

Death and deliverance – the Godward life

The Godward Life

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Well, good evening. It is indeed good to be here. I was not expecting to be here in this capacity on this evening but was surprised and honored and excited to receive an invitation to come and share the first message of the conference tonight. I'm excited about the preachers that we have with us over the course of this week and I'm excited about this conference being a very unique experience for me in that last year on the Monday of the conference, I leaned over to Pastor Ronald and I said, "Ronald, um, I just thought you should know that while we were up in the Copperbelt, that Bridget and I decided that it's time for us to make a move in this direction and we believe we're going to bring our family to Zambia." We didn't say anything about it then but in the Lord's providence, just a few hours ago, my family and I got off an airplane and we have moved and we are now residents of Lusaka.

So we are excited to be here, excited about the work that we have the privilege of being involved in, excited about the work of ACU, excited about what the Lord is doing through the Reformed Baptists here in Zambia, and excited about just the privilege of being a small part of it. But as we have traveled these last 12 months, this journey of going from an exciting decision in our lives to finally coming to a place where we have put boots on the ground and we are here, we have learned a great deal about what it means to walk with God and what it means to trust the Lord. And oftentimes when we hear stories about what God has done, we hear those stories from the perspective of the end, "Here's what God did," and there are so many things that happened between something that started and something that came to a conclusion that we don't actually hear the minutia of, but if we did, we would recognize that walking with God and living a Godward life is not always a bed of roses.

Not every day from the time that we made that decision to the time that we got here today has been a bed of roses. Not even today traveling here with my wife and seven children between the ages of 11 and 2 for hours and hours on an airplane, not even that was a bed of roses, but God is faithful and what we learn when we walk with God over time is this: a commitment to the Lord and a commitment to a Godward life is not a commitment that guarantees us ease, it's not even a commitment that guarantees that we will see fulfilled all of those dreams and hopes and goals and desires that we have, but what it guarantees is that we will be found in Christ and that regardless of how it is that God determines to

bring maximum glory to himself through us, when it is all said and done, if our goal is God, then even our worst days are days for which we can praise God because we know that he is maximizing his glory in and through us and oftentimes that's the only thing that allows us to keep moving forward.

We've been out of our home since the middle of June because of how long it takes things to ship here, and early on after we were finally out of our home and dealing with that sort of initial shock, I was invited to preach at a church up in Minneapolis where we had taken our oldest daughter and son-in-law, Philip was here with me all last year, he and Jasmine were married in October and now he has an assignment in Minneapolis. And so we went up to see them, sorted out, preached at the church up there while we were there, and was assigned a text that I really didn't think would have anything to do with the journey that we were on but God has used it mightily to just remind me of his goodness and remind me that serving God does not always look like what we expect.

And I want us to look at this text tonight, it is Acts 12, and specifically I want us to look at this and think about the individuals who are right here with us in our midst, and there are more than you know, who hear this idea of the Godward life and think about how awesome and victorious it sounds and almost have a hard time getting excited about it because the fact of the matter is, the difficulties with which they are wrestling often cause them to wonder whether or not their life is actually all that Godward. Because after all, if you are living a Godward life, shouldn't you be experiencing victory after victory and glory upon glory? If you're living the Godward life, shouldn't people watch you walk into a room and wonder if your feet are actually touching the floor? If you're living a Godward life, you should be able to be on an airplane for 20 hours and not have offensive breath when you get off because you are just so godly that you can do that.

But you know better and as we examine this over the course of this week, I just want us to remember that a Godward life is about God. A Godward life is not about me. A Godward life is not a means to an end, it is an end in itself. A Godward life is not something that we live so that we can maximize our comfort. A Godward life is not something that we live so that we can maximize our benefit. A Godward life is not something that we live so that we can have a bargaining chip with God, so that we can name and claim whatever it is that we want. A Godward life is rooted and grounded in the understanding that we serve a sovereign Lord who has the right to do with us whatsoever he wills and who will do with us whatsoever he wills and when he does it, he will do it in order to maximize his glory.

