

God is Good, Even When Life is Bad

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Text: Acts 12¹

Date: October 31, 2010, 10:30am

Series: The Goodness of God

Introduction: Open your Bible to **Acts 12**. The title of this morning's message is "God is Good, Even When Life is Bad". Some of you were taught to pray as children, "God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food."

If we truly understood the **goodness** of God, that He is love, and that His love is fixed on unworthy people like us, it would transform us.

- God is **good**. There is no kinder, more self-sacrificing Being in the universe. He is supremely good. He can be nothing but good. All that God does is good. That does not mean He is good like us. Our goodness is like evil compared to His goodness. He far outshines all beings everywhere in His desire to do good even to the most unworthy creatures. On our clearest thinking days we can't come close to comprehending the magnitude of God's goodness.
- But God is also **great**. He is omnipotent. He can do anything.

And what I want to convince you of this morning is that in your darkest hour God is still good and He is still great. In other words, He is **good**—He is love. He is pure, holy, and just. He is merciful. He seeks to do you good. He came not to condemn the world but to give it life. He sent His Son Jesus Christ for you. But He is also **great**. He is in absolute control of every molecule in the universe. He will save every single soul that comes to Him for mercy. He will crush all those who spurn Him. He's extremely good and extremely great.

With this in mind, have you ever questioned God's goodness in your life? Yes! We all have. Have you wondered if God has forgotten about you? If God is so great, why doesn't He use all that power to demonstrate His goodness toward me? Why do I sometimes feel so forgotten by God? Wrongs are committed in the world. Some of them are committed against you and me. Why doesn't God do something? Your questions remain unanswered. How should I respond when everything is out of control?

- I could take things into my own hands.
- I could say that God is less than omnipotent, or less than loving, or that He is not engaged in my life.
- I could become spiritually sappy and use a spiritual smoke screen to hide the fact that I'm suffering.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the *English Standard Version* of the Bible.

- Or I could trust in the goodness and greatness of God and pray. I want to recommend the latter. Why? Because God is good and wants to do you good in all circumstances if you are in Christ. God is good even when life is bad.

I want to show you the goodness of God in five common trials in life.

I. First, we need to remember that God is good and is guiding our lives even when we **suffer** (vs. 1-4).

In Acts 12, the early church is going through a *violent* persecution. They had seen the Lord crucified. It was fresh in their minds. He had risen, but He said if they followed Him, they would likely begin to lose their lives. This is exactly what happens. They begin to suffer. Deeply. Get this saints. It is God's will at times that His dear, precious children suffer and even die. Please keep this in mind when you suffer.

A. Sometimes God allows hateful **people** or circumstances into our lives to bring us suffering. God controls kings and nations and events. God sometimes allows bad things to happen to His people. We find a very bad man in verse 1. His name is Herod.

1. Who is **Herod**? The year is 44AD, 14 years after Pentecost, and we find a 34 year old maniac king in **Acts 12:1**, "About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church". Who's this? Herod is a popular name for Jewish kings in the New Testament. There were several Herods. They are all villains in the story.
 - There was **Herod the Great** at Jesus birth: he has the infamous reputation of slaughtering all the innocents two and under at the time of Jesus' birth.
 - There was **Herod Antipas** who killed John the Baptist. He was king of only a fourth of the kingdom. That's why he's called a *tetrarch*, it means "ruler over a fourth".
 - This is another Herod. This is **Herod Agrippa I**, the grandson of Herod the Great. He's a young tyrant who is in the peak of his power. He's having problems with Rome, so he needs to please the Jews. He needed to win the favor of the Jews. When he found out the Jews liked it when Christians were tortured and killed, he begins a large scale persecution. So what does Herod Agrippa do? He does everything he can to keep the Jews happy.

Verse 1, "About that time Herod [Agrippa I] the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church." He purposely inflicted torture and violence to make the church suffer deeply. But it gets worse.

Notice **verse 2**, “He killed James the brother of John with the sword”.

Thesis: God is good even when we suffer!

B. No one is **exempt** from suffering (vs. 2-3). Absolutely no one. You will suffer. But God is still unchangeably good! If God is good then why do we suffer? First of all, most of our suffering is self-inflicted. We are all guilty sinners. But for those who are saved, we are NO LONGER GUILTY. So why do we suffer? God has a plan and a purpose to conform us to Christ. Therefore, all God’s people will suffer, and often that suffering is at times greater than the suffering of people who do not know the Lord. Your sincerity or service, or sacrifice, or stature will not exempt you from suffering.

