

UNSTOPPABLE, BUT UNPREDICTABLE
Acts 12:1-25

When it comes to God's will, we've all had our "why" questions. Why did God let this happen? This tragedy? This job loss? This health issue? Why do good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people? Why does one man die at age 65 and another live until he's 100? Why does one get cancer, and another doesn't? Why is this person healed and another isn't? Why is one of my children perfectly healthy and another have a disability? Why is this prayer answered and another isn't? What's your "why" question this morning? And it can't be, why does God allow people to put pineapple on pizza? I don't struggle with that one. But seriously, what's your why question? It's important that we deal with them because they can keep us from a bold & vigorous faith. And they can keep us from the freedom that comes when we let go and surrender our hearts to the Lord. That's sort of where we're going this morning as we come to Acts 12 as we learn how God glorifies Himself through life and death and everything in between.

Last time we were in Acts, Luke was giving us a glimpse of Antioch where Paul and Barnabas were ministering but now Luke now gives us a snapshot of what was taking place in Jerusalem with Peter and other apostles.

"Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, to do them harm. ² And he had James the brother of John executed with a sword [likely beheaded]. ³ When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter as well. (Now these were the days of Unleavened Bread.) ⁴ When he had arrested him, he put him in prison, turning him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending only after the Passover to bring him before the people. ⁵ So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made to God intensely by the church.

⁶ On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. ⁷ And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly stood near Peter, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. ⁸ And the angel said to him, "Put on your belt and strap on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." ⁹ And he went out and continued to follow, and yet he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ Now when they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. ¹¹ When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." ¹² And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. ¹³ When he knocked at the door of the gate, a slave woman named

Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, “You are out of your mind!” But she kept insisting that it was so. They said, “It is his angel.” ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, “Report these things to James and the brothers.” Then he left and went to another place.”

I. THE DEATH OF JAMES. (VV. 1-2)

While the church is growing up north in Antioch, **persecution** fires back up in Jerusalem. It’s helpful to think the Christian movement is about **10 years** into it at this point. It’s an established entity now separate from Judaism. One questions is why is persecution firing up again? Most think it is due in part to the **acceptance of the Gentiles** in the Church. The Jews who refused to accept Christ already hated the Church, but now the Church is accepting Gentiles as well, causing even more hate. But it’s also due in part to **Herod Agrippa’s desire for acceptance among the Jews**.

King	Relationship to Herod the Great	Ruled	Reference
<i>Herod the Great</i>		<i>37-4 BC</i>	<i>Luke 1:5</i>
<i>Herod Antipas</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>4 BC-39 AD</i>	<i>Luke 3; 9; 13; 23</i>
<i>Herod Agrippa</i>	<i>Grandson (through Aristobulus)</i>	<i>37-44 AD</i>	<i>Acts 12:1-23</i>
<i>Herod Agrippa II</i>	<i>Great Grandson (through Agrippa I)</i>	<i>44-100 AD</i>	<i>Acts 25:13-26:32</i>

This is not the same Herod from the gospels. Herod is a **title**, like Caesar. Just as there’s many Caesars, there’s many Herods. The Herod we’re probably most familiar with is **Herod Antipas** at Jesus’ trial or **Herod the Great** who tried to kill baby Jesus and who killed his sons out of suspected betrayal. However that was not before one of them, named **Aristobulus**, has a child named **Agrippa** who was not yet 4 years old when that happened. And this little Agrippa was then sent to Rome and grew up as a member of the Roman Imperial court and befriended a classmate named **Gaius**, who would later become the Roman Emperor, **Caligula**. Caligula would then appoint Agrippa to be king of over portions of Israel and Caligula’s successor, **Claudius**, expanded his territory when it became available. Agrippa was a people-pleasing politician and he **desperately wanted to please the Jews**, sometimes bending over backwards for them. So he followed their traditions and laws and even moved his primary palace from Caesarea to Jerusalem.

