

ACTS 12 “... But Even If God Doesn’t”

PERSONAL
PREP

Session
6

SETTING THE HEART

Knowing that God is all-powerful and all-knowing raises a couple of logical questions: *Why do bad things happen to good people? If God is in control, why do bad things happen at all?* Unbelievers aren’t the only people who ask questions like these. Sadly, Christians often ask the “big whys” out of ignorance of the ways of God. While this session isn’t a definitive study of all that Scripture has to say on the subject, it will shed light on the ways of God in the circumstances of life that seem so unfair.

As you prepare your heart for an experience with God’s Word, meditate on the unjust and unfair suffering of Jesus Christ—possibly the most extreme case in history of bad things happening to a good person.

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

1 Peter 2:21–24

CROSS CHECKING

Before we dig into the action of Acts 12, we’re going to get to know one of the apostles featured in this chapter, James. Read the passages below using your Bible, and write what you learn about James beneath each reference.

Matthew 4:21–22

Luke 6:13–16

Matthew 17:1–2

Mark 5:35–43

Mark 14:32–38

GOD WANTS YOU!

In the space below, summarize what you learned about James.

DIGGING IN

Now to Acts 12. Read Acts 12:1–17 using your Scripture sheet, and look for references to the following people, paying close attention to what they do and what happens to them:

1. King Herod
2. James
3. Peter

You may want to use a different color or symbol to mark each person. When you've finished marking, record below what each person did and what happened to each person.

King Herod

James

Peter

TAKING IT INWARD

Using the information you just learned about Herod, James, and Peter, spend a few minutes answering the questions below. Keep your heart open to the things that God wants to teach you from this passage.

What do you notice about the fates of James and Peter?

How does this strike you with regard to God's ways?

Have you experienced anything recently that has caused you to question God's fairness with people? If so, what?

How can the different fates of James and Peter help answer the question, *Why do bad things happen to good people?*

DIGGING DEEPER

To explain this apparent inconsistency in how God worked in the lives of James and Peter, many people would just shrug their shoulders and say, “Well, God works in mysterious ways.” But God’s ways aren’t so mysterious when you know what He said in His Word! God never said that following Him means that we’ll always be free from suffering and persecution. As a matter of fact, He’s said quite the opposite—we’re to *expect* suffering and persecution if we follow Him.

Using your Bible, read the Scriptures below, and note everything you learn about God’s ways in each situation. Also, take a cue from the participants in Daniel 3, and note what you learn about how we are to respond to suffering and persecution.

1 Peter 3:8–17

1 Peter 4:12–16

Daniel 3:13–18

TAKING IT INWARD

No matter how much you pray, no matter how strong your faith, there’s always the possibility that God will not deliver you from suffering *in the way you think He should*. James was an obedient follower of Christ. He was chosen to be an apostle and brought into the “inner circle” that walked closely with Jesus. Yet he suffered an unjust death at the hands of a tyrannical ruler, becoming the first apostle to be martyred. Did God deliver him from his trial? Yes. Through death, he gained something far better—an eternity in the presence of Jesus. Was it a miraculous, “Praise God” deliverance like Peter’s? Few would have called it that.

Allow this scene in Acts 12 to teach you more about God’s ways in human suffering. Let His Spirit help you understand what happens when godly people live in an evil world. Some questions are listed below for your consideration, but it’s more important that you listen to the Spirit as He speaks to your heart. He may direct you to other passages that give insight into this subject. Feel free to add these to your preparation and share them with your students.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego made a profound statement in Daniel 3:17–18. To paraphrase, “Our God is able to save and rescue us, *but even if He doesn’t*, our faith and obedience won’t waver one bit.” Can you make the same confident statement when you face serious trials and suffering?

GOD WANTS YOU!



Are you prepared to continue doing good despite the suffering that may come because of your actions?

Based on what you've just learned in Scripture, how would you answer the question, *Why do bad things happen to godly people?*

INSIGHT—THE NAME GAME

One of the keys to understanding the events of Acts (or any book of the Bible) is to know “who’s who.” Since your students may ask you about the identities of these men, take a few minutes to bone up on Herod and James.

The Herods

As you read the New Testament, you’ll see several references to rulers named “Herod.” The Herod rulers were from a dynasty appointed by the Roman Empire to govern the Palestine provinces; these included the provinces of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. It may be helpful to have a perspective on when each New Testament Herod ruled.

Herod the Great—He reigned at the time of Jesus’ birth (Matt. 2:1–18) and built the temple in Jerusalem.

Archelaus—This member of the Herod family succeeded his father, Herod the Great, and was responsible for much Jewish bloodshed (thus altering Joseph’s travel plans in Matt. 2:22).

Herod Philip—He inherited the northern part of his father Herod the Great’s kingdom and is briefly mentioned in Luke 3:1.

Herod Antipas—He was the ruling Herod during most of Jesus’ ministry. He was responsible for the death of John the Baptist and was the Herod of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion.

➡ **Herod Agrippa I**—He was the Herod of Acts 12, who was responsible for the death of James.

Herod Agrippa II—He was the son of Herod Agrippa I; he listened to Paul’s defense in Acts 25 and 26.

The James Gang

Since five men named James are mentioned in the New Testament, it may be helpful to distinguish the James of this session from the others.

1. The son of Zebedee (and brother of John); one of Jesus' twelve apostles. He was martyred in Acts 12. He is sometimes called "James the Great."
2. The son of Alphaeus; another of Jesus' twelve apostles.
3. James "the Younger" or "the Less." He was the son of Mary (not the mother of Jesus).
4. The father of the apostle Judas (not Judas Iscariot).
5. The half-brother of Jesus. He is the author of the New Testament book bearing his name and is probably the James to whom Peter refers in Acts 12:17.

Scholars still debate the details of the identities of these men—for example, some think that James, the son of Alphaeus, may have been the same person as James "the Younger." For a more thorough treatment of this subject, feel free to consult a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia.

FINAL DIG

Acts 12 closes with an account of Herod's demise. Read Acts 12:18–25, and simply answer the following questions:

What was Herod's fate?

Why wouldn't this be a good lunch-time story?

How did this new wave of persecution (James' death and Peter's imprisonment) affect the church?

WRAPPING IT UP

Spend time in prayer for your students. Pray that this session will enhance their understanding of God's ways as they learn of the different outcomes experienced by James and Peter.

Before you close your notebook, read through the Lesson Plan so that you're confident with the direction of the session and familiar with the exercises.