

The Deliverance of God
Acts 12

Psalm 91:1-16

1 John 4:1-16

Responsive Psalm 30:1-12

This morning we are going to be going through chapter 12, One of the main sticking points of this book written by Luke is the sovereignty of God throughout the ministry of the apostles and the early church. In each chapter, and in every step of the accounts laid down in this book we see that it is God working through these men to save souls and to bring more into the fold. Even in the case of say Cornelius, he was told by an angel to go and call for Peter so that he may bring the gospel to his household. A clear work of God orchestrating and designing such events that would bring Peter, a Jew into the home of Cornelius a Roman Gentile. Something that was forbidden by the Jewish law, yet God likewise showed Peter that this gospel message was not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles, and it is Christ, and his word that is the salvation not of the Jews only, but of the whole world.

We have read multiple accounts of how God had empowered these men with wisdom and understanding of scripture through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As we had noted in the early chapters of this book, the stark difference between Christ's disciples before, and after Christ's death, burial and resurrection. Now that the spirit has been given, and the promise that Christ gave, that after he would go, he would send a helper...this disciples were now able to see the larger picture, able to decipher the meaning of scriptures, and while they did believe that Christ was the Messiah, they now saw that he did not come to establish his kingdom in Jerusalem and to free the people from Roman rule but rather his kingdom is spiritual, and he had come to conquer not Rome, but Satan himself to establish his kingdom of all those who are the called according to his purpose.

There were given now the ability to understand, having their eyes open to the scriptures, and to the teachings of Jesus, and not only that, but given the boldness to stand and teach that which God has given them to proclaim. Even in the face of the rulers and the courts, Jesus told them, that for his names sake alone that they will be dragged to court, beaten, and imprisoned, As Luke recorded the words of Jesus in his Gospel, he told his disciples, "Nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven. But before all of these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for my names sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you an oath and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for my names sake. But not a hair of your head shall be lost."

And this very thing is what we see in Chapter 12 this morning, we have seen God's sovereign provision in the ministry of the gospel, we have seen the Holy Spirit and the word going out like a wildfire saving souls and drawing more and more people into the family of God, and in our account that we see this morning as we read chapter 12, we see the death of James, by the hands of Herod and the his men, but also the deliverance of Peter from prison, fulfilling just as he said, that some of you will be put to death, but let us not discount or discredit one account over another. The death of James was ever as much a part of God's sovereign design as was the deliverance of Peter. So let us read our passage this morning, Acts, chapter 12, starting at verse 1 till the end of the chapter.

Before we get into some of the lesson's that we can take from this passage, I want to just take a few moments to lay out a bit of the political history that we see playing out here to give us a sense of purpose behind this Herod and his rising up to persecute the Jerusalem Church. This King Herod Agrippa reigned from AD 41 to AD 44, and was the son of Aristobulus, and Grand Son of Herod the Great. Emperor Caligula gave him rule over the area's formally held by Philip and Lysanias and allowed him to be called King. Claudius, the next Emperor added Judea and Samaria to his kingdom allowing him to now rule over the area that was previous ruled by his Grandfather. Herod Agrippa was doing what ever he could to win over the Jews, and to gain favor with the Pharisee's hence his reasoning behind the persecution of the Christians. It pleased the Pharisee's who he was seeking to gain favor with. According to the historian Josephus, Herod Agrippa despite his Roman and Greek interests, sought to live as a faithful Jew which also gives us a bit of an insight into another motivation of persecuting the Christians, for he may have seen them also as a political threat. In his execution of one of the 12 disciples was a deliberate attempt to destroy the church by systematically removing its leadership.

Receiving the approval of the Jews for the arrest, and execution of James he also then sought after and arrested Peter, and it was his intention to bring him before the people and make an example of him, much like how the rulers and people conspired together to have Jesus put to death, so to we are seeing the same sort of thing with the apostle Peter. The Theologian William Cunningham remarked that the death of James was no small meaning, and was by no means being merely glossed over by Luke in this account, but rather it prepares the reader to understand how dire the situation really was for this young church and the Christians in Jerusalem. And by contrast, it shows the significance and enormity of the miracle. Without explanation, one apostle is executed, while another is rescued. He noted that this was to teach the church to live with the mystery of God's providence and to rely anew in each situation on the mercy and continuing care of God.

