

Introduction:

Good Morning!

- Next Sunday is our first week of advent – also youth takeover!
- Invite a friend!
- This morning we are continuing along through Acts into chapter 12.
- If you have been reading along, you will notice that in the last part of chapter 11, we learn that Paul, after becoming a believer, actually went back to his hometown of Tarsus.
- He was probably there for 10-15 years. Then Barnabas comes to get him to help minister in Antioch
- It was in Antioch that followers of Jesus were first called Christians.
- After Paul was there a few years, we find ourselves in Acts chapter 12 (Back in Jerusalem) with the first death of one of the 12 apostles: James the son of Zebedee.

ME:

- In the NICU praying for healing for my son:
 - Thinking it would just be so amazing right now!
 - But there was a couple down the aisle also praying over their son.
 - If God heals my son, he would have to heal theirs and vice versa.
 - In fact, all the babies in the NICU need healing!
 - To have unequal outcomes would feel devastatingly unfair.

It is hard to watch God answer someone else's prayer and not yours, and not ask the honest question to God "I'm so happy for them, but why not me too?"

WE:

- We see the same tension in today's passage.
- Two apostles with the same calling, same devotion, same Jesus.
- James mentioned in this chapter is not the brother of Jesus. This James is the son of Zebedee and the brother of John.
- James, John, and Peter were Jesus' inner circle. Between James and Peter:
 - One gets a miracle.
 - One gets a funeral.
- And the early church had to wrestle with the same question we wrestle with:
 - "Why does God answer differently?"

*God doesn't promise the same outcomes > Acts 12 makes that clear. **But He does promise His presence and His purpose in the midst of both deliverance and loss** > and growing as a disciple means learning to meet Him in either story.*

GOD:

ACTS Chapter 12

12 About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. 2 He killed James the brother of John with the sword, 3 and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 4 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 prayer for him was made to God by the church.

Peter Is Rescued

6 Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. 7 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. 8 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." 9 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. 10 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. 11 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."

12 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. 13 And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 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. 15 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!" 16 But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. 17 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." [a] Then he departed and went to another place.

18 Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. 19 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.

The Death of Herod

20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain,[b] they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. 21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. 22 And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" 23 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 last.

24 But the word of God increased and multiplied.

25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

- So we see that Herod Agrippa was violent with a bunch of believers and he ends up killing James, the brother of John.
- And it indicates he was doing it because it pleased the Jews.
- So he arrests Peter and throws him under maximum security.
- James's death would have been devastating to the church.
- Then it says in verse 5 that the church prayed earnestly.
- Were they praying for James? Yeah probably. But they also may not have realized that Herod Agrippa was going to actually kill him. But now they have Peter and it says they were praying.
- Then this incredible miracle of deliverance happens for Peter.

We can't help but see that clearly God had the means and power to intervene and save James, but he didn't. Instead, he went to great lengths to rescue Peter. But why? It seems unfair.

- It would also be the wrong application to read this as if the prayer of the church is what made the difference. Not the prayer here is vitally important, so set that aside for right now, and we will get back to it.

Let's look at the bigger picture of what was happening here:

James's death shows God's presence in loss.

- Jesus predicted it.
- Mark 10:38-39

37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 38 Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" 39 And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, 40 but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

- The cup that Jesus talked about was the shedding of his blood. The baptism was to die with Christ and to be buried with him. These are images of suffering.
- James becomes the first apostle to be martyred, and this was not God's plan collapsing, rather part of the calling that Jesus has spoken over him.
- In other words, James's death was separate from God's sovereignty. And neither is any of our suffering.
- It's crucial to be clear: James' death is not God's neglect. It is a real, human tragedy in which God is present.
- *Even in the face of suffering and loss, God is present. He is with those who grieve, and His love does not fail, even when life ends in ways we cannot understand, or we don't know His reasons.*

- It is easy to praise God when everything works out, but when things are hard, those are times we really get to learn what it means to trust God.

Peter's rescue shows God's power in deliverance

- This is not about favoritism or worth. No indication that God values some people more than others.
- God's presence and care remain constant in every situation.
- We see God's power here. Sometimes He seems to intervene, sometimes He allows trials, but in all circumstances, He is faithful and near.
- We should also be inspired by this to be reminded that God can truly do the impossible in difficult situations.
- Peter was arrested. And yes- God did deliver him miraculously, but he was on the run afterwards. His overall situation was still hard.
- In the midst of that we see God's power.
- While it is easy to praise God when everything works out, we sometimes are just praising the outcome, rather than His presence.

