



Why Did God Let James Die?

Brownsburg Church of Christ

by Edwin Crozier

May 15, 2011

AM Assembly



Introduction:

In **Acts 12**, we find one of the most stunning contrasts in the Bible. We read of the first apostle to die, James the brother of John. Herod executed him. When he saw how it pleased the Jews, he arrested Peter and planned to execute him as well. Amazingly, in **Acts 12:7-11**, an angel of the Lord rescued Peter. Have you ever wondered why God rescued Peter but allowed James to die? When we ask that question, we actually learn several lessons about life, death, and Christianity.

Discussion:

I. Nobody lives forever.

- A. No doubt many Christians were killed in the persecution and scattering recorded in **Acts 8:1-3**. But, the apostles had continued on and the church continued because of their presence. But, after a period of peace (**Acts 9:31**) and seemingly on a whim, Herod decided to mistreat the church. So he executed James. Can you imagine the shock in the Jerusalem church? How could something like this happen to an apostle? Death overtakes everyone (**Ecclesiastes 9:2-3**). Nobody is so important God will keep them from dying indefinitely.
- B. Since everybody dies, we must never conduct the work of this congregation in such a way as to make anyone indispensable. If the work will fall apart when someone is gone, we are planning for failure. This leads us to two important conclusions about our work in the congregation.
 - 1. We have to equip ourselves to carry on the work we see others doing. Each of us must be a working part of the congregation. In this manner the congregation will continue to grow, even when we lose active workers and leaders.
 - 2. We have to equip others to carry on the work we are doing. We must make ourselves dispensable. We must replace ourselves. Sooner or later we will be replaced anyway. We can either do it intentionally or not. One of God's all-time greatest leaders was Moses. One key that made him such a great leader is he left Joshua. He had developed a successor. There is no success without successors. Who is your Joshua?

II. Always pray.

- A. I have no doubt the Christians prayed when James was imprisoned. But he was executed anyway. Imagine how hopeless they must have felt when another apostle was captured. What did they do? They prayed (**Acts 12:5, 12**). Despite the fact that their prayers "did not work" for James, they prayed for Peter anyway.
- B. The brethren obviously recognized God may say "No" to some prayers. That does not mean He will say "No" to all prayers. That does not even mean He will say "No" to a similar prayer. Far from believing God does not listen to prayer, we need to keep on praying. Jesus taught the necessity for continued prayer in **Luke 18:1-7**. If an unrighteous judge will be worn down by continued entreaty to finally give the good gift, how much more will our God who wants to bless us give us the blessings we need. We must never lose heart and always pray.

III. What happens to us is not necessarily an indication of God's approval or disapproval.

- A. Both men were leaders in the early church. Both were apostles. Both had been a part of Jesus' inner circle. Both had the same relationship with God through Jesus Christ. However, one was executed and one escaped.
- B. In a very real sense, I cannot with complete surety answer why God dealt with these two men in different ways. However, I am certain it was not because Peter was right with God and James was not. When bad things happen, we have a tendency to want to know what we have done to deserve them. All the while, we want to know what those who have good happening have done to deserve the good. The contrast between James and Peter demonstrates the different things happening to us do not necessarily indicate God's approval or disapproval.
- C. I like to read a lot of books, many of which are by religious authors. One of the greatest fallacies committed by most religious authors is to declare they know their position is right because God has blessed them so greatly. It is the argument Bruce Wilkinson, author of **Prayer of Jabez**, makes to encourage us to pray the way he says we should. I remember a book by Charles Stanley on prayer in which he talked about his own relationship with God being demonstrated by the fact that a need he and his wife had prayed for was filled within the week. No doubt, every good gift comes from God. I understand that, but God sends good gifts upon the unrighteous as well as the righteous (**Matthew 5:45**). The good or bad things that happen to us do not demonstrate our relationship with God. Rather, our obedience to His word does.

- IV. We must learn to rejoice with those who rejoice, even when we are weeping. And weep with those who weep, even when we are rejoicing.
- A. I cannot think about James and Peter without thinking about their brothers: John and Andrew. In the end, John was weeping over the death of his brother, while Andrew was rejoicing over the escape of his. Despite the different outcomes, both John and Andrew were to follow God's directive to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (**Romans 12:15**).
 - B. To fulfill this command, they had to go against the more natural feelings they had based on what happened in their own families. Andrew was to weep with John, even though he was rejoicing over Peter's escape. It is difficult to accept our blessings without feeling guilty about those who are weeping. God has not blessed us so we may feel guilty about it. He has blessed us so we can better serve Him and others. Weep with those who weep, that is, share in their sorrow. Cry with them and help them work through their emotions. But do not get bogged down in guilt. After all, should Andrew have felt guilty that John's brother died and his did not?
 - C. Perhaps more difficult is to rejoice with those who rejoice when I have personal cause for weeping. No doubt John had a lot to weep about when his brother died. I also have no doubt Andrew wept with him. But when the angel rescued Peter, how easy it could have been for John to be filled with bitterness that a blessing was given to Peter and Andrew and not to him. Even in this moment of sorrow, John was to rejoice along with Peter and Andrew. I have no doubt he did. But what about us? When we look around us at those who have blessings we do not, do we rejoice with them? Are we happy for them? Or do we become bitter and envious? Remember to rejoice with others for their blessings, whether or not we have received the same blessings.
- V. Serve God when, where, and how you can without being caught up in what happens to others.
- A. I can almost imagine a conversation between James and Jesus. James asks Jesus why he died while Peter was allowed to live. Jesus responds as He did to Peter in **John 21:21-22**, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!"
 - B. We must learn not to get caught up in what happens to other people. We need to be focused on serving God as best we can where we are. We should not spend our time wishing we had other people's blessings. We should not spend our time wondering why God granted a certain lot in life to someone else and not us. We must accept where we are and serve God there.
 - C. As we consider our brethren, we will see different people with different circumstances. Some make more money, some less. Some have better health, some worse. Some have greater ability, some less. Some have more opportunities, some fewer. Some have lived longer, some not. We have two choices here. We can get caught up in asking, "Why?" and feeling arrogant or envious. If we do, we will cripple our ability to serve God. Or we can learn the lesson that Jesus taught Peter in **John 21:21-22**. If God wants something different for the others around us, what is that to us? That is His business. Our business is to follow Christ no matter what.
 - D. I said I can almost imagine this conversation between James and Jesus because when James was taken to paradise by the angels of God, he was probably so happy it did not matter to him that he had died and Peter had not. I doubt he would ever ask the question. In fact, if he asked anything it was probably, "Oh poor Peter, why did You make him stay on earth?"

Conclusion:

Perhaps God let James die so we could learn these lessons. Perhaps it was for another reason. Whatever the case, we should take these lessons to heart.

If you are not a Christian, I want to remind you of the very first lesson from James' death. Nobody lives forever. You will not live forever. As **Ecclesiastes 9:12** said, your death will come like a snare suddenly. If you are not ready for that sudden snare, why not become ready right now? Why not submit to the blood of Christ in faithful obedience to His gospel, being baptized for the remission of your sins based on your repentance from sin and your confession of faith? Then the power of the sudden snare will be broken in your life.