

God's Unsearchable Ways

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Date: 13 March 2022

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Thank you for your warm welcome. Good to be with you this morning. A long time ago, I used to live just two streets up from here. Well, roughly two streets, Montpelier Park.

And I don't think I appreciate what a great church there was just down the road. But lovely to be with you today and to be able to open God's Word. So if you've got a Bible, it'd be great if you'd open it at Acts chapter 12 that we just had read for us.

That's what we're going to be thinking this morning. So as you get to the end of chapter 11 in Acts, we're told there's a famine coming. And when you get to chapter 12, the problems for the church there are not that there's going to be no food, but rather that there's no protection.

They find themselves in this war zone here. And if you've been working your way through Acts, you know that Acts is full of this kind of opposition and persecution.

Largely coming from the Jews, the Sanhedrin, the kind of leaders who put Jesus to death. But then now Herod, the kind of politician, is getting involved in the act.

[1 : 21] Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He killed James. He proceeded to seize Peter also.

This is the decapitation of the church that you're witnessing here. Now the obvious question to ask is, why is God allowing these things to happen?

You might have the same question when you watch the news. Afghanistan, Myanmar, Yemen, Syria, the Ukraine.

Why is God allowing this to happen? And Acts chapter 12 does give you a moment's pause, doesn't it? David Attenborough, who's the great naturalist, was asked if he believed in God.

He answered tentatively. He said, sometimes I stand beside a termite mound, and I wonder what knowledge they could have of me.

[2 : 35] Now it's not a ringing endorsement of the reality of God, but you can see what he's edging towards. The Bible opens with this statement.

In the beginning, God created. And in that statement, you get a gulf that is far vaster than termite to human being.

An infinite, eternal, omnipotent God. And my tiny, little, microscopic life, what knowledge would the termite have of God, of a human being?

What of my knowledge of this infinite, eternal being? I've called this first part of the sermon today, The Uncertain Will of God.

Now, if you want the kind of more classier description, it is the unsearchable will of God.

[3 : 47] But let's just talk about uncertainty for a moment or two. It doesn't mean that God's unpredictable, or that he's fickle, but it does mean we are not able to second-guess him when the Bible hasn't told us what to expect.

Will he heal? Will he not heal? Will he intervene? Will he not intervene? James was killed with a sword.

Peter was seized. Now, notice, will you, that we've given the time of year. Luke's a kind of precise historian, isn't he? And he just kind of puts in this date for us.

He tells us that it happened, end of verse 3, during the festival of unleavened bread. And then he goes on to tell us that Peter's trial is slated for after the Passover.

This is Easter. That's where we are. We're 12 years previously. This is AD 44. Maybe 14 years previously.

[5 : 04] Jesus was on trial. And prior to his trial, this is how he prayed. And going a little further, Jesus fell to the ground and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.

And he said, Abba Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will. Now, you can hear the tension in those words, can't you?

If it were possible. All things are possible for you. If the Son of God in his humanity struggled, how much more us?

How much more people like us? And this passage poses two questions we're going to think about this morning. And the first question is this. How does it look, what does it look like to trust an unsearchable God?

Or maybe put it slightly differently. What does faithful Christianity look like in a world where evil is real and you are uncertain of what God is planning?

[6 : 10] That's our world. That's where we live. Okay, look at verse 6. Verse 6 states, doesn't it?

The night before Herod was to bring him, Peter, to trial, Peter was pacing the floor, trembling with anxiety, filled with fury at what happened to him.

Not any of the above. Peter was. It's one of these great anti-climaxes in the Bible, isn't it? Sleeping. And I think you could almost insert the word soundly into that sentence in the light of the effort that has to be made to wake him up.

It has to be slapped in the side to bring him to consciousness. Now, here's the thing. How can you sleep soundly when you know you're going to die?

I think a lot of us would really like to know the answer to that question. How can you sleep soundly when you know you're going to die? Now, very helpfully, Peter, when he talked to the children this morning, took us back into that incident that took place in the Gospels on the boat.

[7 : 35] And we've had it unpacked for us. The storm. The disciples think they're going to die. Jesus is asleep. He gets up. He tells the wind to be quiet.

