

Faithfulness in Persecution

Despite opposition and threats, the spiritually blessed and empowered new church in Jerusalem continued to grow with God's abundant blessings upon them, as evidenced by signs and wonders (5:12-16). We'll note the hostility of Satan against the church, the first actual persecution of the church. And what is important for us to understand is how God used this experience of persecution to advance the gospel and further strengthen his witnesses.

Follow as I read **Acts 5: 27-32**

²⁷ When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

We're all painfully aware of terrorism around the world and even in our own country, and as happened this past Easter Sunday in Pakistan. Some of this violence targets Christians specifically. Organizations, such as Open Doors and the Voice of the Martyrs, monitor persecution of Christians and implore our prayers and support as they seek to encourage our persecuted sisters and brothers. Although we're aware of the possible threat from terrorism, we Christians in the US have been basically spared overt persecution. So it's difficult for us to closely relate to the experiences of the first church and their apostles. But there are truths we need to heed, both for ourselves and for fellow followers of Christ.

The apostles made the choice to accept persecution when they committed themselves to follow, serve and confess Jesus as Lord and Master. The members of the religious high court were "filled with jealousy" (17) upon seeing how this new movement of followers of Jesus of Nazareth was attracting such attention by preaching, witnessing and performing miracles of healing. The Christian movement was growing at an alarming rate (12-16). The leaders of traditional Jewish religion were seeing their influence slip away from the people who were joining up with this new "Jesus movement." They were now seeking to strike a blow against this threatening movement, to stop it in its tracks.

In addition to being dupes of Satan and members of his kingdom of darkness, those today who persecute the church see the Christian gospel and faith as a threat to their way of life and their political control. Nations still today refuse religious freedom. The good news of Jesus teaches people a new way of life,

brings them under a new allegiance and gives them a new set of values and perspective on life. The apostles who were persecuted made this choice, to obey God rather than human authority (29). Already Peter and John had told this high court, which had issued them a warning to stop their witnessing about Jesus, that they couldn't help speaking about what they had seen and heard (4:20). The high court arrested them and the other apostles, and an angel appeared to them, miraculously opened the doors of the jail, and told them to get right back to preaching (5:17-20).

Now here again we see the choice before the apostles, which was to obey the angel and face further trouble or simply disappear and retreat from this threat and live a secretly "Christian life." As we see, they chose to obey God, and were thus arrested again by the angry officials. These apostles had been with Jesus during his earthly ministry and remembered that he had told them that just as he suffered persecution so they would also. Because the world hated him the world would hate them also. "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (John 15:18-20). The Apostle Paul would later relate about his own persecutions and sufferings, and said, "All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Only those who take Christian discipleship seriously will ever have to be worried about persecution. Those who are professing Christians only because it's socially popular, personally advantageous or good for business with the world will not suffer persecution. When and if persecution of Christians takes place in the Western World there will be a purifying of the church because, just as we see in Acts 5:13, nominal Christians will be afraid to join a faithfully confessing church because it may be a persecuted church. Those who follow the way of the cross, living a godly life of courageous testimony for Jesus Christ, can expect persecution from a world that is hostile to the message of the cross and the risen Savior.

As one commentator remarked, Luke seems to enjoy reporting this humorous incident of the high court arresting the apostles, then reconvening session the next morning to decide what to do to these miscreants, only to discover they mysteriously had escaped through locked prison bars and guards, and resumed their prohibited preaching in the temple courts. The high court and law enforcement look like a bunch of Keystone Cops, while the apostles look like the real authorities in control of the situation. Angrily, the high court reminded the apostles of their violation of their gag order, to which Peter and the others replied, "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (29).

The apostles were prepared to accept the consequences of persecution. They certainly realized they might be subjected to the same fate as their Lord—execution by the cruel death of a cross. In fact, they were facing charges that were similar to the ones for which Jesus was crucified and they remembered the

warning of Jesus that “Servants are not greater than their master” and that they would experience similar hatred from the world (John 15:20).

Peter no doubt remembered how that, when Jesus was being tried, he had denied his Lord, despite having been warned (Luke 22:31-34; 54-62). Now restored by the risen Lord and filled with his Spirit, Peter’s determined to never again avoid persecution by denying his Lord (John 21:15-19).

The fact remains for us today that our only option to persecution acceptance is persecution avoidance, which is to deny our Lord Jesus. Jesus, in a passage about warnings and encouragements, makes it clear that if we fear the hostile world more than we fear God, we’ll in fact deny him, and whoever denies him before others, Jesus says, will be “denied before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8f).

When we fail to identify ourselves as followers of Jesus, and chose instead to conceal our identity by compromising with the world and living by its standards, we deny Jesus. It’s the way to avoid persecution because the life of blending in with the world and remaining silent instead of speaking up for Jesus is the life that pleases Satan and his fallen world empire. And the sad truth is that there are millions of professing Christians whose lives are no different from the world around them, who would remain silent in the face of ungodliness and opposition to the kingdom of God.

