

Introduction:

Today we're going to conclude looking at *the Acts of the Apostles*.

Things we will look at in this lesson:

Part One: The Changing Shape of the Church

Part Two: The Difficult Will of God

Part One: The Changing Shape of the Church:

01. What must we be careful not to let rituals and traditions do in the church?

02. What new method had a profound impact on the effectiveness of the church?

03. What must be known in order to present the gospel effectively?

04. What did the believers who spoke to the Gentiles in Antioch understand?

05. What need did Barnabas see in the growing church?

06. What did prophets provide?

07. What would the Antioch church become?

Part Two: The Difficult Will of God:

Article 1)

The Reason for Suffering (Acts 12:1-5):

Two of Christ's inner circle of three apostles were arrested. One would be executed and the other released. We are never told why one was released and the other executed. We can detect no good human reasons at all for James' death. Was James outside the will of God? Did he lack the faith Peter had to be delivered? Did someone mess up? The answer to these questions is no. But the answers to why God allows good people to suffer are difficult and complex.

(1) Our suffering can sweeten the victory to follow.

Sometimes our loss is allowed so we can appreciate and value more greatly the victory that is soon to follow. This is generally the case when there is no death involved—the loss of a job or some other kind of setback. Some trials are not meant to be permanent but to prepare for a great victory. In Mark 4, the storm at sea is a classic example of this. The disciples were in the middle of a frightening storm. The greatness of the storm only helped them better appreciate the power of the Lord over the storm. Were it not for the storm, they never would have known the depth of peace and the power Christ's presence brings.

(2) Our suffering can be discipline from the Lord.

It is always possible that suffering may be an act of discipline from God (Hebrews 12:6) In the Old Testament, Israel was forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years because the Israelites had disobeyed God. As a general rule, God does not use extreme measures to punish people. Some people mistakenly think that when someone loses a spouse or child, the reason might be God's punishment for sin. That does not fit with what Jesus taught us about our heavenly Father.

(3) Our suffering allows us to become a resource.

Sometimes, what we suffer allows us to become a resource, a help, and an example to others. Out of our own pain we can encourage and give hope to others. People who have endured the death of a child, terrible illness, or divorce can minister to others in those situations because they have been through them. The stability and strength we gain in trouble can be passed on to others.

Paul set the example for us (Romans 1:11). Three years after writing that letter, he finally got to Rome, but as a prisoner. Still, his time in Rome proved stabilizing to the church that would soon undergo terrible persecution at the hand of the emperor Nero. The example of Paul strengthened them and showed them that suffering does not mean a person is out of God's will. In fact, it may show the opposite—that we are in God's will (Romans 5:3–4). It is a four-step process that brings one out on the other end purified, whole, alive, and a contributing member of the body of Christ.

Article 1) continued...

(4) God may use suffering to change our direction.

God may be using our trials to get us going in a different direction, one we would not have chosen on our own. Stephen's death was an example of this. Because of that tragedy and the persecution that followed, the church got going in a whole new direction. Believers reached out to Samaritans and Gentiles.

(5) We may never know the reason for our suffering.

We may never understand why God allows some tragedies to occur (Deuteronomy 29:29). From a human perspective, James' death (Acts 12:2) served no purpose. Jesus had invested three years in him. He was one of the inner circle of three, yet we never read a sermon he preached or a letter or book he wrote. Why was James killed when Peter was released? It is likely the church that prayed for Peter also prayed for James. The outcome is not related to anyone's faith or the power of anyone's prayer. It is a matter related to the sovereignty of God. His ways remain mysterious and hidden to us. The Lord reserves within His sovereign judgment when to have us move from His presence on earth to His presence in heaven. Faith serves God in the midst of mystery, in the midst of not knowing. Our faith must be anchored in God, and we must trust Him. Because our faith is based on the solid Rock, we can weather the times when we have many questions.

08. By what means do we attain an active trust?

09. What was Peter's first thought when the angel released him from prison?

10. What was the result of Herod's violation of God's commandments?
