

Main Idea: God works in mysterious ways. God is at work in our lives in two very different kinds of situations as seen in Acts 12:1-19.

- I. God works in our trials (1-5).
 - A. The church was persecuted (1).
 - B. James was killed (2).
 1. There is more to life than meets the eye.
 2. The purpose of this life is to prepare for the life to come.
 - C. Peter was imprisoned (3-5).
 1. The situation was bleak (3-4).
 2. The church prayed (5).
- II. God works in our triumphs (6-19).
 - A. The Lord gave Peter rest (6).
 1. It's easy to say we trust God.
 2. If we do, we will submit our lives to Him.
 - B. The Lord gave Peter a rescuer (7-11).
 1. God delivered Peter from a hopeless situation (7-10).
 2. Peter gave God the honor (11).
 - C. The Lord gave the church a reunion (12-17).
 1. There was surprise (12-14).
 2. There was skepticism (15).
 3. There was story-telling (16-17).
 - D. The Lord gave all of us a reminder (18-19).
 1. When a believer dies, there is temporary loss.
 2. When an unbeliever dies, there is eternal loss.

Think about it: What does this teach us about God?

1. God's ways may not always make sense to us.
2. Though God always has us in mind, He has more than us in mind.
3. Though we may not understand God's ways fully, we can trust Him wholly.

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:28-39

I've entitled this message, “Seeing God in the Mysteries of Life.”

E.g.—

God is God. He does what pleases Him. What pleases Him is always good, for He is good. Yet we may not always understand His ways, the reason being our perspective is so limited. Sometimes His goodness makes sense to us. Sometimes it doesn't.

For instance, we receive an unexpected job promotion. A healthy baby enters our home. The guy or gal of your dreams agrees to marry you. How do we respond? We probably praise God for His blessings. “Thank You, Lord, for what You have done in my life!” It's pretty easy to acknowledge the hand of God when we like the things that enter our lives, when they make sense to us. But what about the distasteful things?

The pink slip at work. The untimely death of a loved one. A physical affliction. An unexpected and unexplained rejection. When those things happen, we're not as quick to praise God for His goodness and to acknowledge what His hand has done. In fact, we're more inclined to ask, “What are You doing, Lord?”

You don't have to be a Christian very long before you observe the following. *God works in mysterious ways.* In recent weeks we've been learning from our study in Acts that we must come out of our comfort zones, and to do so we must learn to “think outside the box.” Today we're going to take that thought a step further. If as God's people we are going to think outside the box, we must first settle this issue. A great hindrance to thinking outside the box is our tendency to want to make God *fit inside our box.*

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

We want a safe God, a predictable God, a tame God. My friends, none of those adjectives describes the God of the Bible. But this one does. He is *good*. And this phrase describes Him, taken from Isaiah 55:8-9, *his ways are higher than our ways*.²

Yes, God works in mysterious ways. That means He will do things in our lives that will not make sense to us at the time. When that happens, how should we respond? We'll find out by looking into His Word and examining something that happened in the Jerusalem church many years ago. We'll discover that God is at work in our lives in two very different kinds of situations as seen in Acts 12:1-19.

I. God works in our trials (1-5).

James said, "My brethren, count it all joy *when* you face various trials (James 1:2)." He didn't say *if*, but *when*. Trials are inevitable. God uses trials to accomplish His purpose for us.

That's what He did with His people in Acts 12. You'll notice three trials mentioned in verses 1-5.

A. The church was persecuted (1). "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them."

The author of Acts, Luke, records that this persecution happened "about this time." What time was that? According to the preceding verse (11:30), it happened at the time that the church at Antioch sent a famine-relief-gift to help their brothers and sisters living in Judea.

Remember, the first church started in Jerusalem after Jesus returned to heaven (Acts 2). After several years of phenomenal growth, the Jerusalem church experienced persecution that forced them to scatter (Acts 8:1). As a result of the dispersion, some of the followers of Jesus ended up in Antioch, and the gospel reached Gentiles. A church was started there, in fact, this new church would soon be the base of operations for the advancement of the gospel in the Roman world.

Not everyone was pleased with the fact that Jewish Christians were spending time with Gentiles. Apparently, Herod wasn't. Or at least Herod knew the Jews in Jerusalem weren't happy because he decided to use this for political advantage. Verse 3 indicates his actions were politically motivated, primarily to please his Jewish constituents.