We do not know the outcome of any situation, yet we can only and must rely upon God's providing grace, believing and understanding that he is a merciful and loving savior, and that ultimately it is his purpose that things such as the death of James, as much as the release of Peter play an important role in his sovereign plan. That is what Cunningham means by the phrase, that we are to learn to live with the mystery of God's providence, and each day, and each trial, or temptation bring it to God relying on his mercy and grace. For we do not know the outcome, but must trust that whatever it may be it is for the purpose of God's glory, whether like in the death of James God is glorified by the faithful witness, even a witness leading to death, but also likewise God is glorified in the deliverance of Peter and the answering of the prayer of the church for that deliverance. We has humans as we assess situations like that of James and Peter, we like to put our own understanding of judgment and fairness and look at it and ask God, why spare one, and allow the other to be killed? This can also be a question we ask within our own lives as we look at how it seems that God may be pleased to bless some, yet allows others to suffer, even within the faith, and the church.

The answer to this question is implied in Paul's letter to the Romans. While he is directly writing about the sovereignty of God in salvation, why some may be saved, and others may not, I think the same principle applies here as well. As Paul wrote, "What shall we say then, is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For he says to Moses, I will have mercy and whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion, so it is not of him who wills, nor of him to runs, but of God who shows mercy. Again it is not by our merits that we can generate salvation within ourselves, and likewise it isn't by our merits that we are either delivered, or persecuted.

James did not deserve to die, any more than Peter, and Peter did not deserve to live anymore than James by any account of measurement of mankind. But ultimately both were for the glory of God. Continuing in Romans 9, Paul said, "But indeed o man, who are you to reply against God, will the thing formed say to him who formed it, why have you made me like this?" We look at such situations even in our own lives and can at times think to ourselves that something isn't fair, or isn't right. We may think that we know better, or what is right, but should we, especially those who have been born again, who are the adopted children of God question God's purpose and intention? Who are we to say to God that anything is unfair? For we are his people, created for his purpose, to be used according to his will, and it ultimately is for his purpose and glory. Our response should not be about what we think is fair, or right..but rather praise God either for the deliverance that he has given, or like the disciples did which Luke recorded in Acts chapter 5, after they had been beaten and let go being warned to no longer speak of this Jesus...it says, they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name sake.

Worthy to suffer shame, for his name's sake. Let that sink in a minute...it seems to always be our natural inclination to become depressed, or distraught, and rejoicing in our suffering is the last thing on our minds. Yet, we see with the disciples, and the apostles that even in the face of death, and after having been beaten they yet rejoice not only in God's deliverance but in that God counted them worthy to suffer such. I don't think this is the same rejoicing that would occur in say, some joyous or happy event, I don't believe they are having a big party celebrating their suffering...but rather I think it is a deeper expression, a heart felt true emotion and the expression of such rejoicing is going to God in prayer, and worship. It is a deep understanding, knowing that such suffering is for the kingdom of God, and that God maybe pleased to use it for his purpose, to use you as an example of what true Christian faith looks like so that your life, and responses to such things are a witness unto him. We all know that Christians do not suffer, nor respond to hardships as the world does, and largely it is our response of faith, and peace in the midst of peril that can be an outreach to those around us, as they recognize and see the working of faith, and hope in us, and likewise in the praise of our deliverance God is glorified, and his name is proclaimed.

This account of Peter's arrest and divine intervention in our passage this morning is the second account, of three that are in this book. In the first account, just as Gamaleil had warned, that if this message that they are speaking is of God, then mankind can not stop it...we see God's intervention against the designs and plots of mankind to bring about deliverance. One of the interesting things to note in this account is the prayer of the church for Peter's deliverance. Verse 5 says, that he was kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the Church, and yet we see by the response of the believers who were gathered together at Mary's house...even though they were gathered together and praying there was an element of hopelessness and doubt for they were shocked to see Peter when he arrived at the gate, we see this in their response to the girl who came to answer the door, verse 13. "As Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. But they said to her, You are beside yourself! You must be crazy because there is no way it could be him at the gate...and despite her insistence they did not believe her, and seeking to dismiss her claims they said, "it is his angel."

When Peter first knocked at the door he was met by this young servant girl who recognized his voice, implying that he was a regular visitor to this household, in her response we see that opposite of those who were gathered and praying, for she is quick to believe that the prayers of the church had been answered in the deliverance of Peter.