Now, if you're reading Matthew's Gospel, just before that incident, Matthew tells us that a man came to Jesus and said, I will follow you wherever you go.

And Jesus said to the guy, foxes of a hole, birds of the air of a nest, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. My home, my family, my money are the reassuring facts, factors about my life that gives me a sense that I'm in control.

I've got a place to live. I've got some people that quite like me. I've got some cash we can manage. Right? I'm in control. Jesus takes his disciples onto the boat and into the storm to the place where it doesn't really matter if you've got a great house and loads of money in the bank.

You are not in control. But hey, Jesus is in control. He can control the storm.

[9 : 03] He can keep us safe in the storm. That's a great bit of news. Jesus leads his people into the storm.

Make no mistake, he will lead his people into the storm. Undoubtedly so. It's part of God's unsearchable ways. Illness or redundancy or bereavement or discrimination or whatever else you might like to think of.

But Peter, Peter can sleep in the storm because he knows as Jesus has led him into this place. He will lead him through this place.

You see, the thing about death is death is that terrible, terrible dead end. That horrible, horrible cul-de-sac that nobody knows what it's going to be like except Jesus who says to us even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we should fear no evil for he will be with us and his rod and staff will come for us.

Peter knew that. Now there's a second little aspect to this. Living in these unsearchable ways of God and it's the church that prays.

[10 : 28] Don't say Peter here as a solitary hero. Peter struggles with fear all the days of his life. It dogs his life verse 4.

Herod sees Peter and put him in prison verse 5. Ernest prayer was made for him in the church and those two things are, they are closely linked. Peter slept because the church didn't sleep.

Now this is not a perfect church. This is not a church that's kind of oh, we know what's going to happen here. That's why we're praying. You can see there's this lovely irony in the passage isn't there?

Where this iron gate in the prison just kind of opens by itself but Peter can't get into the pyramid. Can't get the door open because the people inside are not you know, they're not tuned in to everything that's going on.

But make no mistake, their praying makes a difference and above all it makes a difference to Peter. Peter, or Jesus urged his disciples to pray with him and sadly they left him to sweat and agonise and wrestle alone.

[11 : 49] And I suspect there's a lot of that going on these days. These are not good days for commitment. People choose churches on the basis of the music or the preaching or the kids' work and feel liberty to opt out or in as these things are or aren't being delivered.

Now that is a bad plan. Sooner or later you and I will find ourselves in the storm and we will need people to pray for us.

Now this may not be the best reason for church membership but this much is true that the more deeply woven into the fabric of the church family we are the more we will benefit from the prayers of God's people.

Not the best reason for being a church member but it's certainly an important reason. So here's how you trust in an unsearchable God. You trust him to lead you through the storm and you join the imperfect prayers of his people.

Now let me switch your attention from the uncertainty to the certainty in this passage. So Acts 12 is about powerful people pursuing their agendas.

[13 : 19] Herod, the Jews, increased their grip on power by raising their approval ratings. And that's what we see around our world, isn't it?

Leaders and regimes squashing dissent, locking up those who don't agree with them. And it could be all those places we mentioned at the beginning.

It could even be Scotland with its woke agenda. You don't want to upset these people. And these kind of pictures all too easily fill our minds with fear.

You don't want to follow Herod or any of his many successors. But notice in this passage that there are two agendas, not just one.

So it's not just Herod playing out his plans. We read of an angel. Well, maybe two angels, but there's certainly two incidents that concern angels.

[14 : 16] One who facilitates Peter's release and the other that brings Herod to the end of his life. And this section of Acts that was not written in chapters but in chunks runs through from 932 to chapter 1224.

And there's a woman who's raised from the dead and there's a man who has a vision and there's a prophet who predicts that there's going to be a famine. And here's Luke's summary of what is really going on.

So you look at verse 24 and this is his little, let me tell you what's really happening here. But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

Here's the certain plan of God. Okay. So, which of these agendas has got your attention?

Who's, which of these agendas are you investing in? there's one that's visible and you can see it around us here in this country and you can see it as you switch on the news, the agendas of the world or there's an agenda set out here in the scriptures.

