

“THE CHURCH ON THE RUN.”

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Scripture Texts: Acts 8:1-8

Introduction.

We are returning to the Book of Acts this morning. This is Luke’s history of the early church. We started with Jesus’ ascension into heaven, then Pentecost and the phenomenal growth of the early church which led to the formation of deacons to help with the work. One of them was Stephen who became the first martyr in the Christian church. He was stoned to death by an angry mob of Jews. All of this was watched over by Saul who was approving it.

Text:

Killing Stephen emboldened the Jews against the Christians and out of this arose the first great persecution of the early church in Jerusalem and as a result the church was forced to scatter, to run for their lives. I want us to notice a couple of things.

First, Luke tells us the persecution was great. Families, husbands, wives, children, church leaders were forced to run for their lives, fleeing their homes and businesses and jobs and schools and friends. Many only had what they can carry on their backs. They are like refugees. No food, no water, no shelter. This is real hardship.

And for some of them it was even worse. They didn’t get away, they were dragged off to prison, prisons that were nothing like ours today. As bad as the Whatcom County jail is, it’s the Hilton Hotel compared to the dungeons and pits the early Christians found themselves in.

How bad was the persecution? Let Paul tell you himself.

Acts 22:4-5 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ... I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

Galatians 1:13 You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

The word behind Paul's ravaging the church suggests a brutal and sadistic cruelty. Paul was a ruthless and relentless adversary, hunting down and killing or imprisoning both men and women. Our first brothers and sisters in the faith endure terrible hardship.

Second, notice how they treated Stephen. Notice what they didn't do. They didn't blame Stephen for creating this mess, they didn't say they wish he had kept his mouth shut and not made the authorities so mad. They didn't blame him for causing them to lose their homes and livelihoods, and have to run for the hills. They didn't blame him for being put in prison.

They could have. They could have been angry, they could have said he should not have preached so pointedly and certainly should not have called the Jews stiff-necked. That's not how you win friends and influence people. Look at the trouble he has caused, look at the incredible cost, loss of homes, jobs, lives. Really, was it worth it?

Luke clearly regards Stephen as praiseworthy, he is held up as a good example of a faithful and godly man. Stephen is an inspiration and example for the rest to follow him in standing for Christ and bearing testimony for the Gospel.

And they don't blame God either. Why did God allow this? Why did God let them kill such a good man in the prime of life? Why did God give such freedom to their enemies to make their lives so miserable? Why didn't God stop them? Why is God letting them be like sheep led to the slaughter (Psalm 44:22)?

Where was God in all of this?

Behind the evil and wickedness and hate and persecution, there is the sovereign and good providence of God, ruling over and controlling and directing everything.

This is just as Jesus said 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."

So this is step two, first Jerusalem, and now beginning in Acts 8, to Judea and Samaria. This is the Holy Spirit breaking new ground. One writer called this one of the most important events in church history. This is the beginning of the Gospel reaching beyond the Jewish world. This is the second dot on the way to connecting with us.

This is the beginning of our salvation and it comes to us at the shedding of much blood.

What looks like a step backward, what looks like a terrible defeat, what looks like the triumph of evil, is actually a great forward advance of the gospel. The church isn't being destroyed, it is being multiplied far and wide.

Philippians 1:12-13 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

God is purposefully scattering the church and pushing them out of their comfort zone. God is on a mission and persecution serves that mission.

The purposes of God are seen in the scattering of the church *and* the purposes of God are seen in the chief cause of the scattering. God is going to glorify Himself by taking one of His greatest adversaries and turning him into one of His greatest advocates.

Saul was seething with rage, he was hell-bent on destroying the church and anyone associated with it. He was a savage wolf toward the sheep. God will glorify His power and His goodness by converting such a cruel man. This will make the conversion all the more astonishing.

God's arm is not shorten by the viciousness of our enemies. God can turn the worst into the best. Look at your worst adversary with the eyes of faith. What can God do? They are vulnerable to your prayers. Sauls can also become Pauls. Never rob God of the glory of His great power. Pray with faith. Our adversaries are God's instruments.

Out of the death of Stephen, Paul would be raised up. If Stephen's death accomplished no more than to stir the heart and conscience of Paul, then it was more than worth it. What a harvest from one seed.

Those who were scattered went about preaching the Word.

Notice they did not give in to the persecution. They are not broken and in despair. They are not cowering in fear and hiding. They did not allow their voice to be silenced. They are emboldened. They have a new courage. They keep doing what got them into trouble.

Hebrews 10:34 You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

Acts 5:41-42 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

They rejoiced to be counted worthy to suffer for Jesus' sake. They were free, unafraid, bold because they rested on two promises of God.

