

“HOW PERSECUTION BACKFIRES.”

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Scripture Texts: Genesis 50:20; Acts 8:1-8

Introduction.

Do you know anyone who has ever said that their times of greatest spiritual growth and greatest fervency in prayer and intimacy with God have come in times of ease and comfort when everything is going great

Do you know anyone who has ever said that those same experiences with God came in times of trial, trouble, suffering and hardship?

In the past weeks I have reminded us of the sovereignty of God over our salvation and over our elections, and today I want to show how He is sovereign over His church, especially in times of persecution, and sovereign over us in our hard times.

The first two Sunday's of November are commonly marked by Christians and churches as an International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

We are living in a time of unprecedented persecution of religious faiths in general and of Christians in particular. Christians are being killed (some estimate 300 a day), churches are being destroyed and pastors are being imprisoned. Entire Christian villages and towns are being decimated and Christians forced into refugee status.

Persecution backfires causing the church to spread and grow.

Stephen was the first martyr to die for his faith in Jesus Christ. And once the wolves had that first taste of blood they were emboldened for more. Luke tells us that this particular persecution was a *great persecution*. In fact it was so great that Christians abandoned their homes and possessions and livelihoods to flee for their very lives.

This was the first great disaster to confront the church. Some of the apostles had been threatened and beaten and jailed. But this was against the whole church, over five thousand people.

Jesus had announced His purpose for this church in Acts 1:

Acts 1:8 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.

Up to now there had only been one church, the church at Jerusalem. Immediately after this many more churches sprung up wherever the Christians scattered. The body of Christ became scattered far and wide.

It is very possible the Christians were hesitant to go and were getting a little too comfortable in Jerusalem. Comfort and ease, luxury and affluence, safety and security are very real and serious dangers in the church and to Christians. They have a way of making us apathetic, lazy, self-centered, unwilling to risk or invest or sacrifice for the kingdom of God.

It is hard to say which is worse for the church, prosperity or persecution. So Jesus pushed them out into Judea and Samaria, meaning the whole country of Israel.

What might be our attitude if we were chased out of Lynden with only the clothes on our backs? Might we be distressed by our circumstances, stressed out about what to do, fearful of our futures, broken in faith to the point of wanting to hide and be silent?

Luke tells us these Christians went about proclaiming Christ almost as if nothing bad had happened. No bitterness, no anger, no blaming, no woe is me, no cowardice, no shame in the cross or in Christ.

Notice what happens, instead of killing the church or making it smaller, it spreads and grows. This is God's way, to bring light out of darkness, to bring life out of death, to bring good out of evil. Persecution and the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

Do you know what gave their message a greater ring of truth? It wasn't some health and wealth Gospel. It wasn't look at us and all we have and what Jesus has given us and done for us materially or financial.

It was, sure we lost everything, and now we are homeless nomads, but that stuff is nothing, we have something far better.

Philippians 3:8 I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

It's a spiritual reality that in the providence of God what appears to be an unmitigated disaster and an unredeemable catastrophe is designed from the very beginning to promote and build the church that the persecution was trying to defeat and destroy.

Illustration of the Church in Iran.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-story-of-the-irans-church-in-two-sentences>

“The Iranian revolution of 1979 established a hardline Islamic regime. Over the next two decades, Christians faced increasing opposition and persecution: All missionaries were kicked out, evangelism was outlawed, Bibles in Persian were banned and soon became scarce, and

several pastors were killed. The church came under tremendous pressure. Many feared the small Iranian church would soon wither away and die.

“But the exact opposite has happened. Despite continued hostility from the late 1970s until now, Iranians have become the Muslim people most open to the gospel in the Middle East.

“As a result, more Iranians have become Christians in the last 20 years than in the previous 13 centuries put together since Islam came to Iran. In 1979, there were an estimated 500 Christians from a Muslim background in Iran. Today, there are hundreds of thousands—some say more than 1 million. Many Iranians are turning to Jesus as Lord and Savior.”

Let me share five things that have happened as a result of this intense persecution of the church (see <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-ways-persecution-in-iran-has-backfired#When:2016-10-11T05:00:00+00:00>).

1. Banning the Bible has backfired.

When Iranian government officials warned citizens against reading the Bible Iranians become all the more eager to get a copy and many have put their faith in Christ after reading one.

A few years ago, a government official waved a New Testaments on national television and warned the population to avoid it. Demand for the New Testament soared as a result.

2. Closing church buildings has backfired.

The Iranian government’s closure of churches over the past few years has forced Christians of Muslim background to meet in underground house churches. These usually grow and multiply as friends, family, and neighbors give their lives to Christ. Now government security agents working to crack down on these outlawed house churches can’t find them all.

3. Censoring television and blocking websites has backfired.

Christian websites are routinely blocked and TV channels scrambled in Iran. This censorship makes more people curious about what the government doesn’t want them to know. Blocked websites are being accessed and scrambled programs picked up through satellite television. At least 30 new house churches were planted through satellite television in 2015.

4. Killing leaders has backfired.

Eight pastors have been martyred in Iran since 1980 because of their ministries. Their deep affection for Christ—and their willingness to suffer for him—has made these leaders compelling examples for the rest of the church to follow. Their martyrdom accounts are well known among Iranian Christians, many of whom desire to imitate their leaders’ deep love and courage for Christ and are increasingly willing to take risks in order to share the gospel.

