

Acts 12:16-17

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[0 : 0 0] And let's turn back to that chapter that we read together, Acts chapter 12. And we can take up the reading at verse 16, but Peter kept on knocking and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.

Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison.

Sometimes you have to ask yourself, you know, when you look at the history of the Christian church, you have to ask yourself, well, if this really was the truth and if the gospel is really the way of God to himself, then why do things go so incredibly difficult for the church?

Why is life so amazingly difficult for them? It seems that although the church does make progress, and if you read the book of Acts, which is of course the history of the early church from day one, you're tempted to think, why does God not make life easy for his people?

In fact, why are things so difficult? From the very beginning, as soon as Jesus is raised up to heaven, as soon as Jesus leaves his disciples with a task of spreading the gospel, and they begin to spread the gospel, and they go from place to place, but as soon as, from day one, there's this persecution.

[1 : 2 8] It's almost incredible how the outside world just pounces on the church, and it wants to imprison the disciples, it wants to kill the disciples, it wants to torture them, and if you go even beyond, those of you who know something about the history of the church, beyond the book of Acts, if you read the history book, you'll find that it doesn't just end the book of Acts, it goes all the way through the centuries.

There is persecution towards the church, people who are Christians, and their only crime is they're Christians, they haven't done anything, they haven't broken any laws, in fact, that was one of the main defences that Christians used to make at that time.

Look, they would say to the emperor, we haven't done anything, we've sought to keep the laws, we've tried to be peaceable, we've tried to be respectful to people, and you can't accuse us of disrupting the peace, and yet you take us to prison, you separate us from our families, you send us to the lions and the gladiators, and there was just this blind hatred towards Christians at that time.

Now, there are, of course, our periods in history, like our own period in history that we live in, where there's not been so much persecution, or there's not been so obvious, but if you read something like the classic textbook that you can ever read on it, it's a book called Fox's Book of Martyrs, and it traces the history of Christians all the way from the beginning, and it goes into the most horrendous, horrific detail about how they were put to death.

And the thing is this, there's two features, are quite remarkable. One is the immense cruelty which God's people have had to suffer all down the ages. It wasn't just that people wanted to put them to death, but they wanted to put them to death in the most horrific ways. Long, terrible, I couldn't, honestly, I couldn't even mention what is in this book.

[3 : 23] And then the second thing is the extent to which they wanted to obliterate the church. They just wanted to completely annihilate the church, and they went after everyone who was a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And you're tempted to ask, well, why is this? Surely, if this is the truth of God, and this is God's message of salvation, then surely God would change people, and God would protect his people, and God would make sure that the gospel was successful.

Instead, you read that it's like three steps forward for the church, and two steps back. And every time they make progress, something happens, and something goes against the progress of the church, and you find that the odds are against them, and they're put into prison.

It looks as if the future is bleak, like this chapter here in chapter 12. It's not long after Jesus has ascended up to heaven. It's not long after the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 people became Christians in one sitting.

And it looked as if, for all the world, as if the gospel was really going to take off. And if thousands of people were going to, if 3,000 could be converted in one go, then surely as the days unfold, then more and more and more people are going to be converted.

[4 : 46] That's what you would think, and yet that's not what happens. Instead, as well as enjoying the enormous success of the gospel, they're having to suffer persecution. And it doesn't take long before the world just turns against Christians.

But the fact is, that this is always what Jesus promised his disciples. If the world hated me, he said, they will hate you also. And it's a myth to suppose that somehow or other, in our civilized, modern society, that things are going to be too different for too long.

It's always been the nature for the world to turn against the Christian church and persecute the Christian church in some form or another. Now, persecution, of course, can come either in this way, by people being imprisoned or sent to the lions or the gladiators.

Or it could come in more subtle ways, like you being denied promotion because you're a Christian. That's happened often enough. Or more subtle ways, like if you become a Christian in your family and your family aren't Christians and they may turn against you and they may decide to ostracize you.

And they may decide to even exclude you from the family. Or people don't talk to you. Or people whisper about you and make up lies about you. Well, if they did it to Jesus, they will do it to you.

[6 : 04] Jesus promised his disciples, if they did it to me, they will do it to you also. That was the one thing they could be absolutely sure of, that the world would hate them.

And yet, and yet, in lessons like this, what comes across more than anything else is that God is in control. Even when it looks as if the whole world has turned against the church and that the church is collapsing.

It's dying on its feet, it looks like. And yet, God is in control. There's never a moment, not a single moment, not even in Peter's darkest moment, is God ever out of control.

