

Trusting the Master's Plan

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[0 : 00] This morning, as we begin to look in chapter 12 of the book of Acts, we will catch a glimpse of God's sovereignty in protecting His work in this world, and that it's not limited by our ability to understand it, or rather our inability to understand it.

And a few chapters in the Bible show us God's total providence over life and over death, like Acts chapter 12 does.

We see in the first four verses of the book of Acts that James the Apostle dies. And later on we see that Peter, the Apostle, is miraculously delivered, and he does not die, and he is released.

And we're not given a reason in either case why both men who are doing the will of God, one dies and one is released.

And as this chapter ends, in chapter 12 with Herod's death, we see God's control even in the affairs of politicians.

[1 : 25] That God has His way no matter what we attempt or no matter what we try to do. But there's one constant that runs throughout chapter number 12, and that is the vibrancy of God's church.

That no matter what is thrown against it, the church of God is sustained. And not only that, the church of God grows as His people are facing the opposition, facing the odds, and continue to share the gospel and continue to serve God as God's will is accomplished in the life of the church. Now, God's plan, as we heard so eloquently stated just a moment ago, does not always align with our plans, does not always align with our expectations.

And all of this to understand that God is always working to fulfill a purpose far beyond human comprehension.

That as time marches on, God in His sovereignty is accomplishing His plan, not only in our lives, but God is accomplishing His plan for the ages.

[2 : 54] This morning, we will be looking at Acts chapter 12 and verses 1 through 4 this morning. And the persecution of the church is continuing.

It continues with Herod Agrippa executing the apostle James, the brother of the apostle John. And later on, we're going to see the miraculous release of the apostle Peter, along with a rather amusing time in the early church when Peter comes back to meet with the church body there.

And it's been questioned. Why would God allow James to be killed and Peter to be released? Why are some spared while others die before having an opportunity to spend a full and long life serving God?

The answer? I don't know. Why would God allow James to be killed and Peter to be killed and Peter to be killed and Peter to be killed? Russell Moore was a young man with an irresistible desire to share Jesus with everyone he knew.

[4 : 08] We were freshmen together at Bible College, and there were many times where we would sit down in the student union building, which we lovingly called the sub, and we would talk about our outreach as we were going out into the community during that week.

And we also talked about what we would do after we graduated. Russell had a strong desire to reach God's people.

As a matter of fact, he would often say, he said, Bart, I have a desire to reach the Jews.

I want to go to Israel, and I want to die in Israel. He wanted, he loved God's people, the Jews, so much that he wanted to see them accept Jesus Christ as their Messiah and come to know Him. He wanted to spend his entire life in Israel, sharing the gospel with the Jews, but God had other plans. Russell's leg began hurting, and after a series of tests, it was found out that he had bone cancer.

[5 : 33] He ended up hospitalized in Houston, where ultimately they had to amputate his left leg below the hip.

Six weeks later, and with a prosthetic leg, Russell was back on campus going back to class. Heim went on for a few weeks and a few months, and after one of Russell's routine trips to the doctor, an x-ray showed that he had a suspicious spot on one of his lungs.

As he came back to campus, he said, if the doctor knows anything, he says, I've got about 12 days to live.

But Russell went on to say, he said, but there's three things that I really want to do. During this time, Russell had befriended Harold Morris.

Harold Morris had a very, very interesting testimony. Harold Morris had pretty much reached bottom.

[6 : 56] He was out with a group of friends. He was driving. They stopped at a grocery store, and unbeknownst to him, the two friends went in the store, robbed the store, and shot a man in the store.

They rushed back to the vehicle, and they said, drive. Russell drove. He ended up going back home, ended up going back home in a different state.

He was in Atlanta at the time. FBI comes and knocks on his motel room door where he was staying at the time, arrested him.

He ended up being charged and convicted with two life sentences for armed robbery and murder. Someone that Harold had gone to school with, actually played football with, had come to know the Lord, had gone into the military, had been a war hero, had part of his face blown off.

Some of you may have heard of Cleve McCleary. Cleve came and he visited Harold in prison. He shared the gospel with Harold. Harold came to trust Christ as his Savior.

[8 : 26] Harold was then, a number of years later, asked and given some day passes to go and to share his testimony with high school kids.

Harold was, after a little over nine years serving two life sentences, a miracle happened, and he received a letter from the parole board.

The letter read that after much consideration, he was being paroled, and he would be allowed to live out the rest of his sentence if he behaved as a free man, as long as he kept in touch with his parole officer and followed all of the rules.