The reason we accept persecution is not because we’re masochists or have some sort of “martyr complex.” Those willing to face persecution have an overriding zeal to share the life-changing message of Jesus. Thus, we join Jesus in his kingdom work of sharing the good news by life and by our words, which are empowered by his Spirit. As Jesus says, “the Holy Spirit will teach (us)” what to say at the moment we are called to witness for him (Luke 12:11f). Persecution is optional and is a choice we gladly make if we have this zeal for Jesus and for joining him in his work of rescuing sinners, including our enemies.

The high court of the Sanhedrin responded to the apostles’ release with even greater hostility and furor, wanting to put Peter and the apostles to death. The intent of Satan and his dupes is to destroy the work of the kingdom of God. At first they try to arrest the apostles, and having failed at that, they try to destroy them altogether. Make no mistake about it, Satan, though given the terminal death blow at Calvary, is still alive and kicking. He knows his days are numbered and he’s doing everything possible to try to nullify the advancement of the kingdom of God and the spread of the message of Jesus. That’s true regarding the work of the church in general and your life in particular. Satan’s attacks are relentless.

Satan and his dupes, the high court of the Jews, did their best to deter the apostolic witness, but their efforts were futile. After a cruel beating, the apostles emerged triumphantly (40-41). The disciples left the council of the Sanhedrin,

rejoicing because they had been considered worthy of suffering dishonor for the sake of the name (41). Maybe for us, who have been spared from such suffering and persecution, this is difficult for us to understand. Joy is not an emotion, but rather a discipline. It wasn't the fact that their backs and chests had been whipped raw that they rejoiced. They weren't masochists, but they knew the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that they would be filled with joy (Matthew 5:10-12).

This joy in suffering is possible by the presence of Jesus himself through the Holy Spirit. As Peter himself later wrote, ¹² *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* ¹³ *But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.* ¹⁴ *If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.* (1Peter 4:12-14).

Thus, these apostles could rejoice because in their suffering they experienced the presence of Jesus in a deeper way and were thus filled with a depth of joy that none other can know. The outcome of persecution was exactly the opposite of the intent of the persecutors. They had arrested the apostles in an attempt to stop the spread of this Jesus movement. But the result was an ever more persistent and determined group of apostles, who never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news of Jesus (42).

John Stott noted that "The devil has never given up the attempt to destroy the church by force. Under Nero (AD 54-68) Christians were imprisoned and executed, including probably Paul and Peter. Domitian (AD 81-96) oppressed Christians who refused to pay him the divine honors he demanded; under him John was exiled to Patmos. Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180), believing that Christianity was dangerous and immoral, turned a blind eye to severe local outbreaks of mob violence. Then in the third century what had so far been sporadic became systematic. Under Decius (AD 249-251) thousands died, including Fabian, Bishop of Rome, for refusing to sacrifice to the imperial name. The last persecuting emperor before the conversion of Constantine was Diocletian (AD 284-305). He issued four edicts which were intended to stamp out Christianity altogether. He ordered churches to be burned, Scriptures to be confiscated, clergy to be tortured and Christian civil servants to be deprived of their citizenship and, if stubbornly unrepentant, executed." Stott, speaking of current persecution, continues: "We know that in many parts of the world, the church is severely persecuted. "But," Stott continues, "we do not fear for its (the church's) survival. Tertullian, addressing the rulers of the Roman Empire, cried out: 'Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust...The more you mow us down, the more we grow; the seed is the blood of Christians.' Or, as Bishop Festo Kivengere said in February 1979, on the second anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda: 'Without bleeding the church fails to bless.'" Stott concludes, "Persecution will refine the church, but not destroy it. If it leads to prayer and praise, to an acknowledgment of the

sovereignty of God and of solidarity with Christ in his sufferings, then—however painful—it may even be welcome.”

Just as Jesus' cross appeared to be a defeat and was transformed to the greatest triumph the world has ever known, so the church that suffers for Jesus and with Jesus will be triumphant in him. We're called to stand by our fellow believers who suffer persecution through our praying and even our giving to our One Great Hour of Sharing Offering. We're also called to be faithful witnesses when we face the persecution of misunderstanding, ridicule and possible mistreatment from the kingdom of darkness.

Years ago when we were living in Belgium, Nancy and I were watching CNN international news on television and noticed a by-line that said a man in northern Australia had rescued his wife from a crocodile. Nancy asked me if I would do that for her. “I think so, I said. I hope I would!” But I don't think she was convinced! (I looked this incident up on the Internet and noted this man indeed jumped on the back of the 8 foot crocodile that had his wife in its grip, and the croc then swam away and the man rescued his wife, both of them with no life-threatening injuries). None of us can say what we would do in the face of persecution or danger of any kind. But we need to pray for and give support to the persecuted church, and seek the grace and fullness of God's Spirit that would enable us to be faithful witnesses, even unto suffering and death.