1. **James** wasn’t exempt from suffering (vs. 2). Now look at **verse 2**, “He killed James the brother of John with the sword”. Who is ***James the brother of John***? This is not James the brother of Jesus, the pastor of the church at Jerusalem who was the primary leader in the early church, and has a book at the end of the NT.

- The “James” in **Acts 12** is “the brother of John” and one of the 12 apostles. He is part of the *inner circle* of Jesus’ disciples, Peter, **James**, and John. He’s with Jesus at the transfiguration, at the raising of Jairus’s daughter, and in the Garden of Gethsemane—James of the inner circle, Peter, **James**, and John. **Verse 2** says that Herod Agrippa “killed James the brother of John with the sword”. So **James**, one of the inner three disciples was beheaded. Imagine the shock to the church. James is *suffering* and is put to death. The church is *suffering*.

Bad things happen to God’s people. It is God’s will at times that His dear, precious children *suffer* and even die. James wasn’t just a Christian. He wasn’t just a leader in the church. He wasn’t even just an apostle. He was in the top THREE of the apostles. He is one of the *greatest leaders of the early church worldwide!* And he was put to death. Perhaps he had a wife and children. He was dragged in, a sword was taken out, and his head was cut off. Never again does the book of Acts refer to the apostles as “the twelve”. Now they are only 11. They are the foundations of the church and after Matthias, they are never again replaced.

- *It’s interesting that James is the first of the apostles to die. John, his brother, is the last of the apostles to die.*
- As I said, it is God’s will at times that His dear, precious children suffer and even die.

Application: You will suffer in this life, but it's not **worthless** suffering. It is for the glory of God. It is to grind off the old nature in you. In your flesh dwells no good thing. God is in the business of teaching you self-denial and self-control. The essence of sin is utter selfishness. God is in the business of teaching us how to give our lives away for Him, for His kingdom and His people. He often breaks us and conforms us to His image through suffering.

2. **Peter** wasn't exempt from suffering (vs. 3). Now look at **verse 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 was near the time of the Passover 14 years after Pentecost. The Jews loved it when they took out James, "Number 3" in the church, so now Herod wants to take out "Number 1". This is the third time in jail for Peter. He was arrested in **Acts 4:3**, and they lectured him and beat him and let him and John go. He was in jail again in **Acts 5:18**, and an angel freed him and the other apostles during the night.

Acts 5:18-20, "**they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."**"

Peter is suffering big time. As far as he knows he's going to die. We know from the book of Mark, that Peter has a wife. Didn't Peter love the Lord? Of course he did! This is fourteen years after Pentecost. He's seen thousands brought into the kingdom. Today you have a lot of people say that if you suffer it is because of your lack of love and lack of faith. That's cruel. Peter loved Christ. What great faith he had! So didn't God want Peter's best? If so, why was he suffering?

- C. God's best is not defined by your lack of suffering. God's best is defined by your **conformity** to Jesus Christ (vs. 4). Peter was suffering because he was a follower of Christ. They did this to Christ, and they were doing it to him.

Look at **Acts 12:4**, "**And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people."**"

Explanation: A squad is a group of 4 soldiers, so there were 4 squads or 16 soldiers total guarding Peter. They only had a few soldiers last time, and he was released by an angel! So now they had to be really paranoid about this and they put **16 soldiers** on him!

Objection: Peter is suffering here, but if you know this story, you know Peter later is freed from prison. But did James get out? How do you explain that? **Does God love James less?** No!! Let me make this point loud and clear...God never promised you a life of ease. He said if you want to follow me, you'll have to suffer like I suffer. You have to take up your cross. You have to deny yourself and deny the world. God's best is not defined by your lack of suffering. It is defined by your conformity to Jesus Christ. Are you looking more like Christ? Then God's plan is succeeding!!

Application: You must understand that God has perfect control over every detail of every situation. His purposes are not always seen or known. But one overarching purpose we can count on, is that all our suffering will conform us to Christ. Saints, do you want to be conformed to Christ? Before you answer, understand that it will mean suffering.

Thesis: So we understand that **God is good even when life is bad!** Let's look at this in a second way. God is good not only when we have to suffer, but...

II. Second, God is good and is guiding our lives even when we have to **wait** (vs. 5-11).

Sometimes we think God fell asleep. Maybe God forgot. No, God never sleeps and never slumbers. He never forgets. He is always 100% engaged with every part of your life. He is never distracted. But what about everyone else? He's 100% engaged with them too. He's God. So when we have to wait, there's always a reason. There's something pretty awesome in the plotline of your life when you have to wait.