Harold ended up going to Southeastern, and he and Russ became close friends. And Russell said, Harold, I want to do three things before I die.

He said, One, I want to continue my Bible college training because the Word of God means everything to me. He said, Secondly, he said, I want to go to prison with you, and I want to share my testimony.

[9 : 55] And he said, Third, I want to go to Israel and witness to God's people. Russell attended class for another week, and he asked then, or he asked Harold to ask then Bible college president, Dr. Alden Gannett, if he could speak in chapel.

And as Russell, helped by his mom and helped by Harold to get up onto the platform, he proceeded to speak to a chapel field with student body and with faculty.

And this is what he said. He said, Some of you are playing games with God. When you came here, you had a vision. And you had a purpose.

But you have lost that direction. You know you're playing games with God. It's time to get serious. And as he finished, everyone stood up. The chapel exploded in applause, both students and faculty.

[11 : 09] Russell checked in the hospital later that day to die. After much prayer, he had asked Harold to come to the hospital one day, and he said, My white count is down.

I think he said it was 800. It was whatever number it was. He said, Please pray that it doubles. So they prayed. A little while later, he called and he said, Praise God.

He said, Not only did my white count double, it tripled. He said, But I want to do something before I die. He said, I want to go to Israel.

Harold said, You're too sick to go to Israel. You can't do it. They'll never let you go. And he said, Harold, I want you to go to Israel with me. Harold said, I can't.

He said, I had to get special convention just to come to Alabama to go to college. He said, There's no way they'll allow me to leave the country. Then he thought, he said, Well, they allowed me to get

a passport a few months ago.

[12:28] But Russell looked at Harold and he said, Angels, brother. Angels. And Russell talked to his doctor.

His doctor had come to think of Russell as a son. And he said, There's no way. He said, No way I can let you go. He said, They'll call me crazy for letting you go. And he said, They'll call you crazy for going.

And Harold said, There's no way I can go with you. He said, Get your dad to go with you. Get somebody else to go with you. He said, No, brother. You're coming with me. Well, sure enough, there on that cool December day in 1979, Harold and Russell got on an airplane in Birmingham, Alabama and flew to New York and in New York got on that 11-hour plane ride to Israel.

While on that plane ride, he said, There were mostly Jews on that airplane because we were going to Israel. Every chance he got the whole 11 hours, Harold said, Russell was sharing his testimony. He was sharing why he loved the Jews so much. He was sharing his faith. He said he would share the gospel with someone and he said, You think you've heard something?

[13:55] He said, Listen to the guy next to me. And then Harold would begin to give his testimony. He said, After a while, one of the flight attendants came and tapped him on the shoulder.

And Harold said, She looked at me and she said, I want you to know that I had already decided to divorce my husband. But because of that young man, I've recommitted my life to Christ and my marriage.

Please take care of him. They arrived in Tel Aviv, rented a car, drove to Jerusalem, ended up spending several days there in Israel.

They had, on the way, they had picked up two young girls, hitchhikers. They were dressed in military clothes. And again, Russell shared his testimony with the young girls that Jesus Christ was the Messiah.

And they shared phone numbers and said, Please look us up. We want to hear more about what you have to say. He ended up checking into a hotel.

[15:09] Excuse me. Spent some time there. The doctor had written a note. They had left Birmingham with a lot of medication for Russell.

Every five hours, Russell was to give him an injection. Well, during that period of time, Russell was in so much pain that he had started doubling up on his pain medicine.

And when Harold came to give him an injection, he said, Russell, this is the last of it. And he said, I know. I've been doubling up on it. So they tried to find a druggist who would fill up, fill a prescription. Well, they weren't able to find one. Ultimately, they were able to find a druggist to fill the prescription. Later that week, that weekend, they went to a service at the garden tomb where it was thought that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Harold said, from there, we could see the hill of Golgotha. They worshiped God there. They met a young lady there named Esther. And she invited Harold and Russell to her home.

[16:22] They ended up going to her home and they spent some time there. They had just barely gotten back to their hotel room and the phone rang.

Russell goes to the phone. Harold goes to the phone and it was Esther. She said, you will never guess. You and Russell have an appointment tomorrow at the Knesset.

You're going to meet the Prime Minister's top aide. I told him your story and he says he wants to meet you. So Russell and Harold got in the car.

The next day, they drove over to the Knesset. This would be like our in Washington, D.C. Next day was Christmas Eve and they walked into Mr. Kaddishai's office.

