

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (29-10-1995 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

The trials of believers  
Acts 12

Introduction

The Bible is so true to life, even though events happened a long time ago and in different cultures. So often God's people had to endure as we have to today. Acts 12 is one passage which tells of the problems in Christians' lives. It does not provide an exhaustive answer to the problem of suffering, but there is light and help, strength and comfort.

Trials of believers

It is very clear that King Herod had decided to harass some from the church. This was Herod Agrippa, the grandson of the king who had killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. He was a puppet Jewish king under Roman control, and his aim in life was to keep in with everybody. He needed to keep in with his Roman masters, and at the same time keep in with the Jewish subjects and priestly rulers. Hence he turned his attention to the Christian church, which was a thorn in the side of the Jewish priests because of its message about Jesus the Messiah and Son of God.

So firstly Herod had James, the brother of John, killed with a sword. This proved to be a popular move, so he had Peter seized, since Peter was the leader, and planned to have him killed after the Passover season.

Christians have been in trouble, not just then, but all down through history and even today. The idea that conversion brings an end of troubles is simply not true, despite what some preachers would tell us. Some of our problems may be over, e.g. an accusing conscience, being in the wrong with God. But others are continuing, because we are still human beings in a human body, vulnerable to disease, accident, sudden death. Other troubles are just beginning.

For some, there will be the divided home. Jesus spoke of man divided against his father, and daughter against her mother (Matthew 10:34-36). A man's foes can be those in his own home. For others, conversion can cost friends or employment. Being a committed Christian can affect business prospects, chances of promotion, chance of a good education in places like China, poison in a Muslim home, lost inheritance in a Hindu or Jewish home. N.B. More have given their lives for Christ in this twentieth century than in any other century.

The Christian life is costly. This needs to be preached. There is no point hiding wounds to gain a friend.

*"Why should I complain of want or distress,  
Temptation or pain – He told me no less"*  
(John Newton)

Yet the Christian life is still the best life. Problems in God's will turn out for blessing. If difficulties increase, so does God's grace. **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me (2 Corinthians 12:9). You will fill me with joy in your presence (Psalm 16:11).**

### Mystery in our troubles

Here is a story of arrest, prison and extreme danger. Peter escaped, but James did not. Why? Why were both not killed? Why did God not rescue both of them? Here is a deep unfathomable mystery. As we all go through distress and trials, God takes some one way and some another. We see it repeatedly in the Bible. Some who were thrown into prison escaped, e.g. Joseph, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul and Silas. Others did not get out of prison alive, e.g. Samson, John the Baptist and James.

During the massacres of Christians in the Congo in 1964, there were some amazing escapes, but others did not; some were violated and murdered. At other times, the same disease can strike different people – and some are healed and others die. It is always the same – some Christians have their problems wonderfully resolved, in other cases people have to live with their trials year on year. Sometimes the reason is perceived quickly, but others do not understand God's purpose until their dying day, or indeed have to wait till they get to heaven to get the answer. **I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure (Matthew 11:25,26).**

Yet God has revealed enough of Himself to enable us to trust where we cannot prove or understand. As a Baptist minister once said after being struck down by a dread illness that threatened his life and his ministry, "If God loved me, a sinner, enough to send Christ to die for me, then even this awful experience is not outside his loving purpose for my life." Sangster recalled the sufferings of his sister, the youngest in the family where the rest were all boys. She only lived to 9 years, and in her short life was often under the surgeon's knife, and her wounds were very hard to look at, and she had to be hidden away. When people questioned why God would let this happen, he had no answer when he was a boy, and still as a man he was baffled by the hardship she endured. But he said, "I shall wait till I get home. He will then tell me Himself. And when I hear His answer, I shall be satisfied."

### Considerations to help and support us

- (a) The Sovereignty of God in this situation. He is absolutely in control. Nothing is outside his knowledge. He directs, ordains or permits all that happens to us. **Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11).** So he sent His angel to deliver Peter. One of those **ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation (Hebrews 1:14).** God did not act till the 11<sup>th</sup> hour – the night before execution was due to take place. Man's extremity is God's opportunity. Not till the knife was in Abraham's hand and he was about to strike Isaac did God intervene. Not till the last loaf of bread left George Muller's pantry did new supply arrive.

But equally, God could have rescued James – but He did not. The reason is that it was not in His sovereign purpose to do so. James’s work was done, and the time had come for him to enter his master’s nearer presence. On what principles? For His own glory. The glory of God was seen in Peter’s rescue and in the martyrdom of James. It was also for His people’s good. They learned from James’s death the importance of being faithful to the Lord at whatever cost. They learned from Peter’s rescue the power of the Lord to deliver. So often trouble on Christians brings blessing for they seek the Lord in a new way.

- (b) We can rest in God’s will. There is no clearer evidence that Peter rested in the will of God than the fact that he was asleep on the night before he was due to be tried and executed. So asleep, in fact, that he had to be struck by an angel to wake him up. It was a totally hopeless and helpless situation, but Peter was peacefully and totally relying on the Lord. Prepared to accept God’s will and peacefully submitted to it.

D.L.Moody was on a ship crossing the Atlantic, being badly battered by a storm, liable to sink at any moment. A life or death situation, in which he paced the deck restlessly. It felt like his darkest hour. But why? He had faced death before in the American Civil War trenches. He had visited men dying of cholera and small pox. He had no fear, for his sins were forgiven. Then he realised the problem on this occasion was that he was determined to see Northfield – his work – and family again. By His grace, D.L.Moody found himself able to say “Heaven or Northfield – Thy will be done”, and then went back to his cabin, put his head on his pillow, and had the soundest night’s sleep he had ever had.

We can know this peace of God in all our troubles and dangers. **Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6,7). Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).**

- (c) Importance of prayer in our difficulties. Constant and earnest prayer was being offered for Peter by the church. **He went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying (Acts 12:12).** These people had felt helpless, and they did the only thing they could do – but it was the most valuable thing they could have done. They wielded that weapon we can all wield when we can do nothing else. They offered united prayer. They were zealous, eager, and heartfelt. They prayed to God, not to impress others. Their prayers were not vague, but specifically for Peter in prison. Note that so often Bible prayers are short, clear, concise and emphatic.

What better sort of prayer meeting – everyone there, in earnest, praying to the point. And yet note the disbelief of those at prayer when Rhoda said that Peter was there at the door. How like us. So often doubting God’s ability or desire to answer our prayers. We need to remember: **This is the**

**confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us (1 John 5:14).**

- (d) Use of common sense. The incident indicates that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. But He does not work miracles when we are capable of acting and thinking for ourselves. When Peter was miraculously delivered from prison, he considered his situation, and went to Mary's house – where friends could be found. He went there to find succour. He made contact with fellow believers and told them what God had done for him. Then he went to another place for safety's sake.

God has given us common sense, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. We are meant to use it in trials and dangers and problems.

### Conclusion

Although our circumstances and situation is very different from that of the early church, our experiences may be similar. The same God rules over all, and has the same principles of operation. We will face problems and trials, not least because we are Christians. There is a great mystery in why God deals differently with each person's trials, for He has an individual plan for each individual. But the same basic response is required of us.

We must acknowledge God's sovereignty; the fact that nothing happens without God directs or permits it. Rest in God's will for it is good, acceptable and perfect, and it leads to true peace. Put every energy into earnest prayer and use sanctified common sense. God is at work in our lives and circumstances. **The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made (Psalm 145:9). And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered (Matthew 10:30). Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life (Psalm 23:6). Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men (Psalm 107:8).**