Recently, one of the ways he figured out that he could please the Jews was by **persecuting Christians**. He had thrown some Christians in jail and even **killed the apostle James**, the brother of John. So James becomes the **first martyred apostle**. Realizing it was a smash hit, he said to himself, “I’ll get an encore at the end of Passover by doing the same thing to Peter.” But Agrippa had to wait to kill Peter because according to Jewish law, executions weren’t supposed to happen during the holiday (to say nothing of Jesus’ illegal trial and execution on Passover). **Passover** was the Jews’ favorite holiday which took place on the 14th of Nisan, around Easter, and then the **Feast of Unleavened Bread** was the week-long consecration festival that followed on the 15th-21st. We don’t know how long Peter was in jail but it could have been that entire festival.

But notice he is guarded with **four squads** of soldiers: 4 squads of 4 soldiers each, totaling **16 soldiers** on 3-hour intervals. 2 are tied to him at all times and 2 stand guard. Why do you think that is? Maybe because this is the **3rd time in Acts that Peter has been in custody!** Once, John and him were interrogated and let go, being told not to teach in the name of Jesus. When they didn't stop, all the apostles were jailed but an angel busted them out. If you remember, a wise man named **Gamaliel** said if this Christian movement is of God, you won't be able to overthrow it and you'll be found **fighting against God**. Well, now **Herod is clearly fighting against God** and I think he knows it. He's hoping God doesn't do anything so he looks good. He places 4 squads to guard Peter because he doesn't want to be embarrassed as those in the past were. But these soldiers don't do a lick of good to stop a **sovereign God** and **fervently praying church**. God rescues Peter.

The big "why" question we come face to face with is, "**Why would God allow James to die and Peter to live?**" The answer: God's sovereign will approved of both. He works differently with different people because people are different and His plans aren't the same for each one.

God can use all variables of life to accomplish His will. (Rom. 8:28, 37)

God could use the courageous, refuse-to-retract **faith of James** to bring others to a saving knowledge of Christ and to bolster other believers to do the same. But God could also use the **rescue of Peter** to demonstrate that He is in full control of everything and that James' death wasn't an accident. He uses death and life and everything in between to bring Him glory and accomplish His will. God sometimes uses the rescues and deliverances to get our attention but maybe more so, it's the tragedies of life that really get our attention: the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, cancer, or other aging difficulties that bring us to the end of ourselves.

Prosperity preachers and perforated philosophies try to get us to believe that if God is good, He'll only let good things happen to me. That's horrible theology. No, God is good because He allows difficulties to come into the lives of proud sinners like you and me and build in us some character and hope and perseverance and trust. If only good things happened to us as sinners, we wouldn't want to be around us. We would be arrogant, spoiled, flabby people without any character. And that we know is part of His will: developing us and maturing us through trials and difficulties. Faith is about trusting God and His promises even when things don't go the way we want them to or expect them too. That's the faith that gives God glory. We find out what we're made of and what we really believe about God when tragedies strike.

But James' death wasn't accident. It was God's sovereign will to bring him home. James had finished the race God had for him. Like the 2 witnesses of Revelation, the Anti-Christ could only take their lives once they had finished their testimony. They are invincible until God is done with them. James was just as invincible as Peter until the Lord called him home. James had finished his testimony. It was time to go. Daryl informed me about Pastor Steve Farrar last month. I was just reading one his books in January and listening to his podcast, and then one day, unexpectedly, God says, "*Your testimony is finished. Well done.*" You see, none of us knows when God will take us home but we can rest freely from anxiety and fear knowing that our days are numbered before they

even begin. Psalm 139 says, “*Your eyes have seen my unformed substance and in Your book were written all the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them.*”

II. THE RESCUE OF PETER. (VV. 3-17)

Peter is chained to 2 guards with 2 guards at the door and the impending morning doom is looming over him, but **Peter is sound asleep**. He’s sawing logs! The brilliant light of the angel doesn’t even wake him up. Almost comically, the angel must **strike Peter’s side to wake him** up and get him moving. I think there’s an implication here about Peter’s trust in God.

