

Advancing The Church Through Persecution

Introduction

The Hebrew Bible ends with 2 Chronicles, by the end of the book, King Nebuchadnezzar after a 2-year siege had destroyed Jerusalem, burning it to the ground and the survivors taken as captives to Babylon. Reading at verse 22 of chapter 36, “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia (530 *B.C.*), that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 12) might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: ²³ ‘Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, “**The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.** Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. **Let him go up.**””” God places on the heart and in the mind of a pagan king the importance of Jews to travel or ‘go up’ to the Holy City, the epicenter of the Jewish religion. Nehemiah rebuilt the temple and for the next 600 years it would be the center of Jewish worship until its destruction in 70 A.D.

In the Old Covenant, the city of Jerusalem and the temple served as a central magnet, as it were, for God’s people. It was important for a Jew to travel to Jerusalem and if they lived a distance away then to journey to Jerusalem at least once in their lifetime. Interestingly, this is very the same approach with Muslims and Mecca. The Jews were to live in such a manner that it said to the world around them, “*Come to Jerusalem and see the One True God*”. The Old Testament called

people to come to Jerusalem and discover God. Come to the Holy City and see where God lives in His temple and how He provides for His chosen people. The coming of the New Covenant, was heralded with the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. With the resurrection of Jesus, God gives a gift to every true believer, His Holy Spirit to dwell within them; believers in Jesus as their Lord and Savior are the New Temple of the New Covenant. God does not dwell in buildings built by man. This is true for any temple, whether built by Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Mormons and on and on. With Jesus' life, death and resurrection all of the Old Covenant was fulfilled; all it prophesied and all it promised. Now the focus was no longer - come to the Holy City and worship at the temple made by the hands of men. Unfortunately, the Jewish faith had become a faith in their own ability, the works of their hands, they sought their own glory and they defined who God is. But now God declares the focus is the living Christ and the Holy Spirit living within every believer; God through His Son, Jesus the Christ, commands believers, **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”** (Acts 1:8) God's plan for redemption now entered its final phase for the salvation of all mankind; God wants His people to go into the world preaching the Good News for God the Father desires Jesus to be Lord of all. As Peter made clear, **“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”** (2 Peter 3:9) It was now the time of the Church Age where Christ's Church would share the Gospel of Good News with the world and all those who God has called and repent and give their life to Christ would be saved.

At this point in time in Acts chapter 7 Jerusalem is still the central location of both the Jewish religion and the young Christian faith. However, in Acts chapter

8 persecution begins, to the shame of the Jews, but for Christians Jerusalem is transformed into a missionary sending center focused on the glory of God and no longer on men or nation and their accomplishments. The Apostles stay in Jerusalem to teach the Church and strengthen and deepen its foundation in God's Word and His Son Jesus, and at the same time believers are scattered to take the gospel into the near world. This begins the process of Acts 1:8 being fulfilled and over a short time the gospel would be taken to the then known world and eventually the gospel would go forth to all nations - to the entire world.

The history of the Jewish nation was one of drifting away from God and His calling them back and the prophets preparing the people for the arrival of the Messiah and telling the people, without the Messiah they are lost, and yet, Israel's history shows they killed the prophets sent by God. In the Old Testament, God declares mankind needs to repent and surrender their lives to Him, now God sends His Son to pay the price for the sin of fallen mankind and His Spirit to empower the believers to overcome sin. However, I want us to understand, just because one is devoutly religious, as some Jews were, it is not sufficient. As it was at the time of Christ for the Jewish nation and the early church, it is true today; a person can be convinced and dedicated and devout but if they are dedicated to a false god then the true God does not accept them but rejects them. Islam and Latter-Day Saints and many other false religions are condemned because God has made Himself findable – if anyone searches, they are able to find the one true God. So, all the nations must release their false gods and turn to the only true God whose Son is Jesus Christ. Only in God the Father through Jesus can anyone be saved from sin and hell and this is why God sends His church into the mission field. If all religions led to God, like the Bahá'í religion of today believes, well then, why would Jesus give us the Great Commission, which is His command to all true believers and

churches to go into all nations and share with them the truth about sin, repentance, and about God the Father and God the Son, Jesus, as the only Savior. My beloved, theoretically all religions could be false, but if there is a true belief, a true faith – there can only be one – not many. The triune God of the Bible, of Christianity is the only true God and all others are false and all those who follow false religions, no matter how devout, are lost eternally.