Just who was this "King Herod?" Actually, there were many who bore the name "Herod," and several are mentioned in the New Testament.³

The first and most notorious of the New Testament Herods is *Herod the Great*, who reigned from 41 B.C. to 1 B.C. He is the ruler who was in power when Jesus was born. Remember him? He welcomed the wise men from the east and then massacred the children in Bethlehem (Matthew 2). Herod the Great was married ten times—yes, *ten* times. His offspring appear throughout the New Testament.

For instance there was *Herod Philip the First*. He was the first husband of Herodias, the woman responsible for the death of John the Baptist. He is mentioned under the name of Philip in Matthew 14:3, though he actually had no official office.

Then there was *Herod Antipas*. He ruled the regions of Galilee and Perea. He was the second husband of Herodias, the one who authorized the beheading of John the Baptist. Herod Antipas is also the wicked man to whom Pilate sent Jesus for trial (Luke 23:7).

² "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:8-9

³ As explained by William Barclay, pp. 93-94.

Herod Philip the Second is mentioned in Matthew 2:22. He is the one who founded Caesarea Philippi which was named after him.

Herod the Great had another son by the name of *Aristobulus*. His mother was Mariamne, a princess and descendent of the great Maccabean heroes. His own father murdered him, but not before he had a son named *Herod Agrippa*. That's our man in Acts 12.

By the way, to keep the record straight, Herod Agrippa had a son known as *Agrippa the Second*, and this is the ruler that Paul appeared before in Acts 25-26. He was also the father of *Bernice*, who assisted Agrippa the Second in Paul's trial, and the father of *Drusilla*, the wife of Felix who was the governor who tried Paul in Acts 24:24.

So out of that maze we find our man, Herod Agrippa. Agrippa, again, was the grandson of Herod the Great. When Agrippa was about four years old, grandpa Herod the Great executed the young boy's grandmother because he was suspicious of her as a threat to the throne. Herod the Great also executed his own sons by this wife, for the same reason. One of them was Aristobulus, Agrippa's father. So at the age of four Agrippa was taken to Rome for his own protection, where he grew up and received his education in close company with the imperial family.

Herod Agrippa was the ultimate politician. He had connections. He had power. And he had a survival-of-the-fittest mentality, and operated by the motto, *if you don't look out for yourself, no one will*.

And that's exactly what he did. Agrippa was a self-centered, power-loving, egotistic dictator who knew how to work a crowd and get what he wanted. He's the man Luke has in mind when he writes, "It was about this time that *King Herod* arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them."

Answer this. Is the church of Jesus Christ dependent on a good political climate to fulfill its mission? Sometimes I get the idea that some people today seem to think so. My friend, the early church had no political clout, no voice in Herod's court let alone in Rome, and not very much money. All they had was God.

Maybe that's our problem. We've got the political connections and clout and money, but we've got a tiny dose of God! Can the church move ahead today in a hostile world? So as to remove all doubt about the answer, look again at the beginning of Acts 12, and glance ahead to the end. Acts 12 begins with a power-hungry despot attacking the church. Acts 12 ends with that same despot eaten by worms and dead (23), followed by this statement, "But the word of God continued to increase and spread (24)."

No one can resist God and succeed. No one can *ultimately*, that is. Wicked men sure can cause havoc in the short-term. Herod Agrippa certainly did. He was responsible for trial #1. The church was persecuted. And for #2...

B. James was killed (2). "He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword."

William Tyndale, first translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into English, making a Bible for the common people. In 1535 he was betrayed by a friend, taken prisoner to the castle of Vilford, and continued to work on his translation. He was unable to finish his work because he was sentenced to die a heretic's death: Strangulation and burning at the stake. On October 6, 1536 he cried out his last words.

Why didn't God do something? Why did He allow this to happen to His choice servant, William Tyndale? There's no easy answer to that question. In fact, Tyndale wasn't the first follower of Christ to lose his life unjustly, nor will he be the last. It happened right here in our text. James was killed.

The statement is blunt and almost matter of fact. *He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.* You may recall that this James was one of Jesus' inner circle. He was a choice servant, one of the "sons of thunder."

Why would Jesus invest three years of personal time and energy into training James for service, and then let him die in his prime after only about ten years of ministry? He probably wasn't even out of his 30's yet. From our perspective, that's a great waste of potential. It doesn't make sense. The church needs more people like James, not less, right? James had training, experience, leadership ability, a willing heart, and a solid track record (that's why Herod arrested him first; he must have considered him the most potent force in the church and threat to the Jews). Verse 3 indicates that his execution "pleased the Jews," such was his influence.