First, God has bound Himself to His church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. God has promised to never leave or forsake His church. There will always be a remnant and a testimony on the earth.

Second, God has bound Himself to His Word, promising that it will never pass away but always accomplish the purposes for which He sent it.

This is the beginning of world missions.

From this point on the history of the Christian church is sort of like tracking a wounded deer through a forest, drops of blood mark the trail all the way to the present day.

As Tertullian once said, The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

John 12:24-25 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25 Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Out of death life comes, out of the death of seed comes a great harvest. Death is the way to life, the cross is the path to victory. The church of Jesus Christ is built on blood, Jesus' blood and the blood of countless martyrs. Jesus said:

John 15:20 Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

II Timothy 3:12 All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

First, millions of Christians all over the world are facing and experiencing intense persecution. Also there are Christians all over our country who are facing persecution of one variety or another, in their jobs, in their schools. For some it is ridicule, being mocked, for others being denied advancement or promotions or recognition. Some are facing law suits. Some are being silenced by PC policies. Some are being deleted from Facebook and Twitter.

Persecution is the normal Christian experience. If we desire to follow Jesus and trust and obey His Word, it will mean trouble. If we aren't experiencing it, we are the exception not the norm, we are the fortunate few.

Second, persecution is coming. Persecution comes and goes, rises and falls, for a time disappears and then comes back. It will happen more and more in our country. The gloves are coming off our culture. With each coming generation it will get worse and it is wise parents and grandparents that will prepare the coming generations.

Being naïve and ignorant and complacent are folly.

The conditions that give rise to persecution are always present, they never go away. Satan and those under his influence are at enmity with the kingdom of God and everything and everyone having anything to do with Jesus. The blind rage of the people who killed Stephen is Satan's blind rage and it is just as real today. Satan hasn't changed, the persecution will not stop until Christ returns. The only thing restraining Him is the purposes of God.

When we are in a season of peace there are two things to be done. Prepare and pray.

Prepare ourselves to be strong and courageous, to be willing to openly confess Christ no matter what the cost. The sad reality is the church in the west has not used its peace time well. We have become fat, lazy, complacent, soft, wasting time and resources on what doesn't matter eternally. Life is too good, comfortable and easy. We have been lulled asleep.

Pray for those who are in the midst of persecution. Do for them what we would want them to do for us when we are in the same boat. Do we included one people group of those who are suffering in our prayers?

The same Word that brings persecution is the Word that brings joy.

Why? Is their joy because their fortunes have been restored, life is good again? No, their joy isn't in creature comforts but in Creator comforts. The Word of God is good news and good news is always cause for joy.

If you have Christ, then no matter how great the persecution, how great the trial, how great the suffering, you have hope and the promise of eternal life and that is cause for joy even in the midst of suffering and persecution.

I Peter 1:6-9 In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 8 Though you have not seen

him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, 9 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Implications and application.

Let me make application of these lessons to all of our lives with regard to any suffering or trial or hardship we experience.

There is always a purpose even if we don't always see it. Those persecuted Christians in Acts 8 didn't understand. Their daily prayers would have been for mercy and help, crying out for lost loved ones, begging for healing and relief from pain. Children orphaned or lost, husbands and wives separated, poverty, starvation, thirst, homeless.

With God there is no such thing as senseless tragedy or senseless suffering. From our perspective it can seem that way because we lack sense, we can't see behind the veil to what God is doing.

With God nothing is purposeless, meaningless, senseless. Nothing is chance or fate or bad karma or bad luck or out of control.

Romans 5:3-4 We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

James 1:2-4, 12 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

12 Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

II Corinthians 4:16-18 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Romans 8:18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Eccl. 7:13-14 Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?

14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other.

God draws straight with a crooked line.

Get it settled in your mind that God is sovereign and good, that behind everything is the steady hand of providence. In every trial or trouble or tragedy the final outcome has never been uncertain. Christ crushed Satan on the cross. That seemingly greatest tragedy was the most meaningful and purposeful and the most joy producing.

Those who come to a deep understanding of the sovereignty of God and the absolute purposefulness of God, will be the people who have the most joy in the midst of the trials.

To know joy in suffering we must have a good theology of suffering, a bedrock solid understanding to God's sovereign purposes in it.

God rules over all things, over persecution and suffering, and God causes what is evil to work out for joy. The joy of the Lord is our strength. Remember your joy in the midst of whatever you are in the midst of.

Prayer: Holy Father, that is all the great spiritual conflicts in the world between you and Satan, the outcome has never once been in doubt. Thank you for the victory of our mighty Savior and victorious conqueror. Thank you that whatever you bring into our lives you mean it for good, for our salvation, to strengthen our faith, to loosen our grip on the temporal things of this world and to fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross on our behalf.