In our text today, it is clear that persecution was what moved the Church outside Jerusalem. I want us to also see as we continue our survey of the Book of Acts, that this persecution is God ordained. He pushed His beloved Church out into the world with persecution, God allowed this in order for the church to share the Gospel with the lost world. Even though persecution was and is difficult, the end result is seen in verse 8, **So there was much joy in that city.**” Even amid persecution and even in death, Christian’s experience joy through Jesus.

The key point I want you to latch onto from this scripture passage is; **With God-ordained persecution comes evangelism, glorification of God, the expansion of the His Church, and resulting joy.**

Spreading The Gospel Through Persecution

We begin our study this morning with reading God’s Word at verse 58 of chapter 7, **“Then they cast Stephen out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of his execution. ^{8:1} And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and**

Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. ⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”

There is a strange thing that happens when the Church undergoes persecution and trials. One might initially think that when threats are made and imprisonment carried out, the church would be silenced and run for cover. What happens, however, is the very opposite. Rather than running for cover or hiding without purpose the Church becomes bold and willing to suffer all losses for the sake of her Lord Jesus Christ. However, this seemingly peculiar response really is not strange at all. If, in this world, the only real and lasting possession one has is Jesus Christ then everything else can be stripped away and the result is boldness and joy in Jesus.

Saul’s and the Jewish leadership’s persecution scattered believers and many new believers as they escaped the threat of death and found themselves waking up in foreign lands. I can imagine the result would naturally have been for people to ask, *Where did you and your family come from?* Answer, Jerusalem. *Why did you move here?* We were forced to move because there were those in that city who hated us and tried to even kill us because we are Christians. *Yes, we heard of Stephen and that they killed him. Are those the same people who desired to hurt you?* Yes, Stephen worshipped the One true God and His only Son Jesus the Christ, so those who hate God killed him and they hate us also. *Oh, I see, you and your family fled in order that you could continue to worship this One true God.* Yes, that is right, let me tell you about Jesus ...

In the early spread of the church the Roman emperors also hated Christians and perceived them as a threat to their power. Roman Emperors tried to destroy Christianity. One of them, Diocletian (dai-e-'kil:an) emperor during the late 3rd century was particularly violent in his hatred of the Bible and Christianity. His hatred fueled the death of thousands of Christians, using the most outrageous cruelties, and he destroyed and burned many Bibles. This caused many Christians to go 'underground' and hide themselves from his wrath. They continued to share the Gospel one-on-one and in small groups. When it seemed to the emperor, on the surface, that he had made an end of Christians, he commissioned a medal with this motto on it: "The Christian religion is destroyed, and the worship of the Roman gods is restored." God's Church, even though underground, continued to grow and influence not only Rome but all the Roman provinces of Europe, Asia minor and North Africa.

Back to our passage, Saul in verse 3 began to incorporate his strategy to rid Jerusalem of the Church, as an enemy of God his violence only succeeded in helping spread Christianity to other places that had never heard the Gospel message before. What a frustrating endeavor to try to work against God and you only succeed in accomplishing God's purposes; this is the story of Saul and all the enemies of God throughout the centuries. The evil one has always worked at destroying the church and his efforts have resulted in the spread of the Church and Gospel. It is true, the evil one is succeeding at destroying societies and people's lives through all the many sins that appeal to fallen mankind, by man's desire for power and self-serving politicians and rulers who abuse their positions of authority, but the Gospel continues to go forth and hearts are turned away from Satan and people come to Jesus, resulting in those who believe - living lives to

glorify God and when they die their mortal death, they will be in heaven with God forever.

