

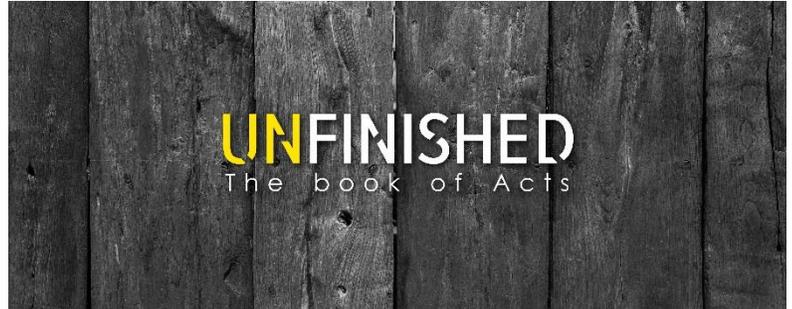


VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Unfinished

God Is In Control – Acts 12
Tim Badal | April 22, 2018



As we come to Acts 12, we see that God has been doing a lot of amazing things in the early church. We've watched how God's people have been faithful in the middle of great triumph, as well as great tragedy and trial. Because of their faithfulness, God has been expanding His Kingdom, not only to Jews but also to the Gentiles; not only in Jerusalem, but now to the uttermost parts of the world.

Our text this morning will remind us of one very important truth that each of us needs to tattoo somewhere on our bodies so we never forget it. We need to put it on our refrigerators or bathroom mirrors. We need to make it the desktop picture on all our devices. What is that truth? It's that God is in control.

The reason we need to remember this is that everything in our world—and I mean everything—tells us otherwise. As we're looking at our own circumstances and daily experiences, it seems that things are out of control. When we look at the geopolitical world around us, it looks as though it could fall apart at any moment.

But over and over in Scripture we are reminded that God is in control. He has His hands firmly on the steering wheel. He did in Acts 12 and He still does in 2018. So even if you feel your life is out of control, I'm here to tell you that no matter what you're dealing with, God is in control. This should give you great peace and bring great joy. It should take all fear and anxiety from your hearts, knowing that your heavenly Father loves and cares for you.

Paul is reminding us, as we wake up each morning, that all the details of our day will not surprise God. Nothing goes by His desk without Him giving some level of approval to the things that will come our way. Because of this, we can have confidence that He will take us through our day—because He is in control.

Why is this so important? In Acts 12, what we're going to see is not the good, the bad and the ugly; rather, it will be the ugly, the bad and then the good. Whatever the circumstances were in this chapter, the overarching theme that the church there realized was that God was in control. This gave them the courage to face death, having confidence in spite of knowing an execution was pending. It also gave the church confidence to pray, knowing God was going to take care of all that worried them. The story in chapter 12 even brought a powerful king to realize he was a small figure in the hands of the Almighty. God is in control.

We'll see how this theological premise drove the early church. My prayer is that this understanding will also permeate our hearts and minds, settling our anxious thoughts and allowing us to look forward to the coming week—with all the surprises and troubles it might bring—with confidence, knowing that the God we serve knows the end from the beginning and the beginning from the end, being part of it every step of the way.

So let's look at Acts 12. There are really three episodes in this story and we'll find God's control in each of them. We'll see how He works all things out for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28)—although we may not always be happy with everything that takes place.

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ² He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 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. ⁵ 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, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. 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." And the chains fell off his hands. 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." 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. ¹⁰ 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, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. 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."

¹² When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. ¹³ And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" ¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. ¹⁷ 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." Then he departed and went to another place.

¹⁸ Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

²⁰ Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. ²¹ On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. ²² And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" ²³ Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

²⁴ But the word of God increased and multiplied.

This chapter is a great time marker for us. The way time was kept back then had a lot to do with who was leading the country. Luke tells us that Herod was the king in Israel. It was similar to us referring, not to a particular year, but to the years when so-and-so was President of our country.