Waiting conforms us to Jesus. What is God's best for you saints? Conformity to Jesus. So if waiting makes me like Jesus, it's good!

Now let's see how the early church is not all that different from us. They had to wait too. We see in **verse 5**, that God is making the church wait until the very last minute to answer their prayers.

Verses 5-6, "So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. 6 Now when Herod was about to bring him out [*to kill him*], on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison." Have you heard this before—"God is never late, but He's seldom early". Would you say that's true?

Explanation: There's a spiritual struggle going on here. Herod is pushing for Peter's death. The church is pushing God for Peter's life. Peter, as far as he knows, thinks he's going to die. As far as he's concerned, this is the end of his ministry, and he's going to meet Jesus and also see his fellow apostle James.

Meanwhile, back at John Mark's house, the church is praying and waiting, and waiting and waiting. They have been praying since Peter's arrest. Day and night. They want and expect God to release him somehow someday. But God waits. Why? Why would He bring an answer when He can do all kinds of great things in us while we wait? Don't think this was easy for the early church. Yes, they had already seen an angel release Peter before. Yet it seems like nothing happens.

Application: You see, the early church is not that different from every one of us. We are tempted to ask God: how long? Why now? Why this? God could take all this out in an instant. He controls kings and kingdoms. But He waits to deliver us from suffering because of the good that it produces in us.

God is never late, but He's seldom early!

A. Sometimes God waits until the very last **minute** to show us His great power (vs. 6-9).

Verse 6, "Now when Herod was about to bring him out [to kill him], on that very night..." How far away is Peter from death? It's not hours. He's minutes away from death. The king has already dropped his scepter and said, "Bring him out". The soldiers' feet are just beginning to make their way down the hallway. The keys are rattling. And what is Peter doing?

Verse 6a, "Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping..."

Why is Peter sleeping? Because He has so much peace. This is his third imprisonment. This is a mature faith. This is 14 years after Pentecost, imprisonment #3! As your faith grows, you have more trust in God. The more trust you have in God, even in the most tumultuous circumstances, the more peace you have.

Verse 6b, "...Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison." He's sleeping between two soldiers. He's got 14 additional soldiers in the cell as well. No one could get Peter out except one Person? Who is that? GOD!!

Now remember back in **verse 5**, "So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church". What does earnest mean? Urgent, sincere prayer. The church has no idea what God is up to!

The plot thickens. The saints are praying. Peter is sleeping. The soldiers are marching toward the cell. Where's God? God is good, and He has a plan, and He's in control, even at the last minute!!

Verse 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....” Sometimes we think angels are feminine creatures with wings of down and soft hair. Listen, angels are warriors! Yahweh is called the LORD of the hosts of the angel armies! So the angel strikes Peter. Peter had to be sleeping hard! He wacked him. You’ve heard of getting touched by an angel. What about getting wacked by an angel?!

Verse 7b, So the angel“...**struck Peter on the side** and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his hands.” That’s God. They didn’t take the chains off. They just fell off. That’s God.

Verse 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.” Peter was totally out of it. He had to be told what to do. “Get dressed! Put your sandals on”. He did that. “Get your coat on!” “Come on lets go!” Peter is in La La land!

Verse 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.” So Peter has no clue whether this is real life or a dream!

Verse 10a, “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...**” So they’re running toward the iron gate leading to the city. It’s night. There are watchman. You can’t just get in. But God opens that too. So far two locked gates have opened.

B. We wait because God wants us to **learn** to trust Him, not because God cannot at any moment open any door for us (vs. 10-11).

God can do anything! Peter was minutes away from execution, and now he’s running as fast as he can toward a locked gate, and it supernaturally opens!

Verse 10b, “...and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.” So he’s running with an angel, and then he’s all alone.

Verse 11, “When 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.” These are the first words recorded out of Peter’s mouth. “I am sure that the Lord sent his angel”. The sovereign Lord is in control. Peter had to wait until the last minute, but He got an answer.

God is good even when you have to wait! It’s not that God is not able to answer. He wants you to learn to trust Him. Peter learned that! “Now I am sure!” “It was

the Lord!! Herod couldn't touch me! The blood thirsty Jewish people couldn't touch me!"

