

WHEN LIFE MAKES NO SENSE

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study
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Let's Begin

The God we serve is sovereign. What does it mean to say God is sovereign? While the answer to that question could be formed in many ways, perhaps being sovereign may be summarized in this way: no matter the degree of degradation, God is so big, He can make good out of it, even when it makes no sense to us. In short, today's lesson simply states, God is sovereign. What begins in tragedy ends in triumph!

Herod Agrippa was Rome's loose cannon. Overly suspicious concerning any possible threats to his little piece of worldly power, he rose up and struck the Apostle James with the blade, putting him to death, "Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword" (vv. 1-2).

Seeing the Jews were well pleased, he arrested Peter and imprisoned him with full intention of executing him the very next day. The church undoubtedly wondered what sense could be made concerning those circumstances. How often we do the same.

As chapter 12 unfolds, we'll allow the outline below to guide our way:

- I. The Mystery of Providence (vv. 1-4)**
- II. The Ministry of Prayer (vv. 5-10)**
- III. The Majesty of Peace (vv. 11-25)**

I. The Mystery of Providence (vv. 1-4)

As our study begins, we're immediately confronted with mystery. The age old question that stirs our minds is *why do bad things happen to good people?* The church was committed to the Lord Jesus Christ. They loved Him, believed Him, and were surrendered to Him. Why then would they lose one of their most inspiring leaders, James? They needed him! Even worse, Peter was taken away in chains!

This places us, along with the early church, face to face with the mysterious ways of God in His dealings with men. Yet, the Old Testament record did not leave them or us in blind ignorance. Isaiah the prophet wrote, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8-9). Hence, seven and a half centuries before Christ, we are informed our finite minds can never fully understand the ways of Almighty God.

In our encounter with this tragedy, we learn three principles which help explain God's providence to us. Let's look briefly at each principle.

Reflection Connection

When was the last time you asked yourself, why do bad things happen to good people? Explain. Do you think such a question is indicative of unbelief? Why or why not?

First, we note the personal principle of God's providence. While it is true God allowed Herod to put James to death, He equally stopped Herod from putting Peter to death by supernaturally planning his deliverance. Though from our side the pain is ever so real, God's providence always secures His all-wise encompassing plan.

Jesus made His disciples fully aware of the cost of discipleship. When they insisted they understood, Jesus further instructed them, "They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other



on thy left hand, in thy glory. But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? And they said unto him, We can. And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized" (Mark 10:37-39).

Jesus would undergo this baptism of suffering. So would those who followed Him. And, while neither James nor Peter knew fully what Jesus meant, following Christ inevitably involved experiencing what Jesus meant. Such is the mystery of providence.

Our inquisitive minds insist we ask, what's the difference? That is, James was just as useful and necessary for the fledgling, persecuted church as was Peter. Why take James but leave Peter? We often focus much energy in times like these, wondering what God is up to. For us, it makes no sense. We must continue realizing that God deals with each of His children on an individual basis. God's plan for your life is personalized. He moves on original tracks in every life. Ultimately, it is futile to compare God's personal plan for one with God's personal plan for another.

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Reflection Connection

In our study, James was put to death, but Peter was delivered from death. Does this indicate God's love for Peter was more than His love for James? Why or why not? Do you think that we, more times than not, confidently leave matters like these in God's hands? Explain.

Second, let's observe the patient principle. Herod was little more than a self-seeking politician who deserved God's judgment. Personal popularity meant more to him than human life. Does such a description fit any politician in America today? The fact is, Herod would murder just to please people.

Yet, his power, prestige, and popularity ended with the people over whom he governed. God is sovereign. Herod's day would soon arrive. Heaven's calling for judgment was stamped, ready to be mailed. Sometimes the wheels of God's judgment grind slowly. Such does not mean, however, that God's judgment is not sure. Luke summed up the gruesome scene, "And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost" (vv. 21-23). Hindering God's church sooner or later brings God's hammer.

Finally, let's briefly note the purposeful principle. Through all the turmoil in tragedy, the church was led to triumph. The Word of God grew and multiplied (v. 24). God promises us deliverance as He works out His providence (cp. 2 Cor. 1:8-10; 2 Cor. 2:14). No matter the degree of hardship or level of pain we experience in this life, God's providence takes all that comes to us and works it out for good (cp. Rom. 8:28).



II. The Ministry of Prayer (vv. 5-10)

The early church was shocked. The Apostle James was brutally struck down by the sword. No criminal would be brought up for charges, however, for James' death was indicative of Herod Agrippa's out-of-control corruption. And, even worse, because the local Jewish leaders were elated at the Apostle James' swift judgment, Herod took measures to offer them another trophy: Peter was seized, imprisoned, and would find himself under the sword the very next day.

It seemed the whole world stood against the church. The formidable foes of the kingdom of darkness bonded together to crush the threatening leftovers of the Man from Galilee. The Roman Empire's full throttle opened up against them.

What could the church do against such forces? Let's get a glimpse from Luke's description, "Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him" (v. 5). They could have sent representatives to Herod, pleading with him to let Peter go. They could have bonded together, strapped on their blades, and stormed the prison, setting Peter free. They could have bribed the guards and gotten him freed. Yet, there was one weapon the church loaded and fired, one the enemy could not even see or hear—"prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him."

We often underestimate the power of this weapon. Nevertheless, as we learn from this passage, prayer was God's means to free Peter and lead the church to triumph. Three *qualities* characterize their prayers. Let's consider each one.