You may be wondering how old Herod was since he was ruling when Jesus was born and is mentioned throughout the New Testament. But he didn't actually live to be 350 years old. There are actually six different Herods mentioned in the New Testament. I'll go through them quickly so you'll recognize them when you read about them and so we can define the time frame based on which one is ruling.

1. Herod the Great. This was the "Christmas Herod." He was the one who told the wise men he wanted to worship Jesus, but who actually wanted to kill Him. In fact, he later sent out a decree that all the boy babies in Judea, two and under, be put to death. Joseph, being warned by an angel, fled with his family for safety. This Herod ruled for quite a long time.

2. Herod Antipas. This is the Herod who beheaded John the Baptist. He also oversaw the trial of Jesus on Good Friday.

3. Herod Archelaus. This Herod did not rule for long. We might call him Herod the short. But he was just as cruel as the others. Nobody liked him. It was said that not even his mother liked him. While the Bible mentions him, there were no significant events during his rule.

4. Herod Philip. Then there was a split in the Herod dynasty. This Herod was given governorship over the northern part of Israel for about two decades. He had an infatuation with Rome and created a city that was designed to merge the Roman culture with the Jewish culture. Thus the city he founded was named Caesarea Philippi. Which makes sense—it acknowledged his leadership while making sure it would please the upper management as well.

5. Herod Agrippa I. This is the Herod we read about today in Acts 12. He was the grandson of the "Christmas Herod." He was well acquainted with treachery and murder through the stories of his father and grandfather.

6. Herod Agrippa II. We'll hear about this Herod next fall. Paul mentioned coming into contact with this Herod during his missionary journeys.

Once we know which Herod is being written about, we can more easily determine the timeframe of the events Luke is recording. Multiple secular historians tell us that Herod Agrippa died 44 years after the death of Jesus Christ. Which means our story is taking place about 11 years after the resurrection of Jesus. So the church has been going strong for about 11 years after Jesus left them. The disciples have done exactly what Jesus called them to do regarding the Great Commission. They had not watered down the gospel. They were faithfully proclaiming Christ whether in times of triumph or times of persecution.

Today we'll look at five indispensable truths that I believe can be drawn out of these stories in Acts 12.

We can experience trials that are unbearable.

In Acts 12:1 we read that Herod Agrippa I was the current ruler over Israel and that he *"laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church."* It wasn't that the church had not already known persecution. But up to this point, the persecution involved those who followed Jesus, but not the leaders of the church. To this point the apostles had been spared. It could be that the rulers understood that killing the church leaders might have the opposite effect from what they desired. Instead of stopping church growth, martyrs might cause it to grow stronger. They knew that killing Jesus didn't stop His influence, so they might have decided just to "pick off" the followers one at a time, hoping to cause the movement to die out.

But that's not what happened. Even though the followers of Christ were being killed or imprisoned or harassed, the movement continued to grow. So Herod decided to go after the leaders. He began by arresting James and beheading him. There's no mention of any kind of trial or other "due process." He's just killed. That's all Luke tells us. As you know, James was one of Jesus' three closest companions, along with Peter and John. James and John were the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). James and John were passionate young men whom Jesus had disciplined into extraordinary leaders. Their faith was awesome. John lived to be the one to whom God gave the great Revelation, as well as the one who wrote the Gospel of John and three short letters known today as First, Second and Third John.

So at this time, James, one of the church's greatest leaders, was dead. I wonder if Luke didn't say much because of how hard it was for him to talk about it. The death of James was certainly a matter of great sorrow to all the believers. We should consider how much a blow this was to the church and how hard it probably was to have their other major leader, Peter, arrested soon after this. The only reason Peter wasn't immediately put to death, we're told, is because it was during the season of Passover. The Jewish leaders would have been highly opposed to anything like an execution taking place during a festival.