Let's look tonight at three things, three pairs of words. Three pairs of words which describe this chapter for our encouragement. The first pair of words is persecution and protection.

Persecution and protection. The second pair of words is prayer and peace. Prayer and peace. The third pair of words is providence and paradox.

[7 : 10] I'll explain what that means a little bit later on. First of all, persecution and protection. The persecutor here was King Herod. This was Agrippa of Judea.

The first of Judea. Just let me give you a little bit of potted history of Agrippa. Because it's quite confusing, isn't it, when you read in the New Testament all these Herods. And you kind of tend to think they're all the same, but they're not.

They're all different. All these Herods are all related to one another. They all came from a certain family of a person called Herod the Great. He was a notable historical figure lived before the time of Jesus.

And the Jews, in short, the Jews hated the Herods. They couldn't bear the Herods. Because they did not come from the Jewish race. And they tended to side with the Romans.

Although very often they fell out with the Romans. In fact, this fellow here, Herod Agrippa I of Judea. He fell out while he was living in Rome. But they tended to try and be as diplomatic as they possibly could with the Romans.

[8 : 15] And of course, that would set them off against the Jews. Because the Jews hated the presence of the Romans. And if the Herods were going to side with the Romans, then that meant that they would hate the Herods as well.

But the Herods were, they weren't interested. They only wanted peace as long as it benefited them. As long as it was in their interest. They were incredibly selfish.

They were only out for their own interests. And they would stop at nothing to achieve their own ends. And if it suited them to try and achieve peace with the Jews by persecuting Christians, so be it.

Herod couldn't care less whether a person was a Christian or otherwise. What he could care less about was extending his own kingdom. And broadening his own boundaries. And if he was going to do that, and this is what happened.

In order to please the Jews, the Jews hated Christians so much at that time. And when he started putting Christians to death, he saw that this was diplomatically good.

[9 : 12] So he thought, right, we'll have more of this. We'll have more Christians put to death. And the more I put Christians to death, the more I'll be popular. That's what he was out for. But God was showing him.

God showed the world by the end of this chapter. That all his ambitions and all his dreams to satisfy his own interests would come to a very swift and a painful and a horrific end.

Because God is on the throne. The question that arises, though, is this. Why is it that one disciple is put to death by Herod, James?

And another disciple, Peter, is protected by the angel of the Lord? Have you ever wondered that? Why is it, again, the same question as we asked at the very beginning.

Why is it that in the same breath, you can talk about Herod being successful in putting one disciple to death. James, he had James, verse 2. The brother of John put to death with the sword.

[10 : 14] How come the angel didn't come and rescue James? And how come he came to rescue Peter? Why one and not the other? Surely if God was going to show his power to the church and to the world at that time, he wouldn't just do it for Peter, he would do it for everyone.

But that's not the way that God works. It's just not the way. God works through the difficulties and through the trials and through the pain.

And his sovereignty becomes obvious despite the attempts of wicked men like Herod to annihilate the church. And God does not achieve his ends by brute force.

But God achieves them by showing and demonstrating, even despite the attempts of people like Herod, that he is on the throne. And when it comes to the difference between James and Peter, we have to say that it's just the simple answer to the question is this, that James' time had come.

And we have to remember that for a Christian, his time, the time that God chooses for his death is a perfect time. You will never die one moment before God's appointed time for you to die.

[11 : 29] And that might be tomorrow, it might be tonight, or it might be 10 years from now or 20 years from now. You must believe as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ that God has appointed all things to take place exactly at the right time.

And we have to believe that James' death was no accident. It wasn't because James displeased the Lord in some way. It was because James' time had come. James, for James, this was his promotion to glory.

For James, this was the entrance into the kingdom of heaven. For James, he now saw his Lord and his Saviour face to face in glory and perfect, unbroken bliss and happiness.

For all Christians, it's going to be the same. Death is not defeat. Death is a step. It's a step into the kingdom of heaven itself. Let's remember that.

We'll talk about that in a few moments' time. But for Peter, his time had not yet come. God still had a work for him to do. And if that meant, miraculously, him escaping from prison, so be it.

[12 : 32] And God was going to do whatever it took to make sure that he escaped from prison. Even to the point of sending the angel there to protect him.

So there's persecution on the one hand. There's protection on the other. The fact is that God is glorified in the death of his saints. He is also glorified in the life of his saints.