God's presence is in both moments

- We assume God is near when things go well and far when things go badly.
- But here in Acts 12, we see that is not true.
- With James in suffering: God is present in the tragedy.
- With Peter in deliverance: God acts to rescue.
- Doors open, chains fall, but the nearness of God is the same as it is in suffering.

Discipleship is learning to recognize God's presence whether we are on our knees in grief or walking in freedom.

Herod's story shows God's sovereignty

- Let's look at Herod Agrippa.
- Who was he? He is the son of the Herod the Great.
- Herod the Great was appointed as king over the area of Judea by Romans
- His son Agrippa, took his Father's name (Herod), and used it as a title when he took over for his dad - Herod Agrippa.
- So 'Herod' became a dynasty title in a similar way that Ceasar was a title for the Roman emperor. Like Julius Caesar's name eventually became the title for Emperor.
- Although trying to please the Jews, he is not truly faithful to God in any way.
- After murdering James, we see the account of his death. It seems a bit confusing, (calling him a God, and an angel, and getting ill), but we do have supplemental historical record of this event through the Jewish Historian Josephus.
- Josephus was about 7 years old at the time and would have obviously heard about this event. But Josephus was also friends with Herods son, Agrippa II. He also had access to official records. Here is a snippet of what Josephus wrote:
- "he put on a garment made wholly of silver, ... and came into the theater early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him. [the crowd] cried out, one from one place, and another ... that he was a god:... Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But, as he ... looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, ... and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly and began in a most violent manner."
- Josephus then continues on to say that he died 5 days later.

- Herod Agrippa was struck down publicly, showing the fragility of human power.
- He not only had killed an apostle and hurt many more, he also didn't; reject the claims from the crowd. And God strikes him down.
- This is a powerful reminder that God is not to be mocked, and that He ultimately will have justice and make right in dealing with the sins of humanity.
- Vengeance belongs to the Lord.
- Then we see that God's kingdom continues to grow, both through loss and deliverance.

Discipleship is learning to meet God in every story — trusting that He is faithful, loving, and at work, even when life is hard, confusing, or painful.

YOU:

- And how do we trust God in the Good and Bad times?
- We start with prayer. And this is the response we see from the church after James dies, and Peter is arrested: **They pray – Hard. They pray without ceasing.**
- Prayer is the way we trust God because it:
 - Acknowledges our dependence
 - Shows our honesty
 - Shapes our perspective
 - Aligns us with God's purposes
 - Keep us connected
 - How we hear his guidance
- Therefore, meet God in the midst of life. Put your trust in Him.

- We named our Son Toby because it means 'God is good' We knew that no matter if God healed our son, or the entire NICU, or none at all, that we could trust that God is good.
-

Gospel Call:

- Because If God is faithful, present, and powerful in both loss and deliverance, then we can trust Him with the our story.
- Like Peter under arrest, every person is held captive by sin, and we can't get free on our own.
- God sent Jesus to live a perfect life, die on the cross for our sins, and rise again to conquer death, and to bring forgiveness so that we can be set free from the chains of sin and we no longer have to be separated from God.
- God is inviting you to step into freedom today.
- To trust in Jesus with your whole life – all the good, and all the hard things.
- If you want to take the next step today, you might start just with prayer.
 - 'Jesus, I believe You died for me. I trust You with my life. I want You to be my Lord and walk with me, in every joy and every pain.'
 - If you prayed that today, or if you want to talk to someone about taking that step, reach out.
 - We want to walk with you in your journey and celebrate God's work in your life and help you begin following Him.

WE:

- Imagine being part of the early church that night: James is dead, Peter is arrested, fear is heavy, and you don't know what God will do.
- Imagine praying with everything in you, not knowing the outcome, and then witnessing the impossible > Peter walking free. (haha Rhoda!)
- Now imagine your own life. God is near in both loss and in miracles.
- That's what it means to trust in Jesus – we meet him in every story!

Let's pray.

Jesus, thank You that You are present in every story. In our joys, in our losses, in the things we understand and the things we don't. Help us to trust You, not just in the easy moments, but in every moment. Teach us to pray honestly, to seek Your presence, and to follow You with courage and faithfulness. For those here today who want to step into Your story, guide them, meet them, and let them know Your love in a personal, real way.

Benediction

The Lord is near to all who call on him,

to all who call on him in truth.

19 He fulfills the desire of those who fear him;

he also hears their cry and saves them.

20 The Lord preserves all who love him, psalm 145