

## Acts 11:19-12:24 Our Confidence in God

### Introduction

In 1981 Jewish rabbi Harold S. Kushner wrote a best selling title: *When Bad Things happen to good people*. He wrote the book as part of his response to an experience of personal tragedy. His son Aaron was diagnosed with a ‘premature ageing’ illness from which he died. This was a terrible blow for Kushner and his family. He wrote the book as an attempt to assist other people who have equally been hurt by the challenges of life and want to find a way their faith can help them through their trials. Kushner took the story of Job, from the book of that name, and sought to apply what he learned from that to contemporary life. He was convinced that God did not cause the suffering in the world, and equally convinced that God could not have prevented it either. He had four main points. **First** of all that sometimes there is no reason –it may simply be an unfortunate fact of life of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. On these occasions, he declared, there is no point in looking for a reason because there isn’t one. **Secondly**, he declared, there are no exceptions for nice people. Some suffering is caused by natural events like earthquakes or disease which affect both the good people and those that are less upright in character and conduct. **Thirdly**, some suffering is caused by the actions of evil people. God has created us with the ability to make choices and our choices impact others for good or ill. For God to prevent all the inappropriate actions of sinful people would place in serious question our ability to function as human beings. **Fourthly** some suffering, he wrote, is caused by our response to it. We may blame ourselves or take out our anger on others who are trying to help us, or on God. Yet this is of no benefit to us, in fact it is harmful rather than helpful. God, he said, has granted us the strength of character to handle our misfortunes and with His help grow as people through prayer and dependence on Him. Although not all that Kushner has written would be acceptable from a mainstream Christian point of view we recognise and affirm much of what he was trying to communicate. We live, for better and for worse, in a rights culture in which ‘risk’ is almost banned and ‘risk assessment’ forms almost obligatory for a large proportion of activities in the public arena. On 3 March 2010, news papers carried the extraordinary story of the death of Alison Hulme, a solicitor who fell down a mineshaft in Ayrshire in July 2008. She lay at the bottom of the mineshaft for six hours because health and safety rules banned fire fighters from rescuing her. The eighteen members of the crews present were all trained in using the necessary equipment, thought crucially not the paramedic who was due to be lowered first down the mine shaft, but their regulations said that the equipment was ‘for saving themselves not members of the public’. [*The Scotsman*, 3 March 2010] This rule had been put in place because some senior fire fighters in England were awaiting trial on charges of ‘manslaughter’ for allowing a team of firemen, two of whom died, when the roof of a blazing building collapsed on them. How do we as Christians come to a sensible and balanced, and especially a biblical understanding, of the trials we may have to experience at some point in our lives?

### **1. The Church in Syrian Antioch** (Acts 11:19-30)

(a) **Its Origin** (Acts 11:19-21) *Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.*

<sup>20</sup>*Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.* <sup>21</sup>*The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.* The early years of the Christian Church were blessed ones. Numbers grew on a daily basis and conversions were expected in every congregation with a high degree of regularity. Yet a day came when the good times ground to a shuddering halt. The murder of their charismatic young preacher Stephen by the Jewish religious leaders, reported in Acts 7:54-60, could have had a devastating impact on its work. Luke reported that those who carried out that crime were then emboldened to attack large numbers of the Christian community. *On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.* <sup>2</sup>*Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.* <sup>3</sup>*But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison (Acts 8:1b-3).* Was this the beginning of the end? On the contrary Acts 11:19-20 records the spread of the gospel, as the Jewish Christians affected went into Cyprus, Lebanon and Syria (using the current names of those territories); the majority were careful to avoid witnessing to anyone who wasn't Jewish! We must not be quick to condemn them as most Jews of that era lived segregated lives to avoid violence from the majority ethnic communities amongst whom they were living. But some were so enthusiastic that they spoke about Jesus to anyone they met- and then faced a huge problem when some non-Jews (Gentiles) decided to accept Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. Where could they take them for worship and fellowship because Jews and Gentiles did not worship together, let alone have a meal together; had they made a mistake? No! Acts 11:21 states: *The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.* Tragedy for many families that in itself was bad was used by God to bring about the spread of His Church. Without the oppression would these evangelistic initiatives have happened? We have had delays, time wise, with our church building project – we have to trust that the Lord will bring good out of that, but I have no idea what that might be? The Lord does not cause the problems we face, but He can work in us and in the midst of these trials to bring about good things that might otherwise not have happened. Our Croatian brothers and sisters lived under the oppressive restrictions of a far-right wing state in which full citizenship rights appeared to be available only to members of the majority Roman Catholic community. Yet in the dire straights of the 1991-95 Balkan War they set up a humanitarian aid organisation to aid the needy, without reference to the race or religion of potential recipients. The government was so impressed with their dedicated work that in the later 1990s they were granted freedom of religion and at least most of the old restrictions were lifted. God brought good out of a tragic situation. We need wisdom to ask God how awful and apparently hopeless situations can be, in some way, redeemed. (b) **Its Growth** (Acts 11:22-26) <sup>22</sup>*News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.* <sup>23</sup>*When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.* <sup>24</sup>*He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.* <sup>25</sup>*Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,* <sup>26</sup>*and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.* The choice of representative from the Jerusalem congregation was

