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“That’s Not Fair!”

Acts 12:1-11

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We tend to view events and circumstances in life as either “fair” or “unfair.” Sometimes it’s hard to reconcile situations that don’t make sense to us. What do you do when God doesn’t do what you want Him to do? In Acts 12, two of Jesus’ original twelve disciples, James and Peter, were arrested by King Herod because of the ongoing persecution of Christians. Peter was miraculously delivered from prison by an angel sent by God, but James was martyred. Why did God rescue one but allow the other to be executed? In this study, we’ll tackle this theological dilemma.

1. **Acts 12:1-11** – *“Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, ‘Arise quickly!’ And his chains fell off his hands. Then the angel said to him, ‘Gird yourself and tie on your sandals;’ and so he did. And he said to him, ‘Put on your garment and follow me.’ So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. And when Peter had come to himself, he said, ‘Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.’”*

2. The persecution of James and Peter
 - a. Jews who did not believe in Jesus and Romans joined forces to persecute Christians in the early church
 - b. James and Peter, two of the original twelve disciples, were subject to this persecution
 - i. James
 1. Brother of John; not the same James who wrote the Book of James, who was the half-brother of Jesus
 2. James and John were fishermen and known for their quick tempers
 - a. In [Mark 3](#), Jesus called them "*Boanerges*," meaning "Sons of Thunder"
 - b. In [Luke 9](#), upon being denied lodging in Samaria, they suggested calling fire down from heaven to consume the Samaritans
 - c. In [Mark 10](#), Jesus rebuked them for asking if they could sit on His right and left when He came into His glory
 - ii. Peter
 1. The Bible records more about Peter than any of the other original twelve disciples
 2. He wrote the books of 1 Peter and 2 Peter
 3. He was impulsive
 - a. In [Mark 8:31-33](#), when Jesus told His disciples that He would be killed, Peter rebuked Jesus to His face, and Jesus said, "*Get behind Me Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.*"
 - b. In [Matthew 26:31-35](#), Jesus predicted that His disciples would forsake Him
 - i. Peter claimed that even if everyone else deserted Jesus, he would not
 - ii. Shortly after, he denied Jesus three times as Jesus predicted
 4. He was also courageous and adventurous
 - a. When Jesus came to the disciples walking on the water, Peter was the only one who got out of the boat; ultimately he would begin to sink as fear set in, but he was the only disciple who attempted to walk on the water with Jesus
 - b. When Jesus asked "Who do you say that I am?" Peter was the first person to declare, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."
 - c. After his restoration following his denial of Jesus, God used Peter to preach the first evangelical message, and three thousand people were saved

- iii. James and Peter, along with John, were part of the inner circle of Jesus' ministry
 - 1. When Jesus healed Jairus' daughter in [Mark 5](#), they were the only disciples that Jesus took with Him into Jairus' home
 - 2. They were the only disciples with Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration in [Matthew 17](#), where the glory of God came upon Jesus, and Moses and Elijah appeared
 - 3. When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane in [Mark 14](#), Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him to have them pray separately from the other disciples before going farther alone
 - iv. Peter and James both loved and followed Jesus and would each ultimately die for Jesus
3. A challenging theological dilemma
- a. Why is it that God allowed James to be executed and He chose to rescue Peter by delivering him from jail?
 - i. We can look at similar scenarios in our own lives and be overcome by feeling "it's not fair"
 - b. How do we reconcile these things, particularly where it involves what God may do for one person and not do for another?
 - c. We tend to evaluate and judge things as fair or unfair by our own personal standards, but what does Scripture tell us?
4. A Biblical perspective—what do you do when God doesn't do what you want Him to do?
- a. God's **ways** are HIGHER
 - i. Some things will simply be a mystery to us and difficult to understand until we are with Jesus
 - 1. [Isaiah 55:8-9](#) - *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says 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.'"*
 - 2. [Ecclesiastes 8:17](#) - *"Then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it."* (1984 NIV)
 - 3. [Deuteronomy 29:29](#) - *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law."* (1984 NIV)
 - b. God's **nature** is GOOD
 - i. He always has our best interests at heart

1. [Psalm 100:5](#) - *“For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.”* (1984 NIV)
 2. When things challenge us, we tend to deny God’s goodness
 - a. This was Satan’s strategy with Eve in the Garden
 - i. God provided freedom with one rule, and Satan turned it into legalism — “God’s holding back on you”
 3. Our circumstances do not change the nature of God
 4. [Psalm 84:11](#) - *“For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD will give grace and glory; no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly.”*
- c. God’s **grace** is SUFFICIENT
- i. He will strengthen us in our weaknesses
 1. In 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul spoke of a “thorn” in his flesh; we don’t know exactly what Paul’s “thorn” was, but it was debilitating and distracting, and Paul pleaded with God to remove it
 - a. [2 Corinthians 12:8-10](#) - *“And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*
 2. If God doesn’t change our circumstances, He will strengthen us to endure them
 3. In our weakness, we can feel the greatness of His power
- d. God’s **justice** is PERFECT
- i. He is going to sort it all out in the end
 1. [Luke 3:5-6](#) - *“Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*
 - ii. God will deal with every injustice, and deliver and rescue all His children—if not in this life, in the life to come
 1. God dealt with Herod
 - a. [Acts 12:20](#) - *“Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king’s personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king’s country. So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and*

gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, 'The voice of a god and not of a man!' Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died."

2. God judged Herod, but took James and (eventually Peter) to heaven
- iii. God will have the last word

Discussion Questions

1. Read [Acts 12:1-11](#) to provide a foundation for your Bible study time.
2. What is the theological dilemma present in this passage? (See #3a above)
3. Do you ever struggle with feeling that God isn't being fair?
4. Read [Isaiah 55:8-9](#), [Ecclesiastes 8:17](#), and [Deuteronomy 29:29](#). Why are God's ways "higher" than our ways? How can this serve as a comfort to us? (See #4a above)
5. Read [Psalm 100:5](#) and [Psalm 84:11](#). Does God ever "hold out" on us? What should we do when we are tempted to deny God's goodness? (See #4b above)
6. Read [2 Corinthians 12:8-10](#). How should we react when God allows difficult circumstances to remain in our lives? (See #4c above)
7. Read [Luke 3:5-6](#). How will God deal with injustice? (See #4d above)
8. Discuss a time when you saw God's faithfulness amid difficult circumstances.
9. Close your meeting by allowing the Holy Spirit to lead your time of prayer.

* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New King James Version (NKJV)