Let's remember that. Let's learn to say with the apostle Paul. Paul could look at death in the face and he could look at life in the face with great bravery. And he could say for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

The fact is what runs through all of this chapter is that God is on the throne. And not a thing happens without him being in control. It looks as if things are out of control.

But God is in control at every moment in time. At the same time, and here we come on to the second pair of words, prayer and peace.

[13 : 34] Because at the same time, as God being sovereignly in control of everything as they take place, God responds to the prayer of his people.

Because at the same time, we read that the church was earnestly praying to God for him. And there's another question that comes up. Now, if you're going to say that God is on the throne, if he's working everything not a moment too soon, not a moment too late, if he's carrying out his plans, even despite what looks to be the opposite, and things look to be out of control and chaos, then why does the church have to be praying?

Why is it so important to be praying? And why is it so important for us to pray? Because it is. There's no answer to these questions.

These questions can only be answered as God has commanded us to pray. And he has told us that he acts in answer to our prayer. And he acts in answer to our earnest and fervent prayer.

Look how the church was praying for him. He was praying earnestly and fervently. The word in the Greek means the same word as it used in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was in agony in the Garden.

[14 : 45] You think of Jesus. You think of him contemplating the awful prospect of the death of the cross and the separation between himself and the Father and how much agony he was in.

That's the agony in which he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. And that's the agony in which the church prays for Peter. It's not just a kind of complacent manner of speaking. It's not just a cold form of words.

Prayer is their heart. It's their breath. It's their energy. They put everything into this. They're met together because they're going to pray to God to please release Peter from prison.

And the fact that James has been put to death is not going to put them off. They're still going to meet together and they're still going to plead with God for him. And it's as they plead with God that God hears them and he answers their prayer.

And one of the greatest dangers that face the church at every moment is the danger of becoming lax in prayer. Where prayer becomes a form of words. It becomes just a formula.

[15 : 49] It becomes a sameness. And the reason it does so is because we lose sight of what prayer is. Here's the example of how we should be praying in our prayer meetings. Earnestly to God.

And sometimes it takes a crisis to focus our prayer and our unity and our calling on God. Please, Lord.

Please. Release this man. Help him. Deliver him from prison. Look how the church were praying for him. They were praying earnestly to God for him.

They were praying, I was going to say expectantly, but in actual fact this is where they fell down because the last thing they actually expected was that God would answer their prayer.

Because even though they were praying earnestly for him, their manner of prayer was correct. But their objective in their prayer fell short because when God answered their prayer exactly as...

[16 : 50] They didn't believe it. Peter was released from prison. First thing he did was he made his way to the home of Mary where the believers were praying presumably for him. They were met together to pray, amongst other things, for Peter who was in prison.

And when the door knocked, when he knocked on the door, they refused to believe it was him. It's impossible, they said. This can't be. It must be his angel.

I don't know what they meant by that, by the way. There's all kinds of theories as to what they might have meant by it must be his angel. Some people just say this proves that everyone's got a guardian angel. It proves nothing of the kind. It just proves that sometimes people, even Christians in those days, had strange ideas.

Ideas that perhaps weren't even right. But in any case, the important thing here to learn from is the fact that having answered their prayer, they refused to believe that God had done this great miracle.

Their faith failed at this point. And I think that's a lesson to ourselves and the church in every age that when we pray, we're coming into the presence of God.

[17 : 56] There's no reason why. We cannot expect God to answer our prayer even if it takes, dare I say it, in the 21st century, a miracle. You say miracles don't happen.

Well, they don't happen normally. Of course they don't happen normally. We're not in the age of miracles. We know that. It's not like the apostolic age. And yet, are we going to deny God his power? Are we going to tell God, well, you can only answer God, Lord, in this way, in the way that I expect.

God is way beyond our expectations. He's promised to do in us and for us more than we can ask or even think. Do we pray in that manner expecting God to do in us and for us more than we can ask or even think?

Do we commit the whole situation to him and just leave it to him and believe believe that he can go way beyond our expectations? Because that's what God has always done. How many times has God surprised us and shocked us and pulled the rug from under us in ways that we have never expected?

Well, while the church was praying for Peter, you know what Peter was doing in prison? on the eve of his execution, he was sleeping.

[19 : 16] You might have missed that. But I want to say that that's probably the most remarkable verse in this whole chapter. That just when James has just been executed, Herod is a tyrant, he hates Christians, he says he's going to take Peter out, he's going to put him on trial, but we all know what that trial is going to amount to.

It's going to amount to nothing but a sham. And he is going to, he has his heart set on executing Peter because he knows he's going to please the Jews. Peter's days are numbered.