And that's what happens in Acts 12. Acts 12 is strategic in its location in Luke's narrative. It comes at the end of two important sections, one primary section and one secondary section. The primary section is, you know, the book of Acts is really divided up into two parts and the first is sort of the spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem and Peter is the focus there. Then at the end of chapter 12, we turn a corner and it's the spread of the Gospel among the Gentiles and Paul becomes the focus there. So chapter 12 is that bridge between those two episodes. It connects two major movements of the narrative and it also repeats major themes. A major theme that is repeated is the theme of death. In this first

section, there are two movements in this first section: there is the founding of the church in Jerusalem, that is chapter 2, verse 1, through chapter 7, verse 60; at the end of that first section, Stephen is arrested and martyred. The second section is about the church being scattered by persecution in 8:1 through 12:24, and that section ends with persecution and death in chapter 12.

He uses a number of literary tools. First he uses framing to highlight the theme of death. Chapter 12 begins and ends with death. It's a frame and there are two portraits within the frame. In both instances, he makes it clear that the events, like all events in the acts of the apostles, happened by the powerful and sovereign will and hand of God, and they teach us something important.

Death and deliverance. The first frame: the death of a faithful follower. This frame is incredibly important because this frame along with the end of that first section where Stephen is martyred, this frame even more powerfully than that reminds us that living a Godward life and serving God does not necessarily bring one ease. Chapter 12, verses 1 through 3,

1 About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. 2 He killed James the brother of John with the sword, 3 and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread.

This is significant. First of all, this is a significant death. James was not only one of the 12, but along with Peter and John, was a member of the inner circle of the apostles, the disciples. Luke also uses the name Herod and not Agrippa in order to highlight the threat to the church because this is not just anyone, this is a man with the power to do much harm, and he also connects the persecution of the apostles to the persecution of Jesus who was put to death under another Herod. So this office is continuing to persecute the Lord by persecuting his apostles.

This was also the fulfillment of a prophecy. Remember when the sons of blood and thunder were requesting seats at the right and left-hand of Jesus, Mark 10:38-40, "Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?' And they said to him, 'We are able.' And Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'" You want it, boys? You've got it. They had no idea what Jesus was saying when he said, "You'll drink the cup that I drink. You'll be baptized with the baptism that I'm baptized with." Herod crucifies Jesus. Herod puts James to death with the sword. He followed Jesus in more ways than he ever imagined.

This is also a reminder of the fragile nature of the mission. The church has always been the target of satanic rage. The church always will be the target of satanic rage and the enemy has always desired and sought out and worked toward our demise and will

continue to do so. And the fact of the matter is, living a Godward life, living a life that marks you out as one who belongs to Jesus Christ, living the life that marks you out as separate from the world also marks you out as a known enemy of our adversary. It marks you out as one who does not go along with the prince of the power of the air. It marks you out as one who is a threat to those who have a form of godliness but deny the power thereof. And it marks you out as a threat to those who are trying to march through life as though God does not exist and they can write their own ticket. When they see you, they see the error of their thinking.

The Lord's protection and favor has always been our only hope. We have no other hope but that the Lord will protect us. And even in that hope, it's not the hope that says, "I have hope that the Lord will protect me, therefore, I am not going to fall to the sword." No! No! I have hope that the Lord will protect me so that if I do fall to the sword, it will not be because God blinked. He never slumbers nor does he sleep. If I fall to the sword, it would be because that is the way that he has chosen to maximize his glory in and through my life. It's as though we could say and we wouldn't, but it's as though we could say, "You can't kill me unless God lets you." Amen? You can't kill me unless God lets you.

The final frame is death as well, but look at verses 18 to 23.

18 Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. 19 And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death.

So now the guards are put to death. This was common practice.

Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there. 20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. 21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. 22 And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!"

Now before we read the next line, just pause for a moment. One of God's elect, one of God's choice servants, was put to death with the sword, and if we are honest, every one of us deep down in that place that you don't talk about in Sunday school, we ask, "God, why didn't you do something about that? Why didn't you vindicate your servant?"