First, the church prayed faithfully. As a pastor, one mark I've noticed through the years about those Christians who remained stable and fully surrendered to the Lord Jesus is the mark of prayer. In time of need, these people turned to the Lord in prayer. They knew where real power exists. Is this not the very situation with the early church? When the Spirit descended on Pentecost, He descended on a humble group of surrendered men and women who were praying. When persecution struck in the first days of the Christian church, leaders threatened Peter and John with death not to preach Jesus and the resurrection. What was Peter and John's response? Upon being released from prison, they went back to church and had an earth-shaking prayer meeting! (Acts 4:25ff). They faithfully prayed to the God of Heaven, believing God was fully in control.

Secondly, they prayed fervently. They prayed in earnest. Note once again, that "prayer was made without ceasing." Hearts bled, souls melted, and tears flowed as the church *without ceasing* made their prayer to God. One easily recalls the Lord Jesus in Gethsemane as "in agony He prayed more earnestly." They put their souls in their prayers, agonizing and travailing as they asked the God of heaven for Peter's release. Charles Spurgeon once said, "Groanings which cannot be uttered are often prayers which cannot be refused."

How long they prayed is not explicitly referenced. However, it very well could have been over several days. The real concern for them was: they knew time was running out. Peter must have been within hours of execution. And, the longer they prayed, no hint of panic was present. Instead, just a stable, persistent prayer without ceasing was made to God for Peter.

Thirdly, they prayed fruitfully. Miraculous things are consistent with fervent prayer. James wrote, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." (5:16). God sent an angel in answer to their prayer, "And, behold, the

Reflection Connection

Have you ever been under such pressure you felt the entire world was against you? Take a few moments to think about it. How did you feel? What options did you pursue? Be prepared to share with the entire group.

Reflection Connection

What do you think of when you hear "earnest praying" or "travail of soul"? Explain. Be prepared to discuss this with the entire group.



angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me" (vv. 7-8). We must not miss the lesson here: *God moves in response to prayer.*

God moves in response to prayer.

III. The Majesty of Peace (vv. 11-25)

Peter's release from prison was amazing. Awaiting his execution he probably did not know what was going on as the long hours moved slowly along. "What is God up to?"; "Why was I singled out to be arrested?"; "Where's James?"; or "Why don't my friends come and get me out?" could have represented the questions flashing through Peter's mind at that time. At least, those questions are applicable to the "old Peter." There was a time when nervous panic ruled his life. Recall, it was Peter who struck with a sword the young guard at Jesus' arrest, severing his ear with a single slash.

In addition, Peter's nervous panic visibly demonstrated itself on several occasions through his penchant for going to sleep when he should have stayed awake (cp. Luke 9: 32; Luke 22:45).

Reflection Connection

When you are going through difficult times, what questions always seem to run through your mind? Explain. Do you ever wonder if God has abandoned you? Be ready to share with the entire group.

Read Luke's account of Peter's imprisonment, "And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison" (v. 6). Now, we find Peter asleep once again. Nevertheless, Peter's sleep this time was much different from his sleep before. Peter's sleep before was driven by panic; Peter's sleep now was driven by peace. The reason Peter could lay down and sleep as he awaited Herod's execution order was his surrender to the Lord Jesus. The Psalmist summed it up well, "It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep" (127:2).

What was the difference between Peter asleep in Gethsemane and asleep in prison? Simply put, it was the peace Peter received from God. Yet, this only begs another question: why did Peter have peace?

First, Peter had peace because he'd been saved by God's power. Years earlier, Andrew had brought him to Jesus (John 1:41-42). Furthermore, after Pentecost, the Holy Spirit empowered Peter in a fresh new way, making Jesus real and alive to him like never before (Acts 2:1-6). When God saves you and enters your life, you are under His mighty umbrella of care. You can trust not only your temporal life to Him, but also your eternal destiny as well. (cp. John 10:29; Ps. 121:4).

Second, Peter had peace because he'd surrendered to God's plan. When one walks in God's will, there's no need to fear. The safest place on earth is the center of God's will. One is ready for what life and even death bring.



Third, Peter had peace because he was sure of God's promise. Circumstances do not alter God's promise to us. Jesus gave Peter a word about his future (John 21:18). And, though a disturbing form of death awaited Peter, he could rest with peace in the promise of Jesus' presence. Peter was literally sleeping on a bed of God's eternal promises!

Golden Greek Nugget

After Peter was arrested and thrown in the dungeon for safe-keeping, Luke says he was assigned to “four quaternions of soldiers to keep him” (v. 4). The term “quaternions” means four. We would interpret “four quaternions” as 4 X 4, or sixteen. Thus, sixteen soldiers were assigned to keep Peter safe. Now, the full sixteen soldiers would not have been with Peter all at once. Instead, there were four soldiers on duty for six hours. Four soldiers rotating every six hours equals sixteen soldiers. When the angel came to rescue Peter, two soldiers would have been in the cell with him—likely chained to him—while the other two would have remained outside the door.

Wrap Up

Life makes no sense to us many times. But believers rest assured in God's providence, knowing He will watch over them for all eternity. Prayer's significance in accepting God's mysterious ways cannot be overestimated. Prayer was heaven's key, which unlocked Peter's prison door. It is no less for us. And, a prayer-filled life results in a life of peace and satisfaction in Christ.