His day is numbered. Tomorrow, he is going to die if Herod gets his way. And yet, on the eve of his execution, Peter is sleeping like a baby, snoring in the middle of the two soldiers.

Can you believe that? How would you be if your life was going to be taken from you the next day? If you were in a prison cell, a cold, dark prison cell, chained to two soldiers, and you knew that you were going to die the next day.

I don't think I would be sleeping. Maybe that's a lack of faith on my part. Probably you'd have to be in the situation. You'd have to be given the grace for that situation. But, I still don't think I would be sleeping.

[20 : 31] I mean, we lose sleep over so many different things. It doesn't take much for many of us to keep us awake and we get troubled about so many things. And yet, here is the biggest crisis in Peter's life.

He's just about to die and he's sleeping. Now, that's not the Peter that we read about in the Gospels, is it? Peter that was so impulsive.

This is Peter that was so unreliable. You didn't know what he was going to come out with next. He was so immature as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. But this is the Peter who has learned by experience to trust in the Lord Jesus.

This is the Peter whose love for the Lord has drawn him so close to the Lord Jesus that when this time of crisis comes that he is able to rest completely in the knowledge that whatever is going to happen, God is in control.

This is the Peter who can say with the Apostle Paul, do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication make your requests known to God.

[21 : 38] It's easy to say these words they kind of roll off your tongue. It's difficult to believe them and it's difficult to live them when things go wrong and when we do become anxious but anxiety leads to nothing but a downward spiral of despair.

Prayer brings these issues up to the Lord sends them up to the Lord knowing that the Lord is on the throne he's in control and the Lord will take care of us.

Knowing that what we sang earlier on the angel of the Lord encamps and round encompasseth all those about that do him fear that's the old version of the psalm and them delivereth what precious words they don't just apply to David they don't just apply to Old Testament believers they apply to all of us because God has his ministering spirits angels we believe in angels don't we?

I hope we do it's all over the Bible angels of the angel of the Lord who's sent to serve those who inherit salvation and it was the angel of the Lord who came that night to protect and to release Peter from prison some people reckon that because the word in the Greek means either angel or messenger that this wasn't an angel it was a messenger but the whole context is quite clear a normal human being simply cannot open doors and break chains and all that God sent his angel to be the mechanism and the means of Peter's release from prison and God will stop at nothing to do his will when we sing the words of Psalm 121 that speak that sing of the Lord's protection of his people we can take them to heart knowing that they are ours they belong to ourselves he will not let your foot slip he who watches over you will not slumber indeed he who watches over

Israel will neither slumber nor sleep aren't they precious words and you can use them we can take them to heart we can believe them and live them whatever the situation even if even if tomorrow we die we can say with the apostle Paul for me to live is Christ and to die is gain prayer and peace peace that we know as Christians wonder if you know that peace tonight if you knew that tomorrow you're going to die how would it make you feel what would it be well I can't say as I said before I think I would be quite troubled if I knew even as a Christian but how much more how much more if I wasn't a believer I wouldn't be able to sleep because I would know that as a person who wasn't a believer I would have to stand before God and my sins weren't forgiven I hadn't trusted in Jesus Christ as my saviour and I would be if I died not trusting in

[24 : 46] Jesus then I would be punished I would be sent to hell that's what the Bible promises all those who die without Jesus I would be utterly terrified and I can't understand someone who can live another day not knowing Jesus not believing in him and trusting in him because Jesus he commands us he invites us he invites you tonight to come freely once and for all to trust in him and begin to believe in him as your own saviour and as your own lord that's your only hope for now and forever it's your only hope for eternity will you not trust him will you not take that step of faith what is keeping you from taking that step of faith and trusting in the lord Jesus Christ as your own saviour trust in him now trust in him tonight don't wait another day don't wait another moment as we read these words that even these words

Peter was sleeping do these words not speak to you of the peace that only Christians know the peace they have with God and you don't have that peace and the reason you don't have that peace is because you haven't received the free gift of eternal life that Jesus came to give to you well take it take it tonight take that free gift and allow God to invade your heart and to change you as you surrender to him well then the third pair of words and the last pair of words is providence and paradox providence and paradox I want you to look at the deaths we spoke before about James' death his time had come we've already asked the question why James and not Peter because God was in control God is always in control but there's another death that we read about in fact there's another few deaths that we read about in this passage this passage is full of death and the soldiers their time had come the soldiers did you read were you reading with me when we read in verse 18 that when Herod came in the next morning he discovered that Peter had escaped or so he thought there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter after Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him he cross examined the guards and ordered that they be executed now here you see you have another problem the problem is that many people level at the church and they say well you know