There's another question that begs our attention. Why would God allow James to die but (as we'll see next) send an angel to free Peter? It's easy to read chapter 12 and celebrate the miracle of Peter's deliverance—and so we should. God did a great thing. But for James there was no miracle. He died a criminal's death. Like John the Baptist he lost his life because of a self-centered whim of the Herod family. How do you explain this mystery?

Here's the answer. We can't. We can't explain God's ways, but rather we must affirm God's revelation. There are two truths God has revealed in His Word that we must affirm when life doesn't make sense.

1. *There is more to life than meets the eye.* Listen to 1 Corinthians 2:9, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him." This life isn't the whole story. Unfortunately, we tend to think this life is the measure of success. We see the death of James as a young man as a tragedy. And it is tragic.

But think further. What is thirty or forty or even one hundred years compared to eternity? According to the Bible, *this* life is all about *that* life. Or to put it another way...

2. *The purpose of this life is to prepare for the life to come.* Yes, this life is preparation for the *that* life. We will all spend eternity somewhere. We will all live somewhere. Jesus Christ came to earth, died on the cross for sinners, and rose again so that those who believe in Him might have eternal life. To prepare for the life to come we must accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior and believe in His saving work. When a believer dies, it's not the end. In fact, he or she begins to live as never before! That's why when we lose a loved one, we don't "sorrow as those who have no hope," as Paul puts it in 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

But we do sorrow. The loss—though it's temporary—does hurt. The Jerusalem church endured a third trial. First, it was persecuted. Then James was killed.

C. Peter was imprisoned (3-5). According to Luke's description...

1. *The situation was bleak (3-4).* "When he [Herod] saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover."

History verifies that in the eyes of the Jews, Herod Agrippa was the most popular of all the Herodian kings. Right here is one of the main reasons why. To arrest Peter was a good political move for Herod—that's why he did it. He could care less about justice. Political advantage and popularity were his aim. If the severed head of James pleased the crowd, it only made sense to go for Peter. It makes good politics to sacrifice the justice of the minority for the pleasure of the majority.

But Herod couldn't act right away, due to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Jewish law mandated seven days of rest during the Feast. Do you see the irony of *selective obedience* here? He's keeping one of God's laws while preparing to violate another.

Notice how Herod removed all chances, so he thought, of a jail break (maybe he heard the report of Peter's previous prison escape in Acts 5:17-20). He put Peter in the custody of sixteen soldiers. Yes, the situation was bleak. How did the church respond?

2. *The church prayed (5)*. "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." This is good. How should the church respond when a hostile world attacks? Should we just "take it?" No. The Bible doesn't commend passivity. Rather, we should mobilize our forces and counter-attack.

Yes, you heard me correctly, we should counter attack. But we must use different weapons. When the church goes to battle, it moves ahead *on its knees*.

While very ill, John Knox, the founder of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, called to his wife and said, "Read me that Scripture where I first cast my anchor." After he listened to the beautiful prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17, he seemed to forget his weakness. He began to pray, interceding earnestly for his fellowmen. He prayed for the ungodly who had thus far rejected the gospel. He pleaded in behalf of people who had been recently converted. And he requested protection for the Lord's servants, many of whom were facing persecution. As Knox prayed, his spirit went Home to be with the Lord. The man of whom Queen Mary had said, "I fear his prayers more than I do the armies of my enemies," ministered through prayer until the moment of his death.⁴

I'm convinced we need more prayer in the church. When faced with a trial beyond their control, the early church prayed. And God heard, as we'll see.

God works in mysterious ways. First, He works in our trials.

II. God works in our triumphs (6-19).

Though not in every situation, there are times when God demonstrates His power in magnificent ways. James never left his prison cell. God had something different in store for Peter. Let's take a look at what the Lord did. He gave four things in verses 9-19.

A. The Lord gave Peter rest (6). "The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance."

The event we're about to see happened "the night before" Peter's trial and likely execution. God's timing is perfect!

What's Peter doing on what may well be his final night on the planet? He's *sleeping*. Remember, he's got chains wrapped around both wrists which attach him to two soldiers. He's laying on a hard, cold jail floor. I can just imagine the stench. And he's sleeping, so sound in fact that the angel will have to hit him hard to wake him up (7).

Later Peter wrote these words in 1 Peter 5:7, "Casting all your care upon Him for He cares for you." Apparently, Peter practiced what he preached. The church members were praying, and apparently their prayers were working for Peter was *sleeping*. The Lord gave him rest.

I see a couple of lessons for us here.