[15 : 33] Now, let me draw your attention to a few aspects of what is true of God's agenda. Let's start with the grace of God. Now, one of the strange things about this chapter is why does Herod last until verse 23?

Or, let me put it to you another way, is enjoying people's flattery worse than murdering somebody?

Oh, why do you get struck down when he just kind of gets a bit carried away with the audience?

Now, I made the point at the start that God's ways are not our ways, and that passage we read, we heard from Isaiah, Isaiah 55, is probably the clearest passage in the Bible that makes that point.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord, for as the heavens are high above the heavens, high above the earth, so are my ways above your ways.

Now, what you need to know is the for, for my ways are not your ways. So, what has he just said that shows that his ways are not our ways?

[16 : 51] Listen to what it says, seek the Lord while he may be found, let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, let them return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him, and to our God for he will abundantly pardon.

What's God been doing in Acts chapter 12? He's been saying to this wicked, unrighteous king, seek the Lord. He's been saying it through his involvement with people like James and Peter and seeing the way they are, but above all, he's been doing it as he researches, as he scrutinizes this escape,

as he thinks.

It's got God's fingerprints all over the thing. The door just opened, the chains fell off. Do you hear? God is speaking into his life.

Oh my goodness. God has been holding out his hands to this evil seek the Lord, turn, repent. so what is it that distinguishes God from me?

The measure of his grace. If you listen to this and you're not a Christian, understand that your past, whatever your past has involved, does not disqualify you from knowing God as your father.

[18 : 28] let Herod encourage you to see that if God pursued this evil king, he is inviting you to seek him.

But let Herod also be a warning. The window of opportunity does not remain open forever. Seek the Lord while he may be found. When you go to 24, you can't find him anymore.

It's too late. There is a too late. And if you're a Christian, remember, it's not for us to decide who God is going to hold his hands out to. In Luke's first volume, Luke 23, Jesus shows mercy to a criminal who's dying beside him.

In Luke's second volume in Acts chapter 9, he shows mercy to the chief of sinners. It kind of blows away the whole idea of worthiness, doesn't it?

God's ways really aren't our ways. The gospel is God's unstoppable mission to deliver compassion and pardon to the wicked and the unrighteous.

[19 : 38] Are you in step with that? Really? Or are there some people that you go, nah, not him. Second thing, the pastor of Jesus.

verse 17 ends by telling us that Peter departed and went to another place. Now, as you know, up to this point, Peter has been the leader of the church.

He's the rock that Jesus spoke of. He's preached those great sermons in Acts. He's operated the keys that let the Gentiles into the church. But now that's it.

You almost hear nothing else of Peter in the rest of Acts. get a glimpse of him in 15. But he's getting off the stage. He's vacating the platform.

He's stepping down. Another guy called Saul, Paul, is going to become the main person from here on. And Peter's okay with that.

[20 : 42] He leaves for another place, a less significant place, a less prominent place. here's how life normally works.

Okay? You would describe it the normal direction of travel is to be upwardly mobile. You get a slightly better house.

You might get a better car. You get a little bit of a step up at work. You have a little bit more dough. You go on slightly better holidays. That's the usual direction of travel.

Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.

Do you see where Jesus is going? Downward mobility. So he associates with the marginalized, the lepers and the beggars.

[21 : 57] He mixes with the despised tax collectors and prostitutes. And these things trash his reputation. They ultimately, they give him a place among the criminals to die.

But of course, you see, this is the thing, isn't it? Jesus is not pursuing his own agenda. He isn't asking what he would enjoy doing.

What would I like to do? He's serving his father's plan. He's looking for his father's approval. And Peter is heading in the same direction. Out of the limelight, off the platform, down into some less prominent but no less significant ministry.

the progress of the gospel or the progress of me, my agenda or his agenda.

Those are the kind of choices that we have. Now, it's about our thinking. It's about an attitude in our minds.

[23 : 05] So we're all used to seeing the images of the Ukrainian president, Zelensky, with his kind of five o'clock shadow and his battle fatigues as if he's just come off patrol.

And there's something entirely appropriate about that, of course, isn't there? There's a war on. You don't expect to see him walking down a red carpet to get into a big stretch limo where somebody opens the door for him.

