

Introduction: Persecution Examples

We have seen a clear pattern emerging in the last few chapters of the Book of Acts. The Church is advancing its mission of winning the world to Christ but as the law of physics tells us, “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” Every time the church pressed forward, the “gates of hell” (Matthew 16:18) were there trying to stop it with physical persecution. This persecution was both intensifying and escalating. It first started when the apostles were arrested and then warned not to teach or preach in Jesus’ name. The second time, the apostles were warned and then flogged. The third time, as we saw last week, Stephen was arrested and then stoned.

Romans 8:28

The Mt Everest promise of the Bible is Romans 8:28:

**We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,
who have been called according to his purpose.**

As people who “love God and are called according to his purposes” we know that whatever we encounter in this world, God is working his eternal good in it. As *terra firma* dwellers that regularly experience the good, bad, and indifferent, and sometimes all three in the same moment, we might ask “What possible good could come from persecution? Or more specifically, “What good came out of the persecution and stoning of Stephen? Even if we agree with Billy Joel, “Only the good die young” and Stephen was young, what does that mean for old fogies like us? We need to trust God’s goodness in persecution so that when the winds of change blow ill against the Church in America, we can overcome it. Let’s begin in Acts 8 to find out:

1 And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Much like we saw with the Myakka dam a few weeks ago during Hurricane Ian, once Stephen was killed, the dam of persecution burst open wide against Christ followers. In other words, it was open season on them. One person, a high ranking official in Jewish government, gave tacit approval to Stephen’s stoning. His name was “Saul of Tarsus.” A fierce protagonist of the Jewish religion, he antagonized this “Jesus Cult” for blaspheming God and leading his countrymen astray. With the full authority of the Sanhedrin, he went door-to-door to arrest, prosecute, and execute Christians. We will explore the “Saga of Sinister Saul” in a couple of weeks, but I see three “S-Goods” that emerged from his venomous attacks against the Church.

Three “S” Goods: Strengthens Our Faith

Like nothing else, persecution, should we allow it, strengthens our faith. A few weeks ago, we sat under an almost CAT 5 hurricane for twelve hours. Although it was wearing us out, we survived it. Think we are going to get worked up over the next little tropical storm? No way Hosea! Much the same way, the mini persecutions we go through in ordinary life will seem small once we endure persecution for the sake of Christ. Paul asked a rhetorical question in Romans 8:31, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” “No one of any consequence” is, and always will be my answer providing

we allow persecution to toughen us up. Like nothing else, persecution turns our spiritual mush into spiritual muscle. If it doesn't kill us, it will make us stronger and more determined.

Three "S" Goods: Sobers

Persecution not only strengthens our faith but also sobers us to the situation we are in. Namely, that the world is not our home, that we are passing through, that there is a raging war between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Darkness, and that peoples' eternal destinies are at stake. Persecution also separates those who are serious about their faith from those who are not. When everything is onward and upward and peaches and cream, it's more difficult to take these realities seriously so persecution is one way God uses to make us spiritually sober.

Three "S" Goods: Scatters

The third good of persecution is that it scatters. Listen to the report of Acts 8:4:

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

Saul's efforts to annihilate the Church after the stoning of Stephen propelled it to "get out of town before sundown." But this escape from Jerusalem was not fear driven but mission driven. This was a real turning point in the history of the church. Without persecution, the Church probably would have stayed in Jerusalem, enjoying the worship and fellowship (HUB night) all the while forgetting that Christianity has a fully constituted missionary DNA. Often, we don't do the Great Commission to "Go out into all the world" until we need to. We don't continue Jesus' ministry of "Seeking and Saving the Lost" until we are compelled. We don't become a "Church without Walls" until there are no more walls left. As the Church scatters, it encounters more opportunities to meet new people that just might ask:

Why are you scattering?" Because we love Jesus and the world hates us for that." Why do you love Jesus? Because he died for our sins and now we have an amazing future!" Really, how do I get to know this Jesus?

If an eaglet is reluctant to leave its nest at an appropriate time, his parents will start making the nest smaller by dismantling it piece by piece. At some point the eaglet understands, "It's getting a wee bit uncomfortable here, I'm moving out" (nature's parenting rule). Sometimes God uses persecution to make us uncomfortable so that we get on with our mission of inviting people to him.

The Scattered Philip

One of the first people to scatter from Jerusalem was Philip. Like Stephen, he was one of the original seven that was elected to oversee the administrative affairs of the church (6:5). And he, like Stephen, was an incredible evangelist. Listen to 8:5-8:

5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city.

Philip heading south to a “city in Samaria” fulfils the very last promise Jesus gave while on earth, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria...” (Acts 1:8). It took Saul’s brutal persecution for the early church to cut its spiritual umbilical cord with Jerusalem and now, the Gospel is unleashed into places like Samaria and beyond. I believe that if it weren’t for that persecution we would not be sitting here right now. Notice, however, what happens when Philip proclaims Christ and does miracles, and performs exorcisms, “There was great joy in that city” (v8). Who wants to be a church that brings great joy to our city? If so, we got to scatter and spread the Good News!

Conclusion:

Praise God we have yet to suffer the physical persecutions of the early church nor the church today in many parts of the world. No, we are not being fed to the lions yet, however, we still experience “dangers, toils, and snares” and trials, tribulations, and troubles every day. Whatever those are for you remember God is working his eternal good in it and while he is doing so, allow it to strengthen your faith, sober you up, and scatter you so that you can minister to the folks he wants to reach.