They sat down there. Well, that night before, Russell had spent all night long writing two messages from Romans chapter 10 and Romans chapter 11. They sat down and began talking to Mr.

Kaddishai and told him why they were there.

[17:41] Russell reached into his pocket, pulled out one of the messages, handed it to him. They talked for a while. Russell, Harold had noticed that there was a door to their left and after a while of talking with Mr. Kaddishai, he left the room, went through that door on the left.

A few moments later, he came back with Menachem Begin who walks into the room and Russell explains why he's there, that he loved Mr. Begin's people so much that he wanted to come and die in Israel.

Russell reached into his pocket, took out that message. He says, Mr. Begin, I wrote this just for you. He said, if you read this, if you study it, you'll see that Christ is the Messiah.

One day, every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that he is Lord. Mr. Begin took the message, put it in his pocket. He hugged Russell and he saw a tear come down Mr. Begin's eye or his cheek.

They spoke for nearly an hour. Begin walked out the room having shared his testimony.

[19 : 10] See, that was Russell's life. Russell lived 42 days after they came back to Birmingham. Russell Moore died at 22 years old.

So the question is, why does God allow some to die young without having the opportunity to spend a long life? We may ask the same question.

Why does God allow children to die? Why? Well, you know, questions like this really have no answer.

Really are any value because God is God. We are not God. God knows what he's doing and God is doing it.

We call it sovereignty. That's who God is. He works with a broad plan for all ages in mind.

[20 : 13] But how often do we second-guess God? How often do we second-guess God's plan not only for our lives, but we second-guess God's plan for others' lives as well?

Well, let's take a look at what was going on in Jerusalem. Let's look at Acts chapter 12 verses 1 through 4. Verse 1. 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 a 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, put Peter in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people at Passover.

So back in verse number 1, either right after the time of what happened when the church in Antioch decided to take up the offering, or right around the time of the famine, Herod, because Paul was no longer on the scene as the persecutor of the church, Herod takes over the role as chief persecutor of the church.

[21 : 36] Bible historians put this around the time of A.D. 44, probably in the spring of that year when he arrests James, kills James, he arrests Peter, and ultimately plans on putting Peter to death as well.

Now this Herod was Herod Agrippa. He was the grandson of Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the one who ordered the Bethlehem children to be murdered.

And he was the nephew of Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist beheaded. Lovely family, right? And so this is the Herod from this family that begins to persecute the church.

They were a scheming, they were a murderous family, and the Herods were despised by the Jews because they resented Edomites ruling over them.

And Herod knew that. Herod knew that he was despised by the Jews, and so he decides to persecute the church to convince the people of his loyalty to the Old Testament patriarchs.

[22 : 47] And so Herod decides I'm going to vex, I'm going to harass, I'm going to hurt this fledgling religion, and so I'll show the Jews that I am on their side.

This word harass in the Greek means to treat severely, to hurt. So that's what Herod was doing. Then verse 2, he killed James who was the brother of the apostle John.

He kills him with the sword. James was a faithful man of God, and he was doing the will of God, but he was killed. So we ask ourselves the question, why would God allow this to happen?

His brother ends up living around 100 years old, or maybe a little longer. So it doesn't matter whether we live 50 years or 100 years, the thing that matters is, are you filling your life, are we filling our lives with service to God?

Russell filled his short 22 years of life with service for God. John filled his over 100 years service, life, with service for God.

[24 : 07] and we ask and we think about it, what difference does that make in eternity? If we share the gospel with one person, if we've encouraged one person, if we've led one person to faith in Jesus Christ, it's been a life well lived.

So think about this, the cost of discipleship isn't a fee we pay up front. The cost of discipleship is what we pay every day as we die to ourselves, we take up our cross, and we follow him.

We pay that cost of discipleship every day that we serve him. It often requires us stepping into the unknown, trusting in God's plan over our own.

I think this passage causes us to reflect on the mysterious purpose that God has in our lives. It doesn't always make sense to us, but God still is carrying out his plan.

Now it's easy to celebrate the release of Peter. We spend a lot of time on the next few verses where Peter being chained to at least two soldiers the entire time that he's imprisoned, and then miraculously he is released.

[25 : 30] He comes to the door, Rhoda answers the door, she gets excited, she doesn't believe it's him, she shuts the door. We get excited about Peter's release, but yet God was just as much in the death of James as he was in the release of Peter.

God is as much in the death of a 22-year-old sold-out follower of Jesus as he is when someone says I've been healed miraculously.