We can rest confidently in the sovereign will of God.

Peter was. If Peter wasn’t trusting God’s will and timing in his life and the promises of eternal life in Christ, he’d be a nervous wreck, chewing his nails or angry with God, throwing a fit like a child who didn’t get his way. Instead, he rests confidently. And you know, Isaiah 26:3-4 says, “*You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for in God, the Lord, we have an everlasting Rock.*” If you want better sleep at night, trust that God is in control and trust His promises of eternal life.

When Peter is out in the street and wakes from his stupor, realizing he is free and it’s not a dream, he goes to the **familiar home of Mary, mother of John Mark** (who wrote the gospel of Mark). Tradition, and I think the Bible, indicates this is where the Last Supper took place in the upper room and where they were staying between the ascension and Pentecost. This is the place where Mark returns to from his mission and becomes Peter’s son in the faith. It’s a place large enough for a church to meet and Mary has a servant named **Rhoda** which tells us that Mark’s mom, Mary, was a wealthy individual.

Anyway, in another comical moment, when Rhoda answers the door and hears Peter she is so excited that she doesn’t let him in! She runs to tell everyone – who is fervently praying for his release – that he’s at the door! But they think she’s nuts! They get into this discussion about how it’s his angel or something – probably assuming that he already died. So they’re arguing and meanwhile, Peter’s still knocking! He’s out in the dark street waiting for someone to come arrest him again and wondering what in the world they’re doing! But there’s another lesson here for us because **here are these believers praying for God’s deliverance of Peter and yet seem incredibly surprised when he is actually released!** It gives us an honest reality we need to face:

God’s will is sometimes mysterious & unpredictable.

That’s how these early believers operated and understood God’s will, isn’t it? I remind us this group of people have seen many miracles at the hands of the apostles the last 10 years. They’ve seen God rescue the apostles before from jail. **They knew God was unstoppable. But their shock & disbelief reveals to us that He wasn’t always predictable. They didn’t know what God would do but they still trusted Him.** Isn’t that great? I say this because it shows us they didn’t

have a “name it and claim it and receive it” concept of prayer. Their prayers were not “my will be done” but “Thy will be done.” Just like Daniel and his friends who said God is able to deliver us, but even if He doesn’t, we will be faithful to Him. But this also tells us prayer can be very powerful and somehow, somehow, God uses it in His will.

God answers prayers in accordance with His will.

1 John 5:14 says, *“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”*

Anyway, they finally let Peter in. He gives them instruction to tell **James, the brother of Jesus** (who wrote the book of James & becomes a leader in the Jerusalem church) what happened. Peter then departs to an undisclosed location. The next time we run into him is in Acts 15 where he is back in Jerusalem. Meanwhile he could have gone to Antioch according to Galatians 2:14.

III. THE SURPRISE OF HEROD. (VV. 18-25)

“¹⁸ Now when day came. ¹⁹ When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.”

When Herod wakes up, imagine how incredibly furious he is that Peter is missing. This was supposed to be his big moment the Jews would praise him for. Instead, Peter’s nowhere to be found. After **searching** for him and **examining the guards**, the guards are executed as was the standard procedure for any soldier who proved incapable of discharging his duties. Sometime later he goes northwest to **Caesarea** up on the coast to deal with **Tyre** and **Sidon**.

“²⁰ Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one mind they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king’s chamberlain [something like Herod’s chief of staff], they were asking for peace, because their country was supported with grain from the king’s country. ²¹ On an appointed day, after putting on his royal apparel, Herod took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. ²² The people repeatedly cried out, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” ²³ And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.”