I don't understand a God who allows that to happen I don't understand a God well I mean these soldiers were only doing their duty why did God not just reach down his hand there and then before Herod was able to execute them and stop them he could have done that God's all power you've just been talking about a powerful sovereign God who's in control of all things why is he allowing these poor soldiers to be put to death just for doing their duty it's almost a kind of a twisted story isn't it God steps in sends his angel releases Peter but in the process these soldiers who weren't doing anything they were just sitting guarding Peter and they're having to be put to death but it's all so unfair isn't it but I don't know why you're blaming God for that it wasn't God's fault it wasn't God that put them to death it was Herod himself the fact is we live in a cruel world a world full of cruelty and injustice a world where things go wrong and where there is hatred and animosity and unpredictability wherever you get human beings you get them unpredictable you don't know what they're going to do they act in irrational crazy ways some people there's nothing so monstrous as what one human being will do to another human being he'll persecute him he'll hate him he'll kill him he'll torture him he'll simply take pleasure in watching him suffer and Herod was so full of his own power he just said right if Peter is gone that's it off with their heads you can't blame God for that because that was Herod's free choice in the matter it was him that ordered their execution but it reminds us that we live in a world where every one of us is vulnerable we don't know what's going to happen to us you might go out that door you're walking home to your flat or to your house and some crazy driver who's been out on a binge and he goes mad and he runs you over you can't blame God for that you blame him for that but what's it going to do there's no point in blaming because that's the world we live in we have to be ready to die and we have to also believe that over all the chaos of a world that's gone so terribly and sadly wrong there is a

God who is in control and we have to believe tonight that even Herod having ordered the execution of these two yet even then it was their time to die the bible tells us it is appointed unto man once to die it is appointed that means that the day and the method and the time and the place of our death has been appointed now the question is this are you ready for that or can you afford to take the chance of going one more day in this crazy world without having accepted the lord jesus christ that's your only security that's the only thing you can place your trust in tonight and you know that's the only thing you can know to be sure to be faithful their time had come and your time will come one day are we ready you know i wonder about these these soldiers i wonder it would have been totally impossible to be chained to peter without them having heard the gospel you imagine peter being chained to two soldiers and not sharing the gospel with them not telling them about the lord jesus i can't imagine that at all i think for sure that peter spent as much time as he possibly could speaking to these men about the gospel now who knows maybe by the time they came to be executed they had trusted in jesus as their savior i don't know i don't know but i do know this that the christians peter paul james all of these men they were on fire for the lord they would have used every opportunity and that's why we need to use every opportunity to get to know people and to try and share to use the opportunity to share the gospel with them because we don't know what's going to happen but then lastly there's a paradox in this whole chapter and a paradox that sums up the entirety of this chapter i'm just going to leave this with you tonight and it kind of answers the question that we started off with at the very beginning about why does god let this happen and isn't it strange that there should be chaos such chaos in the church where god has empowered for such a purpose and the paradox i'm going to put in the words of john stott who says this the chapter he says begins with james dead peter in prison and herod on the throne everything looks as if it's collapsed the chapter closes with herod dead peter free and the word of god prospering and god is on the throne tonight there's only two sides there's herod's side and god's side which side are you on the side that's doomed ultimately it appears it may appear to be successful tonight just as herod appeared to be successful on that day but it ended up with herod collapsing doomed to destruction gone and forgotten and there's the gospel that today is flourishing more than it has ever done in the past which side are you on let's bow our heads in prayer our father father in heaven once again we rejoice in being able to remember

the lord jesus christ tonight and we rejoice in the privilege that you've given to us and belonging to your church and we pray that every one of us will surrender to in personal faith to that lord jesus christ tonight even if it means persecution even if it means loneliness even if it means that the world turns against us lord whatever happens to us lord if our security is in jesus then we cannot fail because you have promised to that you will prepare a place for us that where jesus is there we may be also lord that's a great hope tonight lord and that's we want to we want to commit ourselves to you lord there may be some tonight who who are going to find difficulty sleeping because of some trouble they have something that's been worrying them over the past few days lord we pray that as we've read about peter and how he was able to commit this tremendous crisis to yourself we ask lord that you will do the same for them that they may go to sleep tonight in peace knowing that god is on the throne lord be with us watch over us and bless us for we ask in jesus name amen to to please■ loosam