"The voice of a god, and not of a man!" 23 Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

God will not share his glory with another. Not every blasphemer dies on sight and there are some of us in the room who could shout, "Amen! Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!" right

now because there are those in the room who have been blasphemers and who have been redeemed and you are grateful that God did not strike you down on sight, amen? However, on this particular day with this particular blasphemer, it is as though God has said to his people, "You wonder if I take care of things like this? You wonder if I am just? First of all, you shouldn't wonder if I am just, you know that all men will face me on the day of judgment so don't ever wonder if I am just. But in case you were wondering and in case you need a lesson, keep watching this man."

"The voice of a god, and not of a man!" Can you see him? He is persecuting the church, he is killing Christians, this faith that is spreading abroad, he is going to put a stop to it. People are coming to him, bowing down asking for favor. He gives an oration. They praise him as the voice of a god and not a man and his chest puffs up to take another breath and there is not one to take.

So on the other end of the frame, we have the death of the wicked. On the one side of the frame, we have the death of the righteous; on the other side of the frame, we have the death of the wicked. Both died. God was glorified in both instances. It's what's on the inside of the frame that helps us.

Go back with me to verse 6. We have two portraits, the first portrait is a portrait of drowsy deliverance, I like to call it. Verse 6. Now again, James has been put to death with the sword, Peter, James and John, the inner circle. Herod sees that the Jews are excited by the fact that he put James to death with the sword. They want these people stamped out so he goes and gets the top dog, the one whose name everybody knows, and he puts Peter in prison with a view toward Peter being killed next. So now Peter having witnessed the death of James, the other member, the other third of this inner circle, is in prison waiting for his own execution and here we pick up the story.

6 Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. 7 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put 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 followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. 11 When Peter came to himself, [now, all that happened and now Peter came to himself] he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.

Do you know how awesome Peter's faith was? Here's how awesome Peter's faith was, this is what we believe, right? Peter was delivered from prison because his faith was so awesome. It's faith. It's your faith. It's your faith. "Wake up." Huh? "Put your clothes on, let's go!" Okay. Past one guard, past two guards, past one gate, past two gates, down the street. So all of this is happening and Peter is just sort of sleepy eyed and walking along. They take him around the corner. He's out of harm's way and then when he is finally out of harm's way after all of this has happened, he stands up and he says, "Now I know."

You know, the image that we have because of our warped view of faith, the image that we have would have had Peter in the cell waiting on the angel, wondering why he was taking so long. We would have had Peter on his face praying, claiming his deliverance from the cell. We would have had Peter already with his clothes and shoes on saying, "What took you so long?" But that's not how it happened. Peter wasn't up praying, he was sleeping. This didn't happen because it's exactly what Peter asked for, he was surprised by it. Don't you know that if Peter had said, "Lord, please send your angel. Please, come and get me. Lord, please..." You don't think that you're seeing a vision when that happens. Does this mean that Peter was faithless? No, it doesn't mean that Peter was faithless. You know he was faithful because he was asleep. Amen? Let me see if someone tells you they are going to kill you tomorrow if you can sleep well tonight.

But his faith seemed to have been pointed in a different direction, more of a, "Lord, help me die well. Help me finish well." Newsflash saints, that's a Godward life. The Godward life is not just the one who says, "Lord, I'm trusting you to get me out of here." The Godward life is the one that says, "Lord, if you don't, I'm trusting you to give me what I need to die tomorrow in a way that brings you honor and glory." And until your faith can encompass getting broken out of jail by an angel and being executed for the cause of Christ, then you don't understand the Godward life because if the only thing that you can see in your mind's eye as being faithful is getting out, then you've got two problems: 1. I want to be there when you tell James that he was executed because he didn't have enough faith. If you die before me, don't ask him that until I get there. Problem 2: you have just taken away God's sovereignty. God is not sovereign, he's a puppet and he's going to do whatever it is that you determine he's going to do, and if you have enough faith and imagination to ask him for this versus that, then that's what you'll get. But God is sovereign. God was sovereign when James was walked out of prison by the guards who would execute him, and God was sovereign when Peter was walked out of prison by an angel.

The second portrait. So we've got the drowsy deliverance, how about the doubtful prayer. Peter may not have been believing but those people who were praying for him, verse 12.

12 When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

Now, they are gathered together and they're praying. The text doesn't say this but I feel rather safe in assuming that they're praying for Peter to not experience what James experienced.