III. Third, God is good and is guiding our lives even though our faith is **weak** (vs. 12-19).

A. The early Christians **struggled** at times just like we do. Do you need to be a super Christian to experience God's goodness and His work in your life? No! This is the early church. This is 14 years after Pentecost. Most churches today are wanting to get back to this time as if it was magical—as if the Christians then were somehow less weak than us. Not true. They were just as weak. This ought to be encouraging to you.

Verse 12, 'When he realized this [THAT HE WAS FREE], he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.'

So who is this **John Mark**? He's a new guy. This is the author of the second Gospel. This is the cousin of Barnabas who twenty years later is going to see Peter put to death and then Paul. He's going to become Peter and Paul's right hand man in their golden years.

B. The saints were at John Mark's house under lock and key because of the awful **persecution**. This is also likely the house where the disciples met 14 years earlier for the Passover in the Upper room. The upper room is likely located in the upper part of John Mark's house.

So Peter goes to this strategic house. This apparently was a well known meeting place in Jerusalem among the Christians. Peter goes directly to John Mark's house where the saints are having a prayer meeting. Can you imagine? You are praying for a miracle—something impossible. In fact some are probably by this time asking God to help Peter's family in their grief since he's probably DEAD by now.

These were people that had weak and wavering faith like us—I'm going to show you that in a moment.

1. There was a gateway, so it was a **big** house. But look at **verse 13a**, "And when he knocked at the door of the gateway..." So this is a sizable house because it has a gateway. There's a courtyard with a gate at the front. This is in one of the ritzy ancient Jerusalem neighborhoods. So to get all these Christians together, they have a decent size house.
2. They had servants so this was a **wealthy** household. He gets to the gate, and "he knocked at the door of the gateway" and "a servant girl named Rhoda

came to answer (**verse 13a**). So again, this shows that this was a wealthy household. There were really only two classes of society: the very poor and the very rich. You can guess what part John Mark and his family were from.

So Rhoda, the little servant girl is praying. She hears someone knocking at the gateway in the courtyard. She gets up. The gate is obviously locked, or Peter would have come right in.

Why is the gate locked? It's clear why the gate was locked. Because Christians are being killed! It's against the law to be a Christ follower! They were all scared!

Verse 14 is quite amusing: "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."

C. Peter shows up and **Rhoda** doesn't even let him in! (vs. 14)

Application: Have you ever been praying about things and you half way don't expect an answer? Now we are supposed to pray in faith. But there are often times when our faith wavers. We pray for someone's healing; we pray for salvation of loved ones; we pray for this and that. But our faith is soooo weak!

The early believers struggled in the same way. Check out **verse 14**. Rhoda rushes in to the believers with Peter standing outside and it says she "reported that Peter was standing at the gate" (**verse 14**). What was their response? **Verse 15a**, "They said to her, 'You are out of your mind.'" Look at this great faith they had! They thought she was certifiably insane! Why were they praying if they didn't think that God could do it?

D. The Christians had such **weak** faith, they thought Peter was dead and this was either an angel or Peter's ghost.

Verse 15b, "But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, 'It is his angel!'" Wouldn't you still go and see if it was an angel?! "Just an angel?!" "We'll pass!" "Only if it's Peter!" **The point is, they thought that Peter was DEAD.**

1. Poor Peter! **Verse 16a**, "But Peter continued knocking..." So Rhoda's back in the house. And Peter's on the wrong side of a locked door, and it says he "continued knocking". Why do you think he kept knocking? He just escaped from prison! You can almost hear the dogs barking in the street, and Peter kept knocking. He's a fugitive!
2. Look at the weak faith of these Christians. They finally open the gate for him. And **verse 16b** says, "...and when they opened, they saw him and were

amazed.” What were they? They were **amazed!** They were astonished! That doesn’t sound like expectant faith!

You can imagine them shouting and rejoicing and utterly shocked!

3. But Peter quiets them. **Verse 17a**, “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.” So he’s telling them about how he was surrounded by 16 soldiers, sound asleep! He told them “how the Lord had brought him out of the prison”. Who answered their prayers?

Verse 17a, “Then he departed and went to another place.” He went on to many more adventures of faith.

Application: Did the early Christians at times have very weak faith? Is God good in spite of our weak and wavering faith? Can God work even though our faith is small? Absolutely! Be encouraged!

Conclusion: In the times of suffering, in the times of desperate waiting; in the times when your faith is weakest, know that God loves you and is working on your behalf. When you are the weakest, it is then that God carries you!