Can you imagine how the church felt during this time? One of their greatest leaders is dead; another is now in prison waiting to die. It seems to me that what we do with Scripture at times can be downright brutal. We sometimes use verses simply as pacifiers, something to make us feel good about ourselves. We see in this passage circumstances that are clearly unbearable. A leader was beheaded. And another faithful leader has been put in prison waiting to die. Surely the other believers were then thinking, "When is our time to die?" With every knock at the door, with every suspicious person looking at them in the marketplace, their anxiety would rise. Would they be next? That was surely an unbearable time in the life of the early church.

But in our rose-colored American culture, we can read this and think, "That will never happen to me." We might point to a certain Scripture such as 1 Corinthians 10:13: *"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."*

Without any context, we as American Christians might use these words to assure ourselves that God will never give us more than we can bear. But do you really think, as James was kneeling before his executioner, that he was thinking, "God is not going to give me more than I can bear"? His head was about to be chopped off. That's more than a person can bear. So we must realize that 1 Corinthians 10:13 doesn't mean horrific things won't happen to us. We don't have to look very far in our world today to see Christians being cut down left and right because of their faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In our culture we, try to make ourselves feel better by thinking we can endure anything. But think about a couple things regarding 1 Corinthians 10:13.

First, the word sometimes translated as "test" is better translated "temptation." There's one word in the Greek that's used for both concepts. Paul was saying that we can't be overtaken by temptations. We can't be tempted so strongly that we will be able to stand before God one day and say, "I couldn't do anything about it. I had no other choice but to give in." God will hit the buzzer: "Wrong!" You and I have the power, through the Holy Spirit of God, to push away any temptation. Not only does He give us the power, but the verse also says He provides a "way of escape" from any temptation that comes.

There wasn't a way of escape from the trial that James faced. It ended his life. But God does give us a way of escape from temptations. When the devil tempts us, he cannot corner us into a place where we cannot get out. God says there's always a back door.

Second, we need to think about who the "you" is in 1 Corinthians 10:13. We can't broad-brush what Paul is saying to mean that every person is never going to be tempted beyond what they can bear. This promise has a criterion before it can be applied.

Third, what is meant when it says you will be able to bear, or handle, the temptation? Does that mean we'll never stumble or fail? Will we always get an "A" in every trial? Will we always pass the test? That's not what it means.

I believe Paul is talking about temptation and I also think he's telling us that if we live according to God's perfect will and purpose, He will give us the ability to endure during those times of temptation. But this certainly does not exempt you and me from horrific trials. We could experience trials so difficult and heinous that in ourselves we give up. "I don't know what to do. I don't know where to turn. I don't know if I'll ever get out of this." Why is this? It's because we actually may not get out of this trial.

You may be thinking, "What a terrible sermon. There's no hope. God might actually allow horrific and unbearable trials to come into our lives?" Well, yes. Some of us have already experienced these things. We've had horrific medical reports. We've had horrific news about people who have died. So what is God's Word to us in these times?

God gives us peace.

When we face issues like the one we see in this passage, there is also a promise for those moments such as the one James faced. Paul later tells the church that our trials which, when seen from a human standpoint, are utterly unbearable, God's peace that transcends all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7).

In those unbearable moments of life when we turn to the Lord, God says, "I will transcend any human reasoning and I will give you peace." That's why Peter, who knows James has died and he's going to be next, is still sleeping so soundly that the angel of the Lord has to kick him to rouse him from his slumber. How could he be sleeping that hard? I know I'd be wide awake. But we have to realize that God's peace transcends all understanding, plus it guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

God gives us partners.

In Acts 12 James is dead and Peter is next in line. Paul reminds us that we are to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). Why? Because each of us are sometimes given burdens we can't bear alone. The weight can be so heavy that one person can't carry it. That's why in His love, God has given us brothers and sisters in Christ who share our burdens with us.

