

THE BEST LAID PLANS**Acts 12**

Intro: The quote for today is from a poem by the Scottish poet, Robert Burns. The poem is entitled “TO A MOUSE” and it was inspired by Burns' destruction of a mouse's nest as he was plowing a field. In fact, you might be able to see the subtitle that Burns gave it, was “*On Turning her up in her Nest, with the Plough, November 1785*” The poem has eight stanzas which can be recited in about two minutes. Burns wrote in Broad Scots which is almost understandable and I love it but I'll not subject you to my questionable pronunciations. Instead let me read verse seven to you in English:

*But little mouse, you're not alone,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid plans of mice and men
Go oft awry,
And leave us only grief and pain,
For promised joy!*

You have probably heard the term “of mice and men” in some way or another, especially if you've read John Steinbeck's novel with that title. But you may have also heard it as you see in the quote on your worship folder – “*The best laid plans of mice and men go awry*”. Many quote it but don't know where it came from – and now you do. The gist of it is simply, “*You just never know.*” That is, you can plan but it probably won't work out the way you hope. It's like the Yiddish proverb that I have used before that says “*Make plans and God laughs.*” which has been expanded by some to, “*If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.*” It all means, essentially, **NOTHING GOES ACCORDING TO PLAN NO MATTER HOW WELL WE PLAN.** The truth is, I could have titled this sermon, **GOD'S PLANS AND OUR PLANS** and it would have been just as accurate. The world thinks that nothing goes according to plan because that's not what the “universe dictates”, but what Christ Followers know is that God's plan is what wins out. So we can plan all we want, and if it's not what God is planning or has allowed, we might as well hang it up now.

Our text is a picture of this: King Herod had plans that furthered his own political position and longevity. He found out how far those plans would get him.

The Jews who were getting more and more tired of the success of the followers of Jesus Christ, so they were very happy to fit into Herod's plans. Their plan was for Christianity to fade out and the quicker the better. They found out how far those plans would get them.

Even the Christians had plans, and we will see that in just a little bit.

Spoiler alert: God's plan won out in that his word increased and multiplied and the Church expanded and flourished and it ramped up even more as the chapter ends with Saul and Barnabas readying for the first missionary journey.

Listen as I read the chapter and then we'll take a look at it – it's not on the screen so I hope you can follow along in your Bible or on your device.

(Read Acts 12)

Herod had plans

- Herod was not truly Jewish, which should have made him very unacceptable to the Jewish religious establishment. But he was their man in a case of “*I'll scratch your back and you can scratch my mine*” and because of that he quickly saw that killing off Christians greatly pleased his Jewish constituents and kept him in power.
- The exact words here are Herod . . . *laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.* Acts 12:1. Specifically, he killed James, the brother of John. James was one of the big three that we read about frequently in the Gospels, Peter, James and John. By this time in the development of the Church, James had become a prominent leader and it put a target on his back. He had the dubious distinction of being the first of the apostles (what the disciples were now known as) to be martyred. Herod saw how the murder played to the Jewish leaders and so he thought “Why stop at just James!” and he arrested Peter, and put him in prison.

- Yep, Herod had plans, but he was waiting until after Passover and then he would also execute Peter. He wanted to make some political hay. Well, that was Herod's plan. God's plan was different. But I'm getting ahead of myself, because . . .