crucial. Barnabas was a man of vision who could think outside the box. He was a man who could grasp that things had changed and it was no use seeking to retain old structures that had lost their usefulness. He wanted to see what God was doing and to join Him in that work. The message hadn't changed, but the context in which it was proclaimed had done so. We need man and women with that spiritual vision like Barnabas to see what God may be saying to us and how we must respond to it. Notice how he took a young person, Saul from Tarsus, to train him as a leader in this new missional context. Saul, a young man from the most socially conservative background, spent a whole year on placement in the most radical and innovative congregation then in existence. Antioch was a most cosmopolitan city with people from many nations around the world living side by side. Saul (Paul) would have met in that crucial period of twelve months nationals of virtually all the countries he would later visit on his missionary journeys. Praise God for visionary missionary pioneers of later era, like William Carey (Baptist) and Thomas Coke (Methodist). Praise God also for Christian social reformers like Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce (anti-slavery campaign) who persevered until they saw the fulfilment of their vision. What might be the great steps forward in our generation, in which we might play a part? Great things don't happen only in the past. God has not changed. I thank God, for example, for the work that Laura and Kirsty will shortly be doing on mission in other places and which Gary and his team will accomplish this summer in Romania. God wants to use you and me, without exception to make a difference in other peoples lives, the question is am I /are you open to sensing His guidance about what that might be? (c) **Its Vision** (Acts 11:27-30)<sup>27</sup>*During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.*<sup>28</sup>*One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)*<sup>29</sup>*The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.*<sup>30</sup>*This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.* Persecution in Jerusalem had inadvertently resulted in the planting of the Antioch Church. Would life now be plain sailing because they had come through the first time of trial? No! Another major problem was about to hit them –famine in various parts of the Roman Empire, including in Jerusalem. These Christians could simply have said 'that's not fair' we've had enough problems. Instead Acts 11:29-30 records their response:<sup>29</sup>*The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.*<sup>30</sup>*This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.* We have the resources we need so we can assist our brothers and sisters in Christ obtain what they need also. Back in Genesis 4 there is the awful story of Cain who murdered his brother Abel. In Genesis 4:9 an angry Cain asks God a rhetorical question: *Am I my brother's keeper?* Expecting the answer 'no' Cain was stunned to hear God say 'yes' you are responsible therefore I will hold you accountable for what you have done. The reign of Roman Emperor Claudius (41-54AD) was marked by periodic famines. In one small part of that empire, at least, a group of people sensed how God would have them respond to that time of need from the resources they had at their disposal. As a Church it was good that we felt led to take special offerings for disaster relief in Haiti and Chile. We cannot respond to every appeal, but good stewardship of our resources enables us to accomplish far more than we may have thought possible. Some years later Barnabas and Saul went before the leadership team of the Jerusalem Church to test their call to serve as overseas

missionaries. The call was recognised and affirmed. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:9-10 the following words: *James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.* <sup>10</sup>**All they asked** was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. The Gospel message is a holistic one. These men had been modelling this principle and would accomplish far more as a result. Baptist missionary in China, Timothy Richard, was another man of vision. He was born in South Wales and converted there during the 1858-60 Religious Revival. As a student at the Haverford west Baptist College, some years later, he applied to serve with the Baptist Missionary Society in China and was accepted for the small BMS mission in Shantung (Shandong) Province. He was a convinced advocate of the indigenous principles of James Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, adopting Chinese dress as he lived in the community distributing Christian tracts and rudimentary medical aid. He was convinced that the Chinese Church should be self-governing and self-supporting and that local Christians should take the major responsibility for itinerant evangelism. Missionaries should restrict themselves to supporting local believers by carrying out specialist ministries in support of that work. He was deeply affected by the devastating famine that struck most of north China between 1876 and 1879. He was prominent in the relief work, first in Chingchou and then from 1877 in Taiyuan, capital of Shansi Province. [Brian Stanley, 'Timothy Richard', Dictionary of Chinese Christianity' [www.bdconline.net](http://www.bdconline.net)] He was possibly the first person to see that a co-ordinated famine relief effort was required to alleviate such disasters. It is probable that the modern aid relief charities were inspired by the vision of Timothy Richard. The deaths of hundred of thousands of people was tragic, but Richard's visionary response to it, led to many millions being saved following disasters in the century and beyond that followed. Will we pray that God will enable us to be people of vision in Broughty Ferry and who knows possibly further afield as well?