So in unbearable situations, we should ask God for His peace. He will sometimes give us peace, not by getting us out of the circumstances, but by giving it to us in the middle of the storm. He also gives us partners in ministry to help us carry loads that are too much for us. While we live in the comfort and liberty in this country of "justice for all," it's important to realize that we too are not immune to unbearable moments.

Prayer must be constant because we are unable.

In Acts 12:3–5 we see how the church responds to James' death and Peter's imprisonment. Did they write up a petition and lobby their politicians? Did they get together with all the churches in the city and start picketing or boycotting anything with Herod's name on it? What we read in verse five is this: "*So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.*"

Why would the church choose prayer? We're not told how they prayed. The Bible rarely gives us how-to's regarding prayer; rather, there are some prayers recorded which are instructive to us. But we do know in this case that their prayer was fervent. They prayed persistently and passionately for Peter.

When Peter is released later in the text, those who were praying doubted it was really him. That suggests that they might have been praying for something less than his release. "Lord, keep Peter calm in the prison. Please care for him while he's there, and give him Your peace." But when God does more than this, they aren't able to believe it. To them it's more probable that they're seeing a ghost than that Peter had been released.

We need to pray persistently.

Here's what I want you to know about prayer. You don't have to pray perfectly in order for God to answer your prayer—but you need to pray persistently. We often hear people say, "I want to pray, but I want to be sure to say the right things." That's like saying, "I want to breathe, but I don't want to breathe the wrong way." No, just breathe. Just pray. We need to be people of prayer.

Prayer is just communicating to God concerning a particular thing that we're concerned about. "Peter's in trouble, God. I don't know what to pray for. But I know You are able and we are not. There are 16 soldiers guarding Peter and we're not good at special ops. So Lord, You're our Special Ops Guy. The only way we know how to talk to You is through prayer."

We need to pray passionately.

The church took their request and lifted it before the Lord. We need to do the same. We need to take specific prayers and bring them to God. And more than praying for endurance in a hard situation, we need to ask Him to take care of the situation itself. “Lord, do something to release Peter from prison. That’s what we’re asking. That’s what we want.” We need to pray over and over. Not just once, then assume God isn’t going to answer. We must pray and pray and pray—even as God is answering the prayer. They were still praying while Peter was right outside, knocking at the door.

God does things that are unbelievable.

Peter was in prison. Herod had heard about Christians being released from prison before. He probably had heard that Jesus was actually dead, but appeared again. The Romans thought they had taken care of Him, but their guards couldn’t keep Him in the tomb. Something extraordinary had happened.

Then in Acts 5 there’s the story of Peter and John being flogged and put into prison because they had been preaching the gospel. But the next day, they were gone. So Herod decided that this Christian wouldn’t escape. He put 16 soldiers to guard Peter, four sets of four. He chained two soldiers on each side of Peter. Peter was not going to move, let alone get away.

Then we’re told in Acts 12:6–8 that the night before Passover was finished, an angel of the Lord stood next to Peter. Luke makes it clear that God was totally active and man was totally passive in this scene. The angel came in, a light was shining—and Peter was sleeping. The angel has to strike him.

Parents, think of what it was like to wake your teenager this morning. You did an angelic work.

We don’t know if the angel kicked him or how he struck him, but it was enough to waken Peter. He told Peter, “Get up quickly.” The chains fell off. The angel told Peter to dress himself—and not to forget his sandals. Remember, there were two soldiers right there beside him. You might think they’d need to get out quickly without worrying about what Peter looked like. But the angel said, “Hey, don’t forget the Birkenstocks. Oh, and it’s cold outside—grab your jacket.”

Peter followed the angel, not realizing what was happening until he was outside the jail. God was doing something unbelievable. Peter walked out of prison, but it took him a few minutes to figure out what had happened and where he was. He then decided to go to Mary’s house to tell the others about his release.

God still does amazing things like this. They don’t happen very often, which is why we call them miracles. If they happened every day, we wouldn’t think they were miraculous. Why does He sometimes do unbelievable things? I don’t think God was trying to prove how good He had gotten at prison breaks.