13 And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. 15 They said to her,

"Girl, what did you expect? That's what we were asking for!"

15 They said to her, "You are out of your mind."

"Now you go back so we can pray for that man."

But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!"

First, "You crazy." Secondly, "Okay, okay, okay, maybe you did see something. That's fine, sweetheart. We don't want to crush your faith and everything and that's good, but what you're seeing probably was his angel. Okay, we'll give you that. You saw his angel. Now can we go and finish praying for Peter?"

16 But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, 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 brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers [this is the other James]." Then he departed and went to another place.

Again, Peter's response doesn't sound like this overwhelming victorious faith response and the individuals who were praying most assuredly do not sound like they had an overwhelming faith response but, saints, I want you to notice something: in spite of this, God got him out. God got him out. Why? Because God is sovereign and because God was not done maximizing his glory through the life of Peter.

Mark 11:22-24, "Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea," and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.'" Jesus doesn't tell us to pray like this in order to get the stuff that we want but he's making a statement about God's power and about God's goodness and about God's care for his people. The Godward life won't even take credit for this. There are those out there who argue that things like this happen because of their faith. The Godward life doesn't even say this. The Godward life says, "God was good! God was gracious! God was kind!" Not, "I twisted his arm so violently that he had to give me what I demanded from him." No. Even when God gives me what I have asked for, it's because he was kind. He was good. He was gracious." This is what the God-centered life looks like.

Some application. Application 1, and this is always an application in the book of Acts: narrative is not normative. Narrative is not normative. I believe if chapter 12 teaches us anything, it teaches us that the book of Acts is not there in order to give us a blueprint as to how to get certain things done because in this very chapter on the one hand we have James, a faithful servant of God who was executed, and Peter, a faithful servant of God who was delivered. Both death and deliverance in the life of faithful servants of God and the people prayed for both faithful servants of God. Pray for one faithful servant of God and he dies. Pray for another faithful servant of God and he is delivered. You cannot read Acts 12 and come away thinking that you have a blueprint for how to make things happen through your prayers. That's not what's intended here. What we are intended to see here is a picture of the sovereignty of God and a picture of God's faithfulness to himself and to his plans, therefore, when we lived this Godward life, this God-centered life, what we are living for is God's plans and when we are living for God's plans, it doesn't matter what happens to us because God's plans will not be thwarted. So if I am living in accordance with his will and I am living for his plans, then whatever it is that happens to me, I can rejoice. I can say with Job, "Though he slay me, yet I will trust in him." Because I know this, God is not always going to be on my side but he's always going to be on his own side. God can't always be on my side because I'm not always right. If you can't say amen, you ought to say ouch. So for God to put himself in a position where he's always got to be on my side would mean that God would have to be on the wrong side from time to time in order to back me up. God is always on God's side, therefore, it's incumbent upon me to always be on God's side because if I'm always on God's side, I'm always on the side God is on, that way might as well be my on my side.

Secondly, death and deliverance are in God's hands. Both death and deliverance are in God's hands. Do you know what the tendency is for us, saints? Here is our tendency: our tendency is to get the news that James is dead and then to drop our heads and question whether or not God is still with us. What did we do wrong? Where did we go wrong? What did we not do that we ought to have done? What power is this that is now able to challenge God like this? These are the things that we think when we forget the sovereignty of God. And then when deliverance happens, then we say we must have done something right. That's why I love Acts 12, "This deliverance happened because of our great faith. This deliverance happened because of our great..." No! No! This deliverance happened and Peter didn't even know until it was already done. This deliverance happened and they told Rhoda she was crazy. This deliverance happened because God is a deliverer.

Thirdly, remember that when you live a Godward life and you remind yourself that God always acts on his own behalf and for his own glory, then that means what you are eventually going to have to come to grips with by God's grace, is redefining Providence. You see, most of us don't believe the biblical definition of Providence, the historical Reformed definition of Providence. Most of us believe like this: if I'm riding down the road and I almost get in an accident and then I swerve and barely miss the tree, then I say by God's Providence I did not hit the tree. But the next time something happens, we're riding down the road and we swerve and try to miss the car and instead of trying to miss

this car, we hit another car and then we end up in the ditch, then we believe that we did not experience God's Providence. So basically most Christians basically define Providence as Christian luck. It is not until you understand that God's Providence covers the swerving and missing and the swerving and not missing, that you truly understand the Providence of God.