Tertullian, born 155-160 A.D. in the Roman province of Carthage, now Tunisia, was an early Christian theologian, he wrote, *“That, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church has a depth of insight that is all too often lost on believers today. We have no trouble thinking of persecution and martyrdom as a great obstacle to the spread of the gospel, which will not, however, be successful in hindering Church growth. We would have no problem affirming that the blood of the martyrs is a hurdle which, by God’s grace, can be overcome. But to say that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church is an altogether different concept.”* (1) www.reformationtheology.com/2005/06/the_blood_of_the_martyrs.php Written almost 2000 years ago and it is still true and the same for us today.

From last week, we read about the murder of one of the early church’s greatest preachers and servants, a man of true faith, Stephen. His death marked the beginning of a great wave of persecution that swept over the church. Like a great tsunami that washes everything away, this wave of persecution took many saints with it. Satan had hope this would end the fledgling church. However, believers who, as it were, found themselves washed up on the shores of other lands and they then did what came naturally, they praised God and spoke of Jesus. God was in fact building the Church through the tyrannical efforts of her enemies and this perplexed the world, but for Christians as they gained understanding of their amazing God, they saw His plan being accomplished for the church to spread throughout the world.

Look with me at verse 2, *“Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.”* This act took courage, it showed their loyalty to Stephen

and the God he believed in, the very God that the Jewish leadership and Saul wanted silenced. Well, so much for the compliance and silence the Jews sought and tried to force. However, some were scattered and left Jerusalem, this meant to saying goodbye to family, friends, home, job and most of your possessions. They left all these behind in order to live for Jesus and take Him with them. There is no indication that they were bitter with Stephen for setting in motion their persecution and leaving Jerusalem. God ordained their persecution for the spreading of His Gospel and the Church. I believe they knew from the beginning there would be a price to pay for believing in God's Messiah and they were willing to pay whatever price that required. They set the standard for believers of all ages. Joyce and I found this true in the mission field, the new converts from Islam knew there was a price to pay for following Jesus, even their very lives and they were ready to pay the price if needed. Here is Acts as the Church was coming into its own, persecution followed the believers in Jesus wherever they went. When the Nicene Council was called in May of 325 A.D. to craft the Nicene Creed that codified doctrine and worked to eliminate heresy. Which, by the way, there are copies of at the back of sanctuary. Historians have noted that no more than a dozen men of the 318 delegates attending had **not** lost an eye or hand or the loss of an arm or leg caused by torture for their faith. The result of persecution was the scattering of the saints and the result of the scattering of the saints was the preaching of the Word, as we read in verse 4.

God Ordains Persecution

The persecution and scattering were the fulfillment of what Jesus had told His followers would come, reading Acts 1:8, **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”** (Acts 1:8) Jesus shared with

His followers events that **will** take place before the persecution happened. The Great Commission, as this passage is often called, is a call to evangelism, but it is also a prophetic utterance by Jesus as to what **will** happen.

The followers and believers in Jesus –

WILL receive power when the Holy Spirit descends. Yes, praise God and Amen!
WILL be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem. Yes! This was the will of God
WILL be His witnesses in Judea. Yes, indeed, as the church scattered it did this.
WILL be His witnesses in Samaria. Yes, because persecution drove them further from Jerusalem.
WILL be His witnesses to the end of the earth. The Church continues taking the Gospel to the world until this very day.

Some of the scattered traveled to Judea 20 miles southeast of Jerusalem with the Word. Then the first evangelist mentioned by name is in verse 5, “**Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.**” He traveled a 100-miles north, even though the verse says down to Samaria it was north; understand going to Jerusalem from anywhere was to ‘go up’ and to travel anywhere away from Jerusalem was considered traveling going down.