And by this response of everyone else, it shows the doubt that they had that God would answer their prayers. It is very likely that the death of James was also weighing heavily upon them, likely having received reports of his execution, and now upon hearing of the the arrest of Peter who is awaiting to be executed as well, it would seem to be a very dire and hopeless situation. And it is unclear what exactly those prayers were, we assume that they would be praying for Peter's deliverance, but in the context, and by their response of doubting that it truly was him at the gates, it would seem more likely the prayer may have been for Peter to have peace, and to remain faithful in the face of death.

Yet despite their doubts, and likely small scope in their prayer, God was pleased to answer their prayer by bringing Peter right to the door step of some who were praying. Despite all odds, and possibilities Peter stood at the gate and had come to show that God had freed him. Upon reflecting on this during this past week, the thought occurred to me of the impossible nature of Peter's deliverance, he was in a prison, behind locked doors, chained to 2 men, with guards posted at the door ways. This is not a situation that one would even dare hope to be free from, yet God in his mercy and grace in accordance to his will, had an angel appear before Peter and escort him out.....the impossible became possible, and the condemned became free, by all intents and purposes, Peter was a dead man, and God gave him life....Do you see where I am going with this? We read such accounts and see God's impossible miraculous work in these individuals, yet in many ways it is reflection of what God has done for each and every one of us.

How much more impossible is the saving of the soul? A heart bound in chains to sinful desires, having the guards of pride, selfishness, lust and arrogance standing guard over it, and not only chained down, but being dead in those sins, even to the point of hating God. Yet just like the angel appearing to Peter to bring him out of his prison, from proverbial death, to life..so to Christ has come and not only removes those chains from our heart, but also taking that which is dead and making it alive, so that we are new resurrected creatures in him, with a new heart, and new desires. The God who lead Israel out of captivity, is the same God that leads us out of the captivity of our own sin. The God who did the impossible in freeing Peter from the hands of Herod Agrippa's guard and imminent death, has intervened in our own lives freeing us from the captivity of sin and death. And a notable vehicle for such that we see expressed here by Luke in this book of Acts, is the prayer of the saints. God has chosen to use the foolishness of prayer to show forth his mercy and grace, and in the case of Peter it would seem that God delivered even more then they could have hoped.

All of this shows us God's sovereignty throughout such events, and even in his sovereign design in our prayers, so that he may be glorified in showing us his power, and his grace. And likewise in the end of this chapter we see that God is not just sovereign in the outcomes of the lives of his own children, but also of those who would seek to cause harm. For in the end, God struck down Herod, who died a painful, miserable death as a judgment of his haughty arrogance, and desires to destroy the things of God. Josephus wrote, that on the second day of the festival, Agrippa entered the theater to address the people at daybreak wearing a robe of pure silver, upon seeing him enter with the sun shining upon his silver robe they cried out, This is the voice of a god, not a mere mortal..and again we see God's sovereign hand, as Luke records, "God immediately struck him down for he did not give praise to God. This same God who brought life to the dead, who brought Peter out of a prison where he was being held for execution, is the same who likewise brought death to one who sought to end the life of God's people. God is not frustrated, nor is his purpose ever thwarted. The death of James, the imprisonment of Peter, the saints gathering and praying in the house of Mary, the judgment brought upon Herod, all of these things are working together within the plan and will of God.

And again look how Luke ends this account, verse 24, “But the word of God grew and multiplied.” All of these things worked toward God's purpose and end. So to it is the same today, God is no less the sovereign Lord today, as he was in the day of the Apostles and the early church, he is still going about his sovereign plan, he is still calling people home, as he did with James, he is still delivering people from their prisons as he did Peter, in all these things he is still enacting his will, and he still drawing people to himself, and he is still about the business of growing and multiplying and adding to his church. So I guess if we were to summarize this chapter, it would be that God is the sovereign Lord who brings life to those whom he will, and also enacts punishment upon those whom he wills. There is no one who can escape his righteous judgment, and there is no one who can upset, nor thwart the spreading of his word and his sovereign call to believe. And last, but not least, that prayer is a means by which God has chosen to show his grace and mercy toward us, his love and compassion, and through it give us hope, for we can go to the very throne of the one who sits and reigns over all of his creation, we can approach him, not as his lowly subjects in fear and trembling, but as his children, in whom he so graciously loves.