You think, no, no, no, that's all wrong. Peter had that wartime mentality. As he heads off to play a different part that his commanding officer has just assigned him to, and consequently, the word of

God increases and multiplies.

I'm going to say one other thing. This is the certain plan of God. This is how it happens as we start to get in step with the grace of God that reaches down to the wicked and the unrighteous.

As we start to be ready to step down, down, down, down. And then clearly, as we cooperate and participate in the prayers of the church.

[24 : 23] So twice in this chapter, we're reminded of the prayer meeting. Verse 4, verse 12. And we are most certainly meant to make that connection between the prayer of the church and the progress of the gospel.

Listen to what Jesus said on those two subjects. truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea and does not doubt in their heart, but believes that what they say will come to pass, it will be done for him.

Therefore, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours. Now, Jesus spoke those words just after he had driven the traders out of the temple and he had pronounced judgment on Jerusalem's religion by means of the fig tree.

Curse the fig tree, died, withered, boom. Jesus is referring here in this section to Jerusalem when he says, whoever says, he didn't say, whoever says to a mountain, he said, whoever says to this mountain, the mountain is Jerusalem.

Okay. Now, the book of Acts shows you that Jerusalem is a massive obstacle to the progress of the church. They're trying to dampen the enthusiasm, they're trying to kill their leaders, they're trying to crush the whole thing at the outset.

[25 : 52] Now, if you've been around in Jerusalem in those days, and you'd seen the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees who control the police and who run the courts and who've got the ear of the Roman governor, and you've got Jesus and his little band of followers, and you've been asked, which one of these two do you think will survive?

I don't think it would have been a hard question to answer. But within 40 years of the death of Jesus, the mountain has been moved out the road.

Judaism is no longer the threat that it was to the church and the progress of the gospel goes on to the world. Come with me to the 16th century.

16th century, the church is moribund. The medieval church is just a mass of money-making schemes.

And a friar called Martin Luther in a backwater called Wittenberg in Germany rediscovers the gospel and stands against the Pope and the Holy Roman Empire.

[27 : 09] Not alone, but pretty much alone. And God moves this mountain out of the way. We've heard today about Romania.

Go back just over 35 years and you would not have heard that kind of report in church. Go back to the bad old days of the 70s and the Soviet Union and Romania under the rule of Ceausescu and nobody's setting up these kind of places.

It's all underground. Oh, the gospel's there, but it's underground. 1989, the mountain moves. mountain that you and I are conscious of today is Islam.

Some of you may have read or heard of a book written by David Garrison called The Wind in the House of the House of Islam. It's quite a challenging book to read because it's got so many statistics in it.

It's so carefully researched. Garrison has noted that there's been 82 movements in the entire history of Islam from 600 AD to the present.

[28 : 30] Now, a movement in Garrison's research is a thousand baptized believers or a hundred churches planted.

That's a movement, either or. Thousand baptized believers, hundred churches planted. Now, there have only been 82 in the whole of the life of Islam, but 69 of those movements have taken place between 2000 and 2012.

There has never been a time in history where more Muslims are coming to Christ than today. On the eve of the 79 Islamic Revolution in Iran, there were reckoned to be no more than 500 Muslim background believers in a nation of 40 million.

Forty years later, there are hundreds of thousands of Iranian Muslims who have given their lives to Christ. Now, be clear, this is still a small percentage of a huge empire.

I think there's 1.9 billion Muslims in the world. And there are pockets, so he talks about this house of Islam in terms of rooms, different parts of the world, and there are some parts of the world where there is very little happening.

[30 : 02] But central to that progress are the prayers of God's people. So let me end, I'm going to finish with this, I'm going to end with this. Here's the question that all this poses for us, okay, very simple question.

Would you have been at the prayer meeting? Will you be at the prayer meeting? Let me pray, then we're going to sing. Heavenly Father, thank you for helping us to live in a world of uncertainty, to know how to sleep in the storm.

Thank you, Lord God, that you are outstandingly gracious to the wicked and to the unrighteous. We pray, Lord, that you would help us as we seek to invest in your agenda and walk in step with your plans.

We ask this for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.