God's Providence orders all things according to his will, and as we mature as believers, what happens when we mature as believers is that we are able to hear the news, "It is done. James is dead," and walk into a room where immature believers have their shoulders down and their heads down and they are weeping and wailing and they are saying, "God, why? God, how could you do this? What went wrong? What did we do?" You see, the mature Christian who understands God's Providence can gently come in to the younger believer at that moment and say, "Dear one, do you know where God was the moment James was killed? He was in the same place that he was when his Son was killed, on his throne directing all things to maximize his glory. And do you also know that from the moment the sword took his head off, James walked into a reality that he would never in a million years trade for another day with you."

James is dead. God is on his throne. Peter is free. God is on his throne. Because here is what you need to know, saints: eventually Peter was killed also. You see, we forget that and so we run to a passage like this and we say, "You see, if you live by faith and if you have this and you have God's favor, then you have all this, then you..." No, no, no, no, no. The only way you do that is if you ignore the fact that years later the angel didn't walk him out of jail but walked him into glory. God was sovereign when Peter was delivered and God was sovereign when Peter was martyred.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: the last time I checked the death rate was one per person. Every one of us is going that way and when you understand that, you recognize that your deliverance, great though it may be, is always temporary because there is a date you must keep and unless the Lord returns and we are here when he cracks the sky, every one of us will face that last enemy. So our prayer is, "God, when that day comes, grant by your grace that I might die well. Grant by your grace that I may be ushered into your presence believing you as sincerely as I believed you on the day of my greatest victory and my greatest deliverance. No, no, no, God, more so. More so."

I told you I preached this right after we had left our house and there was a series of events that had happened after we had decided that we were coming and, I mean, it was just a series, it was just magnificent. It was just one thing after another, the Lord just smiling on us and us smiling all the way. And then all of a sudden, late spring, early summer, one thing after another after another began to go in the other direction and there is that tendency, "Do you think maybe we missed God? Do you think maybe we made a mistake? Do you think maybe he's trying to say that we ought not do this?" And I had a wonderful saint, friend and brother to remind me of something that I had heard before and this carried us all the way to getting off the plane today. He said, "Brother, you know, bomber pilots have a saying: the flak is always thickest when you're right over the target." If you're flying over something that the enemy doesn't care if you bomb, it is

usually clear sailing, blue skies and no opposition in sight. But when you get to something that he wants to protect...

I don't know who you are tonight but I know you are here and I know that you are at that place that all of us come to from time to time where we doubt the Lord's loving care for us but here's what we all need to remember: if there is ever a moment when you doubt whether or not God loves you, you do not look at your circumstances, you look to the cross. And when you look to the cross, you come to a place where you say, "God never again has to do anything to prove that he loves me. God has demonstrated his love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." We have been adopted by God. We are his children. He is sanctifying us and conforming us to the image of his Son whom he has loved for all eternity and he is preparing a place for us. He will usher us into his presence in eternity and between now and then, he is merely preparing us for that.

So whatever it is that God is taking you through, don't you dare allow it to cause you to question whether or not the cross still means what it meant because it does and it always will. And because of the cross, we have hope. Whether the news is James is dead, whether the news is Peter is free, God is still on his throne. He is still working all things together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose and he is still going to stand victorious and glorified and vindicated on that day. And when he does, you and I will rejoice even over the worst moments that we've ever experienced as we follow God.

Let's pray.

Gracious God, our Father, we thank you and we praise you for your goodness and your mercy and your kindness toward us. We thank you for those days when things happened that just screamed to us, "God loves me. God is with me. God is for me." But God, we also thank you for those days that cause us to doubt whether or not that's true because we know that in those days, you love us no less; you are no less with us and you are no less for us. Grant by your grace that we might walk in this truth, that we might be marked by it, that we might be shaped by it, and that we might bring you glory as a result. This we pray in Christ's name and for his sake. Amen.