1. *It's easy to say we trust God*. Words are easy. Action is hard. If we really trust God, if we really believe He is in control of our lives, there will be evidence of it. If I'm an anxious person I'm surely not giving evidence that I trust God. Nor am I if I am a worrier. It's true. It's easy to *say* that we trust God. But...

⁴ [Our Daily Bread](#). April 11

2. *If we do, we will submit our lives to Him.* We'll wait on Him. We'll rest in Him. Like David did. David certainly had a lot on his mind. Throughout his life he faced danger, from giants like Goliath and a paranoid father-in-law like Saul. Yet David said this in Psalm 4:8, "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety." Psalm 127:2 says, "He grants sleep to those He loves."

If you struggle with worry—and maybe lose sleep because of it—may I encourage you to do something? Choose to submit your life to God. Tell Him, as did the hymnwriter, "All to Jesus I surrender, all to Him I freely give; I will ever love and trust Him, in His presence daily live. I surrender all. I surrender all. All to Thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all."

B. The Lord gave Peter a rescuer (7-11). First He gave him rest, then a rescuer. Here's how it happened...

1. *God delivered Peter from a hopeless situation (7-10).* "Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up." The KJV uses the word "smote." Peter was really snoozing!

Hebrews 1:14 says that angels are God's "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation." That's what this particular angel did for Peter. Listen to how specific he was when he gave Peter the following instructions:

"Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.⁸ Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." [the reason would soon be clear; Peter wouldn't be coming back here!] And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you [it's cold outside] and follow me," the angel told him." Notice that the angel doesn't do *everything* for Peter, only the things Peter can't do for himself.

Verse 9, "Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision."¹⁰ They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him."

What a jail break! The angel took Peter past three barriers: the first set of guards, the second set of guards, and then the iron gate. He performed several miracles: he caused the light to shine in the dark prison, put the guards in a deep sleep, caused the chains to fall off, and made the gate open all by itself.

But once Peter was safely outside the jail, the angel left him as quickly as he appeared—and Peter was on his own. Again, God did for Peter what he couldn't do for himself. Then it was Peter's responsibility to use his God-given mind and body to take the next step.

And what was the first thing Peter did once free? Verse 11 tells us...

2. *Peter gave God the honor (11).* "Then Peter came to himself and said, 'Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.'"

Until this point Peter thought he was dreaming, but once he realized this was real he spoke. To whom did he speak? Apparently, he talked to himself. And what did he say? He gave *God* the honor. *The Lord* sent the angel. *The Lord* rescued me from Herod's clutches [that word indicates how hopeless Peter felt in the jail]. *The Lord* rescued me from the expectation of the Jews. The Lord did it all!

How we need to learn to do what Peter did, to live with a big view of God! When in prison, Peter rested. When set free, Peter praised. We, too, must learn to let God be God.

By the way, if God sends the angel to deliver us, He deserves glory. But even if He doesn't, He still deserves glory. Remember James.

C. The Lord gave the church a reunion (12-17). In this scene Luke puts the spotlight on the reaction of the church to Peter's release, a threefold reaction.

1. *There was surprise (12-14).* "When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. ¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, 'Peter is at the door!'"

Upon his release Peter headed for cover. He may have been out of jail, but he wasn't out of trouble. He was still a wanted man.

He went to Mary's house, the mother of John Mark. Luke introduces us here to someone we'll be seeing again in a future study, for this Mark will accompany Barnabas and Saul on their missionary journey (Acts 13). By the way, Mary's house was the same house where Jesus ate the Last Supper. Apparently, Peter figured the believers would be meeting there, and they were, praying for him.

What happened next is rather comical. Rhoda heard the knocking and headed for the door. When she heard Peter's voice, she got so excited she ran back to the group and forgot to open the door! Then came reaction #2.

2. *There was skepticism (15).* "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

Now think about it. Why were these believers in the house that night? For a prayer meeting, right? And who were they praying for? For Peter. Verse 5 indicates the church had been praying "earnestly" for Peter the whole week long. The Puritan preacher Thomas Watson said, "The angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was prayer that fetched the angel."

But lo and behold when God answered the church's prayer, the church members were surprised. "You're crazy!" they told Rhoda. For seven days they'd been asking God to intervene, but did they really expect Him to? For that matter, when we pray *do we?* Wiersbe is right, "God graciously honors even the weakest faith, but how much more He would do if only we would trust Him."⁵

The whole scene is rather amusing. Rhoda forgot to open the door. The church failed to believe God for what they were praying. And Peter just kept knocking! Reaction #3...

3. *There was story-telling (16-17).* "But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. 'Tell James and the brothers about this,' he said, and then he left for another place."