## **2.The Church in Jerusalem** (Acts 12:1-24)

(a) **Herod's Persecution** (Acts 12:1-4) <sup>1</sup>*It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.* <sup>2</sup>*He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.* <sup>3</sup>*When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.* <sup>4</sup>*After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.* Persecution, famine –surely now they could have a time of peace and tranquillity! <sup>1</sup>*It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them.* A lot of Christians have had times when they wished they had been living in the time of Jesus or of the Early Church. Well there are plenty of places around the world where Christians are living with persecution and famine, but that is probably not the features of life at that time that they had in mind! The blessing of church growth they experienced came, humanly speaking, as a result of the creative and courageous ways in which they responded to the difficulties placed in their pathway. This serves as a huge challenge to us not to focus on our frustrations at the obstacles we face, but to ask God what opportunities do we have in this situation that we can grasp which might not have been a possibility had we not faced these problems? The Herod in question who killed James was the grandson of the Herod who sought to kill the baby Jesus and was the nephew of the Herod (Antipas) who participated in the trial of Jesus before His crucifixion. The Herods routinely sought to curry favour with both Jews and Romans to keep their life of luxury, but equally

had no time for Christians. When his ‘focus group’ informed Herod that killing James had made him more popular with the masses he proceeded to arrest Peter with the intention of killing him also at a politically convenient moment. He was imprisoned in the maximum security prison in the Tower of Antonia. Herod would be aware that Peter and John had apparently escaped from a regular prison some years earlier which had been an acute embarrassment to the Jewish authorities. The report into the escape was inconclusive as it found that the security system had not been breached, yet the cells were empty. Acts 5:17-24 gives an account of that incident: <sup>17</sup>*Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy.* <sup>18</sup>*They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.* <sup>19</sup>*But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.* <sup>20</sup>*"Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."* <sup>21</sup>*At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles.* <sup>22</sup>*But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported,* <sup>23</sup>*"We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside."* <sup>24</sup>*On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests **were puzzled, wondering what would come of this.*** They could hardly acknowledge the angelic intervention. Therefore, this is the reason why Peter was treated as if he was in the most dangerous prisoner category.

(b) **Peter's Release** (Acts 12:5-19) (i) **The Crucial Time** (Acts 12:5-6) <sup>5</sup>*So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.* <sup>6</sup>*The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.* Peter has been in prison for about a week when the show trial is due to commence. Round the clock prayer meetings are taking place by the Christians in Jerusalem. In Herod's plan Peter had less than twelve hours of life left at the time of this second angelic intervention. God in His sovereignty had not spared James' life and Peter too knew that he could not make the assumption that his fate would be any different. Yet prayer does change things. (ii) **The Extraordinary Encounter** (Acts 12:7-11) <sup>7</sup>*Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.* <sup>8</sup>*Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him.* <sup>9</sup>*Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.* <sup>10</sup>*They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.* <sup>11</sup>*Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."* Group 4 or any other modern security firm would have experienced the same outcome. Our God reigns! Yet we need to have the same confidence in God when a ‘James’ is not spared as when a ‘Peter’ is delivered. Matt and Beth Redmond's precious song ‘Blessed be Your name’, written after the death of their children is an incredibly powerful declaration of the God in whom they and we have confidence in today. A Christian theology of the sovereignty of God and a Christian theology of suffering and of prayer that cannot accommodate both these outcomes is defective in interpreting the purposes of God for His people. We are to pray in expectation of miraculous answers, but

humbly accepting *yet not My will but Yours be done* (Luke 22:42), as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane. If this is our approach the devil cannot get a foothold in our lives and over time our confidence in God will be vindicated, but if not in time in eternity. Too often Christians of all persuasions put God in a box, all neatly packaged by our particular expectations of how He should behave. He is Lord of Lords and will not be bound by our limited grasp of the events of time or eternity. Like a little child with a parent may we trust Him with our lives with full confidence? (iii) The Chaos and Confusion (Acts 12:12-19)

<sup>12</sup>When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. <sup>13</sup>Peter knocked at the outer entrance and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. <sup>14</sup>When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"<sup>15</sup>"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."<sup>16</sup>But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. <sup>17</sup>Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.<sup>18</sup>In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup>After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. Herod of course has everything under his control. Who are you kidding! You and I play that game as well and assume that we (sometimes) are in complete control of our destiny, instead of letting God be God over our lives! What was the response of these Christians at the all night prayer meeting when Rhoda tells them that God has answered their prayers? <sup>14</sup>When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"<sup>15</sup>"**You're out of your mind,**" they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." Don't ever think they were more spiritual than us; they were ordinary people like us with doubts and fears, together with hopes and expectations of God working in and through them. The king and the prison authorities were also confused. They also were unwilling to accept the truth of what happened. Our God reigns! Let's repent of our lack of trust in Him and confess our doubts to Him, resolving to honour Him as we should.

(c) God's Intervention (Acts 12:20-24) <sup>20</sup>He had been quarrelling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.<sup>21</sup>On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. <sup>22</sup>They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." <sup>23</sup>Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.<sup>24</sup>**But the word of God continued to increase and spread.** Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Herod was struck down that day and died five days later due to the blockage of his bowels by intestinal worms, a painful way to die. The key verse here is v24. Persecution in Jerusalem led to the founding of churches in neighbouring countries including in Antioch in Syria. Famine in Jerusalem was alleviated by aid from that cause in Antioch. Peter has twice been imprisoned and miraculously freed yet James is martyred. Yet **the word of God continued to increase and spread.** God is at work! May we also declare our confidence in Him and trust Him for our future as these first Christians came to do 2000 years ago, Amen.