 9, Cornelius’ conversion in Acts 10 and the emergence of the Antioch church in Acts 12.
Everything comes to a screeching halt in Acts 12. We read in verse 1, “It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.” Herod Agrippa I is his formal name. He is grandson of Herod the Great, responsible for the slaughter of all male Jewish children under the age of two (Matthew 2:16). He is the nephew of Herod Antipas who ordered the execution of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-12). He is father of Herod Agrippa II, who is complicit in Paul’s death (Acts 25-26). If you get these Herods confused, just remember all of them are bums!

Herod Agrippa wants to boost his approval ratings with the Jewish people. That’s why he decides in verse 2 to execute James the Apostle. James is one of Jesus’ original 12 apostles and a member of Jesus’ inner circle (Acts 1:13).

Herod does not stop there. He arrests Peter and throws him into prison. His decision to wait until Passover is over to conduct a trial is but a sham. He has every intent of executing Peter as he did James.

Meanwhile, back at Mary’s house, the church prays for Peter’s release (12:5).

Herod knows Peter’s reputation as an escape artist. Earlier in Acts, Peter managed to escape a maximum-security prison. Herod assigns four squadrons of four soldiers each to guard Peter around-the-clock. Two chained to his wrists and two more to guard his prison cell. That’s 16 soldiers assigned to a single prisoner.

An angel comes to Peter in the dead of night to rouse him from a deep sleep. This angel has to guide a
groggy Peter every step of the way. Peter contributes nothing to his rescue except sleep and incredulity.

The angel leads Peter to safety. When it dawns on Peter that he is not dreaming, he seeks refuge in Mary’s house from maniacal Herod.

When Peter knocks at the door, servant Rhoda asks him for proper identification. When she recognizes Peter’s voice, she runs to tell the disciples, leaving Peter outside on the front stoop. We pick up the dialogue in verse 14. “Peter is at the door,” she exclaims. The disciples respond, “You’re crazy. It must be his angel” (12:15). The disciples praying for Peter’s rescue treat Rhoda’s report as crazy talk. They cannot quite conceive that the answer to their prayers is standing at the front door.

“It must be his angel” is likely a reference to Peter’s guardian angel. Jews in those days believed God assigned to every believer a guardian angel, even though the biblical evidence for the idea is meager at best.

Peter keeps knocking (12:16). Hello? The whole scene makes for good comedy. They open the door and Peter walks back into their lives. He recounts the story of his improbable rescue.

The next morning, there is a whole lot of commotion going on down at the local jail. Herod orders the execution of all the soldiers responsible for Peter’s jailbreak. As I said, Herod is not a nice guy.
The story closes with Herod presiding over a coalition of people from the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. Herod is angry with them over something. Since they depend on him for food supplies, they are eager to appease Herod. Herod loves being appeased. He is dressed, according to the first century historian Josephus, in robes of silver that glisten in the sun. The people hail him as a god.

Acts 12.19-24
This is the voice of God, not of a man.

God has seen enough. The angel strikes Herod dead. Everything has come full circle. At the outset of Acts 13, Peter languishes in prison just as Herod’s stock is on the rise. At the close of the chapter, Peter has a new lease on life just as Herod dies a grisly death.

The contrast between divine and human power is striking in Acts 13. Herod wields the sword, but God holds sway over life and death. Herod treats these apostles like pawns yet is powerless to withstand God’s power. The disciples feel small and insignificant in the face of this mighty Roman Emperor. Yet, things are not always what they seem.

I wrestled with Acts 12 this week. Most preachers skip over James’ execution and focus all their attention on Peter’s rescue. Me—I’m still stuck on why James draws the short straw. Luke offers no explanation why one is eliminated and the other spared. I can only assume the church prayed for both.

Luke does not tell us why God “permits” one apostle to die and the other to be rescued. Their only recourse is to trust in
God’s providence. There is no explanation why God doesn’t prevent the premature death of some of his choice servants.

I fall back on something God said through the prophet Isaiah: “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts’” (55:8-9).

God does not promise a smooth ride, only a safe landing. God never promises us an easy journey, only a safe arrival.

We are talking All-In this fall. These 12 apostles are All-in. James dies for what he believes. Peter will die a martyr’s death later, as will all the apostles.

Tertullian (155-225AD) was an early church scholar and defender of the faith. He said to his detractors, “We multiply when we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is the seed [of the church].”

Author and theologian St. Jerome (347-420AD) wrote something similar a century or so later: “The church of Christ has been founded by shedding its own blood not that of others, by enduring outrage, not by inflicting it. Persecutions make it grow, martyrdoms have crowned it.”

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I offer three applications for your consideration today.
First, cherish our religious freedom. Religious liberty is under assault around the world. The persecution and genocide of Christians is worse today than any other time in history. The map on your screen identifies areas of the world where Christians experience significant persecution. My fear is not that my Christian faith will cost me something, but that it will cost me nothing at all.

Some suggestions: Become better informed about the plight of persecuted Christians around the world; pray for the persecuted church; support ministries that advocate for persecuted Christians such as International Justice Mission (IJM) and Operation Mobilization (OM). Some of you may be in a position to lobby for the religious freedom for persecuted people.

Second, resist the entitlement trap. Entitlement leads to chronic disappointment. Resist entitlement. Follow in the way of Jesus who models servanthood.

Some suggestions. Read and reflect on Mark 10:43-45 this week: “The Son of man did not come to be served but to serve. Whoever is great among you must be your servant” (10:43-45). Ask Jesus to give you a servant heart. Identify one place in your life where you can practice servanthood. Do a menial job for someone, visit an elderly neighbor or help our church in some support role.

Third, trust God’s sovereignty. Be honest. We welcome God’s sovereignty in our lives until something bad happens
to us. Can we learn to trust God’s gracious sovereignty, when the circumstances of our lives don’t make sense?

A suggestion: Turn over one area of your life to God that you are holding back for yourself right now—a propensity to anger, a resentment for someone or a bad habit you cannot seem to break. Trusting in God’s benevolent sovereignty in one area of your life will translate into other areas also.

God owes me nothing. I owe him everything!

God doesn’t owe us anything. We owe Him everything!

**Trust in God’s Sovereignty**