God's people had plans too

- By the way, you may remember that just last fall I preached a message on the power of prayer based on this same passage, so that's why it might sound a bit familiar to you.
- Now notice that Peter was locked up with quite a cadre of guards. There were 16 soldiers who guarded him, four at a time, around the clock. There were two chained or handcuffed to him with two others guarding the door of his cell which was inside the Fortress Antonia in Jerusalem (what is on the screen is an artist's rendering from Popular Archeology which shows that it wasn't just a little county jail) . In other words, Peter was very securely incarcerated.
- You just heard the text so you know what happened. Peter was in the very deep and contented sleep of a man who has absolutely nothing to worry about because he knows in whose hands he truly is. As an obedient servant of God he knew that he couldn't lose. That is why he was sleeping so soundly that the angel sent from God had to roughly poke and prod him to wake him up.
- I'm amused how commentators try to examine this escape in some kind of rational and explainable way, but they're wasting their time because this is a miraculous escape so there doesn't have to be any kind of human explanation of what happened. This is what happened: God kept the soldiers asleep and then God opened all three doors and gates out to the street. No one woke up because God made it that way. Peter didn't have to sneak. God's plan was that he would escape, so God's plan was that everybody in the fortress would be asleep except for Peter as he walked out.
- Our text tells us that Peter found himself suddenly alone on the street, and so he headed to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Apparently this was quite the spacious home where many activities were held. No doubt there was a house church there, and it may have even been the location of the upper room where Pentecost began. Regardless, there was a huge prayer meeting going on in the house, and the objective of that prayer meeting – that is, the planned outcome, was to pray until Peter was released.
- This is one of the most fun accounts in all of scripture. Peter goes up to the front gate of the courtyard that surrounds the home and bangs on the gate (Notice that God doesn't open this one – that wasn't part of the plan). Rhoda, the servant girl, went to the door, but when she heard Peter's voice, she didn't open the door. Instead she runs into the house where the prayer meeting is going on and tells them, "Peter's standing at the gate!"
- The response of the praying saints was, "Don't be crazy! He's in prison and that's why we're praying. We want him released, so go away and don't bother us." They were following their plan to pray until Peter was released.
- Meanwhile Peter keeps banging on the door, until someone finally goes and opens it for him. And in an understated kinda way, the text tells us they "were amazed." (v 16)
- Everything went according to their plan, but they were still amazed. Isn't that the way we humans are? We are amazed when God actually does what we asked him to do. But, rest assured, God loves it when we go along with his plan.
- Meanwhile, Herod's plan is not going according to plan. What happened to Peter? They couldn't find him. He was in hiding for sure.
- The guards who had been on duty were punished for their dereliction. They lost their lives because they lost their prisoner. Actually, they were punished for Herod's evil plan which had failed.
- So . . .

Herod moved on to the next plan

- After all, he had to keep the citizenry happy even though he wasn't happy with them. So when they came to him with a request for famine relief he played hard to get. When they came for an audience with him, their compliments were flying thick and heavy. They told him that he had a voice of a god and certainly he was not a man (Acts 12:22). And he thought, "You know, that's not a bad idea. I think I am a god." He soon discovered, but not soon enough, that's what Ron Sprunger calls "stinkin' thinkin". And he died.

Herod, who had some Jewish ancestry, forgot what their first commandment was, *You shall have no other gods before me*. Exodus 20:3. With his haughty thoughts of his own divinity he displaced God with himself, and he suffered the consequences.

- There is a horrific danger in attempting to step into God's shoes. In case you think that you have never done it, you need to think again. Any time that you think you know more than God or that you can do something better than God, you're putting yourself in his place. This is the danger atheists bring upon themselves as they make proclamations that only God could know – they are displacing him. For them to say that there is no God means that they are making themselves a god. They might not get worms and die like Herod, but they are putting themselves on extremely dangerous ground. Don't be like Herod. Know your place.

It's just good to stick with God's plan

- Back to our account from Acts 12 in the final two sentences which are the last two verses. God's plan was unfolding. We read, . . . *the word of God increased and multiplied*. Acts 12:24. No matter what kind of adversity the enemies of the Good News attempted the church flourished even more. It's still that way. No matter how humans try to suppress the church – it survives and grows.
- Also a mission movement was about to launch as two familiar names, Barnabas and Saul, show up in the very last verse. It's almost like the reference belonged at the end of chapter 11, and maybe that is so – but for us it is teaser for the next message in this series in two weeks.
- We will see that as the church expands the Lord requires the best of the best. We'll draw to a close with this – the best laid plans are God's plans. They never fail. Amen