So this occasion takes place in the year 44 sometime later – some suggest 5 months later in August. But that should be of interest to our “Why” questions? Why does evil prosper? Why does God let this apostle-killing man live for some time? It’s because **even though God will right every wrong, God doesn’t immediately right every wrong**. He could’ve struck down Agrippa anytime but we see here that **God patiently waited for the perfect time** to make a statement about his fighting against God. Sooner or later, we trust that God will avenge and we are called to leave room for His vengeance – His wrath. He will repay at His perfect timing (Rom. 12:19).

We don't know precisely why, but the people of Tyre and Sidon had angered Herod. And because Herod oversaw the territory of Galilee which was like the bread basket of Israel, he enacts an embargo, cutting off the supply chain of food from Galilee to Tyre and Sidon. So, hungry as they were, they want peace with Herod and are willing to say and do anything to appease him, including calling him a god. No one actually believed this man was a god – they were just hungry and playing politics.

Interestingly, the historian Josephus collaborated this event with further detail saying that Agrippa put on a garment made wholly of silver that was resplendently illuminated by the rays of the sun when he delivered this speech. He had an “angelic” radiant appearance. But then a real angel comes and strikes him down on that stage and he died of worms. This is probably TMI (too much info) but this might have been a worm cyst (pocket of worms) that broke open in his intestinal track as Josephus says he had violent and agonizing abdominal pain that hit suddenly and lasted for 5 days. It sounds like this was something surprisingly common in those days in sheep country.

The final contrast in 12 is between this puny little earthly king and the King of Kings. Herod refused to submit to the sovereign King of Heaven, was found fighting against God, and was struck down in judgment. It shows us that men can run and hide from God and shake their fist in His face all they want, but sooner or later He's going to call them to account. The wise thing to do is to surrender to God's sovereignty. The story of our lives plays out and ends based on whether we have surrendered to God or not.

Surrender to God's will. Don't fight Him.

I hope none of you are shaking your fist at God and refusing to accept Christ. If you are, I have to warn you that it won't end well for you. But some of us, even though we are saved believers who won't face that eternal judgment, we can still shake our fists at Him for things that have happened in our lives or still hold a grudge against Him for something that He has done or maybe hasn't done for us – a prayer we've been praying that He hasn't answered. You believe in Jesus, certainly – but your faith is anything but vigorous and free because you refuse to surrender your “why” to Him – and it's eating you alive on the inside, causing pain and bitterness and gut-wrenching agony. And as hard as it is, what you've got to do, is you need to let go and trust the Good Father in heaven who works all things for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28).

And I know that's not easy because last night when I finished this message, I had something hit me like a ton of bricks when I realized there's a “why” question and situation in my own life that has started creating animosity in my own heart. It didn't happen all at once but over the course of a year due to unanswered prayer. I was just made aware of this issue and I needed to let this message shepherd my own heart. And I can't tell you how freeing it is to lay this thing at the sovereign King's feet and say, “Lord, You're perfect in all Your ways. Your grace is sufficient. How do you want to let this change me and make me more like Christ?” So I encourage you this afternoon to find some time alone with God and take your “why” question to Him, and just give it over to Him. Just give up. Resolve to trust Him in it. And let go. And be free again.

This early church we know wasn't perfect. They didn't have it all together. But this church did keep trusting God despite the complexities of things they didn't understand. Verse 24: “

But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied. ²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned when they had fulfilled their mission to Jerusalem, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.”

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That's quite the summary statement for this portion of Acts. It's another way of saying, “*You cannot stop God or His Church. Is it unpredictable? Yes. Unstoppable? No. The gospel will advance no matter what you throw at it because God is the One at the controls.*”

Lord forgive us for all the times that we've expected You to respond to every situation the way we think You should. Whatever our “why”, may we give that over to You and resolve to trust You because You are God and we are not. Wrestling over the “what if's” and “might have been's” is a waste of time. Set us free as we continue to trust You – the one who orders our life from beginning to end before we are ever even born. Help us to forget what lies behind and look up and to press toward the goal and the upward call of Christ Jesus. We look forward to the day when in heaven or eternity we can look back on all you've done and sing praises to Your awesome name.