Let me jump ahead to Acts chapter 11 to see the result of this persecution by Saul and the Jewish authorities. Beginning at verse 19, “**Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.**”²⁰ **But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.**²¹ **And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. *The Gospel was now being preached to non-Jews or to Gentiles and they were coming to believe.***²² **The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and**

they sent Barnabas to Antioch. They were concerned about the Gospel being preached to Gentiles.²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose,²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.” (Acts 11:19-24) We see in this passage the Gospel has gone to Judea, Samaria and the beginning of the uttermost parts of the world. The Gospel is being spread by those being scattered because of the persecution that started with Stephen’s death. The Gospel in a very short time had traveled up the coast to the area of Phoenicia to Antioch. Then believers set sail to the island nation of Cyprus. Later, the Apostle Paul, who had been the persecutor Saul, would travel to the far reaches of the known world with the Gospel of Christ. My beloved, this persecution and scattering was ordained by God.

From Persecution Comes Much Joy

As we return to Acts 8, we should remember Philip as one of those selected to care for the widows early on in Acts 6. He along and Stephen are the only deacons Luke speaks about after chapter 6.

When Philip is run out of Jerusalem through the great persecution, he heads straight to Samaria. Perhaps Philip remembered our Lord’s directive from Acts 1:8 “**Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria**” or perhaps the Holy Spirit guided him there. Whatever drove him there, we understand the Orchestrator of it all is God. Philip takes the Gospel to a land of the ‘Lesser-Jews’ or Samaritans. We remember the problems that existed between the Jews of Jerusalem and the Jews of Samara. They were not fond of each other at all. Samaritans were not welcome in Jerusalem or in the temple built by men, but the Gospel was welcomed in the land of Samaria. Reading the rest of our passage beginning at verse 5, “Philip went down to the city

of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. ⁶ And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much joy in that city.” Philip, a Jew, preached the Gospel to lesser Jews or Samaritans and what happened? The crowds listened to the Gospel with “one accord” and he cast out demons and healed people to validate the Gospel. Philip was preaching the message that every person is a sinner and will suffer God’s just judgment for sin. Every person is absolutely guilty and it is right for God to punish them. They have sinned against an eternal God and so this punishment will last for an eternity. That message is not one that would bring great joy to anyone. That message would bring great fear and worry to those who heard. They would need a Savior.

Yet, the amazing result, God by His great grace and mercy extends forgiveness to all who love and trust in the work of His Son Jesus Christ. God sent Jesus into the world, not to condemn the world but to offer forgiveness to everyone who believes and the people believed in Jesus, which brought them and the city “much joy”.

So, we come full circle. The paradox of persecution is that when Christians are forced to leave their home and go to another place, leaving everything behind, it does not result in anger, bitterness, resentment, or depression - but in joy. The very message that caused them all the trouble in the first place was the message they preached. It seems to me that these early followers truly believed and lived what they said they believed.

Knowing the price to follow Jesus is important. Have you made the decision to follow Jesus before the persecution begins, so that, when it starts you are ready? During the terrible Boxer Rebellion that began of 1899 in China the insurgents captured a mission station, blocked all the gates but one, and before this gate they placed a cross flat on the ground. Then the word was passed to those inside that any who trampled the cross underfoot would be permitted their freedom and life, but that any refusing would be shot to death. Terribly frightened, the first seven students trampled the cross under their feet and were allowed to go free. But the eighth student, a young girl, refused to commit the sacrilegious act. Kneeling beside the cross in prayer for strength, she arose, and moved carefully around the cross and went out to face the firing squad. Strengthened by her example, every one of the remaining ninety-two students followed her to their mortal death and their eternal spiritual life.

These believers in Acts 8 and in China were genuine. They loved Christ more than anything or anyone else. So, all the stuff they had to leave behind, in a sense, freed them to love Jesus even more. Giving the moral lives freed them to be with Jesus forever.

The question we should consider this morning is, why is it that we connect wealth and prosperity with God's blessings and think that those poor people in other lands are not so blessed as we are? For my beloved, the true is, the other way around is where Christ is found. One is only free when they surrender all to Jesus.

Should we someday experience trials and persecution for standing up for Jesus and speaking the Gospel, always remember God is at work and persecution **WILL** result in “[much joy](#)”.

The key point I hope you locked onto from this scripture passage is; **With God-ordained persecution comes evangelism, glorification of God, the expansion of the His Church, and resulting joy. Amen!**