God does the unbelievable to unnerve the unbeliever.

Think about those soldiers after they woke up from their sleep and realized Peter wasn’t there. That had to be unnerving. “Where did he go? Why isn’t he here? How could he have gotten past us and out an iron gate? How did he make it past the sentries at the door? How could he have put on his Birkenstocks and we didn’t know it?” They realized Peter was different from any other prisoner they’d ever guarded.

We need to be telling unbelievers as well as believers about what God is doing—because it needs to unnerve them. They need to hear and think, “That’s amazing—I’m not sure what to do with that.”

God does the unbelievable to undergird the believer.

James was dead. Peter was in prison. The believers were huddled together and I imagine they were feeling a lot of fear. They had no idea what would happen to them next. Peter knocked at the door. After the confusion of their disbelief, he was actually standing among them. They were so excited that Peter had to quiet them down. “You’ll wake the neighbors.”

It’s possible that their confidence in God had grown weaker after James was killed. They felt more mortal than they’d felt up to this point. But Peter’s rescue reminded them of the power of God and that His plan would go forward. Not only did it increase their confidence, but it should increase ours as well. We need to be open to what God can do, because it gives us courage to believe that He is in control.

I’m reminded of one of the ways we saw this years ago in our church. We had a rickety old pole barn as our sanctuary before we built this building, after which we used it for classrooms. Every time we’d talk about taking it down and building something bigger,

the city of Sugar Grove would refuse to let us. One of the issues we faced as we grew was we were not connected to a city water supply. We had a well and septic system, and we weren't able to hook up to the city systems which were on the other side of the road. It was going to cost a huge amount of money to make that connection—far more than we had and more than we wanted to spend if we did have it. So our thought was that maybe God was calling us to relocate to another property. We looked around, but everything we looked at was so expensive. We began to think God was not wanting us to move.

Then one Sunday, as church was letting out, a bunch of pick-up trucks were in our parking lot. They were from the Water Reclamation District. They came up to one of the secretaries and asked to talk to someone in charge, as they had a proposal to make. They wanted to bring a water supply through our property so they could bring it to Waubensee Community College. They told us, "If you will give us a ten-foot easement along the property line by the woods, we will give you a free water hook-up." Problem eradicated!

You should have seen the mess. They dug a huge ravine and put in big pipes. They had told us that they'd replace anything they beat up on our parking lot, but at the end, they came to us and said, "We just don't feel right about this mess so we're going to redo your entire parking lot, free of charge." Can I tell you something? That's a miracle!

I want you to know that we didn't have another idea. We didn't have another plan. That building that's now housing all those kids is because God made a way where there seemed to be no way. God does unbelievable things. This affirms for us that He is with us and He is in control.

God's judgment is unpredictable and unimaginable.

Let's be realistic. It doesn't seem fair that James died and Peter lived. Have you ever wondered what it was like when James got to heaven and watched the angel release Peter? I don't know. Maybe it's the middle child in me, but I'm wondering if James was thinking, "Really? I lost my head for You and You're going to let him out scot free?" Now, I know some of you hard-nosed theologians are thinking, "Nobody thinks that way in heaven." But humanly speaking, it doesn't seem fair.

Yet that's what happens. There will be times when you will be a James, enduring unbearable things, and you'll see God doing miracles for other Christians around you. But you need to know that God is good and right and just in everything He does. When you're the James and everyone else is the Peter, there are three things you should remember.

Don't complain.

When God's decisions don't seem fair, we are not to complain. And yes, I struggle with this. When I'm going through hardships and everyone else seems to be doing well—especially when unbelievers are doing well—I don't like that and I complain.

Don't critique.