God is just as much in both of those as he is when we celebrate. But both were an integral part of God's sovereign design.

Look at verse 3. And because he, because Herod saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also.

Now it was during the days of unleavened bread. Apparently, feeling good over his success with murdering James, Herod grabbed the apparent leader of the Jerusalem believers.

[26 : 43] He grabs Peter, and Luke even tells us when this happened, during the days of unleavened bread. And Herod's thinking about it. If it pleased the Jews when I killed James, just think how delighted they will be when I kill Peter.

He goes on, verse number four. So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. Now Herod wasn't dumb. He knew that it wouldn't be popular to murder someone. Even though it was someone that they wanted dead, it wouldn't have been popular to murder someone during one of the Jews' high holy days.

And so what he did was he kind of put him on ice and he said, I'm going to bring him back out after Passover. Then I will carry out my murderous plan.

So he threw Peter in prison and he bides his time. He had no intention of letting Peter go because what do we see here? He posed three shifts of four guards. And the Bible goes on to say that he was chained between two of them, a little bit overkill, but he had no intention of losing Peter.

[27 : 57] He wanted to make sure that he was there. So he had four guards watching him constantly. Herod intended to bring Peter before the people after Passover.

And we're going to see next week how Peter is miraculously released. So the question remains, why was James killed?

Why was Peter released? After all, both were dedicated servants of God, and both were needed by the church. The only answer is the sovereign will of God.

Why does God do one thing in one case, and something totally different in a different case? Well, the answer is, he is God, and he's free to choose.

Who are we, the created, to question the creator? But it's not always easy. It's not always easy when we're the ones hurting.

[29 : 04] It's not always easy when we're the one that gets the bad report from the doctor. It's not easy when we watch someone we love suffer.

But the question remains, who are we to question God? Why do some people suffer while he delivers others? And the answer to that question is, I don't know.

I've been asked that question many times by people who have just lost a loved one. The only, the best answer is, I don't know.

I wish I understood why God does what God does. But I don't know. The bottom line is, we can't answer those weighty questions of why.

why. These verses are a reminder that God's plans are not always understandable by us, but they are unstoppable no matter what we do. We can't stop God's plan.

[30 : 16] We simply need to realize that God is at work in our lives every single day, no matter what happens. When we face situations that are seemingly beyond our control or our understanding, we have this profound comfort to know that God still is in control.

Nothing takes God by surprise. Even in pain, we learn from the Apostle Paul, that even in pain, even in our weakness, God is glorified.

And if anything, if our life can bring glory to God, God be praised. But like Job, like we heard about Moses this morning in Sunday school, we sometimes still question God.

Sometimes we still get upset with God. But God understands. That's why God said to Moses, I will, I will.

that's why God took care of Job. That's why God takes care of everything in our lives. God is at work, and He knows what's best for us, and He knows what is best for all time, and that's what matters.

[31 : 42] It's a call to trust God and His overarching plan for our lives, no matter what happens, knowing that He orchestrates every detail in our lives according to His plan to accomplish His divine purpose, even when the path He chooses for us is painful or beyond our human comprehension.

When we embrace this truth, we can find peace in the midst of uncertainty, anchored in the assurance that God is still in control, and He is guiding us through every season of our life.

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, this is a pretty weighty message this morning, where we see the death of one of the apostles, martyred for his faith, while a fellow apostle is miraculously released.

So, Father, we know when we are honest with you, and when we are honest with your word, we realize that you really are in control, and we simply need to trust you, even when trusting is difficult, because you will have your way, because you are sovereign.

Father, we know you've called us to do what we can, as long as we have breath in our lungs, as we, as I remember in the life of Russell Moore, given, at that point in time, just a few days to live.

[33 : 42] life, but he did everything he could, humanly speaking, to accomplish your will. And I believe you divinely allowed him and gave him that strength to do it, even though you still took his life.

You know that we live in a world cursed by sin and sickness, disease, evil is a part of this world. Sometimes we suffer simply because we're human.

Father, we know that you are always intimately acquainted with our pain, with our grief, with our sorrow, with our difficulties, and you're there to provide comfort.

And oftentimes you allow us to go through pain and you comfort us so that like your word tells us, we can in turn comfort others with the same comfort whereby we have been comforted.

Father, please encourage and comfort each one here this morning as we have gone through, are going through, or will be going through a difficult time in life.

[35 : 05] Father, we thank you for your goodness. And Lord, we thank you that you do still work miracles. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.