First there was surprise, then skepticism, and finally story-telling. It was glory-to-God time in the house as Peter told the miraculous story of what God did for him. My friend, when God does something great we need to tell the story. Don't hide it. Proclaim it!

But the Lord wasn't quite finished yet in Acts 12. First He gave Peter rest, then a rescuer. Next He gave Peter and the church a grand reunion. But fourthly...

D. The Lord gave all of us a reminder (18-19). Here's how. "In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ 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. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while."

⁵ Wiersbe, p. 454.

As the story began, so it ends with the spotlight on Herod. He's fuming now. What was supposed to be a good public relations scam turned into a huge dose of egg-on-his-face. And Herod was hot.

We'll see what happened to Herod in our next study, but something else grips my attention as this story concludes. It's the contrast between the death of James and the death of the soldiers. I think the Lord gives us a very powerful reminder here.

1. *When a believer dies, there is temporary loss.* When James died, there was sadness for sure, but there was also hope. We know where James went the moment the sword severed his head. He went to heaven and he's still there! In fact, he will always be there with his Lord.

Here's the rest of the contrast. When a believer dies, there is temporary loss. But...

2. *When an unbeliever dies, there is eternal loss.* I don't know if Herod killed just the squad of four soldiers guarding Peter that night, or if he killed all four squads responsible for him mentioned in verse 4. Verse 19 just says he killed the "guards." Whether it was four or sixteen, the point is the same. When these guards died, it was more than sad, for unless these men knew Jesus as their Savior, they went directly to hell. No doubt, Peter preached to them while chained to their arms. No doubt he told them about Jesus. But what did they do with the message they heard?

For that matter, *what about you?* Let these words sink in. When a believer dies there is temporary loss and eternal gain, but when an unbeliever dies, there is *eternal loss*. Period. End of sentence. No second chance. O sinner, today is the day of salvation!

Think about it: What does Acts 12 teach us about God? I see three realities.

1. *God's ways may not always make sense to us.* The fact that James was killed and Peter delivered is what F. F. Bruce calls "a mystery of divine providence." It would not be the last mystery of providence.

My friend, perhaps you're trying to "figure out" God. But how could our finite minds ever figure out the Infinite One? I invite you to *trust* Him. With the big questions and the small ones, trust Him.

Elizabeth Elliot shares the story of Gladys Aylward. As a child Gladys had two great sorrows. One, that while all her friends had beautiful golden hair, hers was black. The other, that while her friends were still growing, she had stopped. She was about four feet ten inches tall. But when at last she reached the country to which God had called her to be a missionary, she stood on the wharf in Shanghai and looked around at the people to whom He had called her. "Every single one of them" she said, "had black hair. And every one of them had stopped growing when I did." She was able to look to God and exclaim, "Lord God, You know what You're doing!"⁶

2. *Though God always has us in mind, He has more than us in mind.* Why did God set Peter free? We might say, "Well, it's because He had more work for him to do." He surely did, but it's interesting that as far as the book of Acts is concerned Peter fades from the scene after this.

We tend to think in terms of production—God spared Peter because He needed him—but God won't fit into our "production" box. Know this. God does what He does for reasons known only to God. Yes, He has us in mind, but He always has *more than us* in mind, too. He has a bigger agenda in mind than us. He does what He does for His glory.

The story is told from the past about a believer named Ivan in a Soviet prison camp. One day he was praying with his eyes closed when a fellow prisoner noticed him and said

⁶ from her book *Let Me Be a Woman*

with ridicule, "Prayers won't help you get out of here any faster." Opening his eyes, Ivan answered, "I do not pray to get out of prison but to do the will of God."⁷

Ivan understood this truth about God. Though the Lord always has us in mind, He also has *more than us* in mind. In other words, His purpose is bigger than me and my personal comfort. In fact, His purpose may include my temporary loss of comfort for eternal kingdom gain.

3. *Though we may not understand God's ways fully, we can trust Him wholly.* He is trustworthy. Will you trust Him wholly today?

Community Groups—Potential questions to discuss from this morning's sermon:

1. This morning's message was entitled, "*Seeing God in the Mysteries of Life*" Read again what happened to the early church in Acts 12:1-19. What do we learn about the Lord from this account?
2. Which of God's attributes do we see on display in this passage? How does it affect you to know that this is true of God?
3. What do we learn about our mission as a church from this text?
4. The hymnwriter wrote, "God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform." Think back over your own life. How have you seen God work in the mysteries of your life? What did you learn about Him? About yourself? About His plan for the church?

⁷ *Our Daily Bread*, December 29, 1993