"God, Your plan stinks. God, Your plan doesn't make any sense at all. This is a dumb plan. I'm going to do my own plan." But in those moments when God's judgment seems unpredictable, stay faithful and committed. "I don't know why You've made me a James. I don't know why trials and tribulations meet me at every turn. I don't know why I'm the 2018 version of Job. But whether You give or take away—whether I'm a Peter or James—blessed be the name of the Lord." We need to believe that and own that.

Don't compare.

We don't need to critique or complain or compare. "God, You're doing this for them and not doing this for me." Rather, we must realize that whether God allows us deliverance or death, He is worthy of our praise.

He does amazing things. Often they're unpredictable—even unimaginable. Peter had been released and was now in safety. Acts 12:19 tells us that Herod searched for him, but when he couldn't find him, he had the 16 sentries put to death, assuming Peter's escape was an inside job. It seems that Herod's treachery had no boundaries.

Then in Acts 12:21, Herod gave a speech to some people who were coming to him for help. The secular historian Josephus was supposedly in Jerusalem at that time and he wrote a lot more about Herod's speech than Luke recorded. Josephus, who was not a Christian, said that when Herod came out on the porch of his royal palace, he was wearing a sequined shirt—straight out of the '70s. The sun came at such an angle, Josephus wrote, that it caused Herod's garment to shine like the noon-day sun. As Herod was speaking, the people were blinded by this brilliant light, and their response—according to both Josephus and Luke—was to believe they were being talked to by a god rather than a man. They started shouting, "You're a god! You're a god!" It could have

been right out of a video clip where girls are going crazy over the Beatles or Elvis. Herod heard their cries and thought, “You know, they’re right. I am a god.” Upon which God responded, “No, you’re not.”

In our study group, by the way, I quoted Captain America from the “Avengers” movie. Captain America had been warned, “Be careful, those guys are gods.” He responded with wise theology, “My friend, there’s one God—and He doesn’t dress like that.”

So what happened? Herod Agrippa was struck down and was eaten by worms. What many secular historians believe is that he had intestinal worms that brought him great pain. Within a matter of a couple days—Josephus said it took five days, but Luke says immediately—Herod was dead. This great leader who hated Christianity was dead.

Even the most powerful of leaders are pawns in the hands of Almighty God. When they start thinking they’re equal to God, God addresses that. He did it with Nebuchadnezzar in the Old Testament. He did it with Pharaoh in the Old Testament. And He’s doing it with Herod here. He does it with every human heart that thinks they are God instead of acknowledging Him.

So whether or not we’re believers, we all need to respect God. He has a position no one else can hold. When we allow our pride or arrogance to lead us to think we’re in competition with God, we need to repent quickly. The judgment of God is severe. The book of Hebrews tells us, *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Hebrews 10:31). God’s judgments are unpredictable and unimaginable. He has the ability to strike people dead and we need to be in fear of that.

No matter the trouble, God’s mission is unstoppable.

Finally, we can realize from this story that no matter what the trouble is, God’s mission is unstoppable. After James is dead, after Peter is imprisoned, after Herod thinks he’s god and is struck dead, what happens to the church? Luke tells us in Acts 12:24, *“The word of God increased and multiplied.”* What a crazy chapter! But at the end of it, God is still in control and the church is on the move. No matter what man tries to throw at us, no matter what rulers will do against us, Acts 12 gives us two amazing applications.

Because God is in control, we can have confidence.

No matter what we face, not only is God with us, but He will give us everything we need to endure that trial—even if it leads to our death.

Because God is in control, we can be courageous.

Knowing God is in control not only brings us confidence, it leads us to become courageous. We need to be courageous in bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to our neighborhoods, our workplaces, as well as to our families and friends. If God is for us, who can be against us (Romans 8:31)? When we’re confident of that—whether we’re in a prison cell or kneeling before our executioner or praying in the church—we should have courage to bring the gospel to the places that need it most, because we know God will see us through to the end.

Do you believe this? Do you live in light of this? The believers in Acts 12 did, and my prayer is that we will do the same.