5. Imprisoning Christians has backfired.

Persecution intended to instill fear and paralyze the church has made Christians more willing to suffer. Unbelievers ask, “Who is this Jesus that people are so willing to suffer for?”

One man when he heard on the news that Iranian Christians had been arrested for their faith googled “Christianity.” The Lord used that internet search to eventually lead him to Jesus.

Illustration from Arab Spring

Do you remember the Arab Spring? It started December 17, 2010 in Tunisia and spread like wildfire through Arab countries of North Africa and the Middle East.

It created all kinds of political and social turmoil. Do you remember my statement last Sunday about Charles Spurgeon reading the newspaper to see what God is up to in the world? When Arab Spring was going on we should have been wondering what God was up to.

The upheaval and turmoil and insecurity drove scores of young people to investigate what they believed and go deeper toward God. Muslims under political and religious tyranny found Islam intolerable and they began seeking the freedom that can only be found in Christ. They were hungry for truth that gives life and gives life meaning. And churches in these Arab countries found new opportunities to reach out and minister and be salt and light in dark times (see <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/kingdom-advance-in-arab-world>).

Persecution backfires causing adversaries to become advocates.

Acts 8:1, 3 And Saul approved of his execution ... 3 Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Acts 22:4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women.

Acts 26:9-11 “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. 11 And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Paul was a great enemy of the church, a wolf among the sheep, devouring, destroying, scattering, persecuting. So great an opponent was he that when God converted him, people had a very hard time believing it and were afraid to trust him.

This great adversary became a great advocate, such is the mysterious power of God.

I think of Memli and Luiza Mema, the Albanian couple we support in planting churches among Muslim villages. He used to be a Sigurimi, one of the feared and hated secret police, like the KGB. Part of his job was to enforce the strict code of atheism when Albania was communist.

In Haiti Melissa Smit's in-laws are seeing witch doctors turning to Jesus at great personal sacrifice as they lose their livelihoods and friends. Great adversaries now advocates.

Look at the adversaries of our faith through the eyes of faith, pray to the God who changes hearts, to change our adversaries hearts. Look at your personal adversaries, you trials and troubles and heartaches, Satan's thorns, with the eyes of faith in a good and sovereign God.

Persecution backfires when pain turns to joy.

Acts 8:8 So there was much joy in that city.

Joy is the fruit of faith. Joy is the overflow of a heart filled with gratitude for Jesus, for His salvation, for the privilege of serving Him and suffering for Him.

Notice the same Word of God that brought pain and suffering through persecution, also brought joy, and the joy far outweighs the trouble.

The joy set before Jesus outweighed the suffering and made Him willing to endure the cross and the pain (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Paul said these momentary earthy trials are preparing us for an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all (II Corinthians 4:17).

Peter said, "rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (I Peter 4:13).

The Christian response to suffering is joy. "Count it all joy ..." (James 1:2).

Pastor Richard Wurmbrand, founder of The Voice of the Martyrs (VOM), who was imprisoned over 8 years in Communist Romania once wrote, "I have found truly jubilant Christians only in the Bible, in the Underground Church and in prison."

Implications and application.

I want us to notice something about this persecution. Why did it break out?

Acts 11:19 [They] were scattered because of *the persecution that arose over Stephen*.

This first great persecution was caused by Stephen. So here is the question. As those Christians were fleeing for their lives and leaving behind everything, what were they saying about Stephen?

"This is all his fault. If only he had just kept his mouth shut. Why did he say those things that offended the scribes and elders? Look what he has gone and done. Now we are uprooted from

our lives and jobs, the kids from their schools and friends. What a colossal waste of time and money and energy? How can this be good?"

Do you think they were blaming Stephen? Do you think they were mad their lives were ruined? Or were they rejoicing at the privilege of suffering for Christ and for His Gospel?

Luke was not blaming Stephen when he named him as the cause, rather he was honoring him and holding him up as praiseworthy. Their treatment of his body is an indication; they risked their lives to bury him. He was the inspiration for the rest to be found faithful and to stand up and openly profess their faith in Jesus.

Hebrews 10:32-34 You endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and *you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property*, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

Persecution backfires when Christians have backbone and stand firm in their faith.

Christians today are being persecuted in record numbers and Christians today are joyfully flourishing in those places.

They don't focus on their present circumstances but on *eternity*. Think about how so many Negro Spirituals are about heaven. They fix their eyes on Jesus and heaven and the joy that awaits them there.

They are *God-centered* people rather than self-centered. They aren't looking to be entertained or have their ears tickled. They aren't in church to get something out of it but to give all they have to God and His service. They focus on sharing their faith in Jesus with as many as possible.

They love their *Bibles*. They are more precious than silver and more valuable than gold. Some have one at great risk, to be caught with it would mean death. Others only have pages or scrapes which they commit to memory. They hide as much of God's Word in their hearts as they can.

Satan is unteachable, he never learns and he never changes. Even though everything he tries unwittingly serves the greater purposes of God he keeps trying.

All attempts to silence Christianity are spectacular failures, and the greatest of all those spectacular failures is the cross and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christ alone has the power to defeat Satan. No matter how severe the persecution or how great our suffering, the joy that was theirs is also ours through the sovereign purposes of our great and good God.