

11-22-20 God Uses People and Problems to for His Purpose

Acts 5:33-42

Have you ever heard the saying, there is a method to this (my) madness? I didn't know it came from the Shakespeare play Hamlet, ""Though this be madness, yet there is method in it."

If I were to be honest, I often look at God and his plan and must tell myself, there is a method to all this madness.

"A specific, rational purpose in what one is doing or planning, even though it may appear crazy or absurd to another person."

If you are a born-again follower of Jesus, what you do for the Kingdom of God is unstoppable. To some or many it may seem like madness, makes no sense.

Its immeasurable, what the simplest thing done in Jesus name does in eternity.

Even when things seem or are at their darkest, Christians are on the winning and unstoppable team. Even when it appears that we are losing, we aren't, God wins!

Matthew 16:18, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." ESV

Jesus will do the building and He calls the church "my church." This is not your church or my church; it is the church of Jesus Christ and He alone is the One building it.

Today we're celebrating the church is still winning as we discover how God uses people and problems to accomplish His purposes.

- Christianity is growing faster than the population rate and followers of Jesus outnumber every other faith.
- The center of Christianity has moved to the global south with exploding growth rates in Asia and Africa. The Christian community in Latin America and Africa accounts for one billion people!
- One out of four Christians in the world is an African, and Pew Research estimates this will grow to 40% by 2030. By 2060, six of the countries with the top ten largest Christian populations will be in Africa. The size of the Christian population in Nigeria alone – already the largest on the continent – is projected to double in 40 years.
- 19 of the top 20 countries where the church is growing the fastest are in Asia and Africa.
- Operation World reports that due to prayer, increased Bible distribution, disillusionment with Islam, use of media, along with persecution, the church in Iran is the "fastest growing in the world."
- There are an estimated 100 million followers of Christ in China. Some church growth experts estimate there are more Christians in China than in the United States.

God uses people and problems to accomplish His purposes. Look at how God builds the church.

Jesus gave them, and us, a command in **Acts 1:8**, **“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”**

In the early chapters of Acts, the gospel message penetrated and saturated the city of Jerusalem. As we heard last week from **Acts 5:28**, the enemies say they had **“filled Jerusalem”** with the teaching about Jesus.

Acts 2:41 reports **“three thousand souls”** were saved on Pentecost.

Acts 2:47 says **“the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”**

Acts 4:4 states, **“many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.”**

Acts 5:14 adds, **“And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”**

Acts 8:1-4 shows how persecution ended up propelling the Christians to take the gospel outside of Jerusalem. (Read it)

The explosive growth of the church led to various reactions from the religious authorities. We’ll see three reactions and two responses in **Acts 5:33-42** as God uses people and problems to accomplish His purposes.

Reaction

I. Furiously Hateful (v.33)

- **Read verse 33**
- These leaders were ripped apart as if a sword had sliced through their hearts. Instead of being convicted they were committed to “kill” them, which means, “to slay or execute.”

II. Weirdly Helpful (verses 34-39)

- The second reaction is surprisingly helpful. Look at **verse 34**.
- Last weekend we learned most of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, was made up of Sadducees. There were also a few Pharisees on the council. Among the minority party was a man named Gamaliel. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, wrote that the Sadducees would often give in to the demands of the Pharisees because of their popularity with the people.
- Gamaliel later served as the president of the Sanhedrin for 32 years. He was a Scripture scholar and was “held in honor,” which means he was highly esteemed and treasured by everyone.
- **Acts 22:3** tells us he became the tutor for the Apostle Paul.
- God has always used people and problems to accomplish His purposes. For Joseph, he used Pharaoh. With Daniel, He used Nebuchadnezzar.
- He even used a donkey to get His message across. And He used Gamaliel to deliver the apostles from almost certain execution.

- Gamaliel stood up with a commanding voice and ordered the apostles to go outside for a while so they could talk candidly among themselves. In **verse 35** he gives them a warning:
- He then illustrates his warning by giving two historical examples of men who started strong only to flame out.
- Theudas. The first is found in **verse 36**.
- Judas. The second leader is described in **verse 37**.
- After making the point that these famous guys and their followers fizzled out, Gamaliel argues in **verse 38** that the apostles and their message will eventually evaporate: **(Read verse 38)**
- The phrase “keep away” is the idea of keeping their “hands off, standing down, and withdrawing.” Coupled with “let them alone,” this is an urgent command. Since both uprisings failed on their own, he’s suggesting they leave the apostles alone and see if it all implodes.
- Sometimes things that are wrong or even evil seem to be successful for years, decades or even centuries, but everything operates under and within the sweet sovereignty of God.

Psalm 33:10, “The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples.” ESV

- Throughout the centuries people have declared God to be dead and have tried to ban the Bible to no avail.
- The main point of Gamaliel’s argument is found in verse 39, **“but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it, lest you even be found to fight against God.”**
- You might even be found opposing God!” The phrase “opposing God” literally means a, “God-fighter.”

Proverbs 21:30, “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord.” ESV

- Gamaliel was used by God to continue God’s purpose. But he was wrong to compare Jesus to Theudas and Judas. Jesus is the Only Son of God, God manifested in the flesh, not some limited human.
- He was also wrong when he said, **“if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing (fail);”** Umm, there have been and still are cults and beliefs contrary to God’s Son, Jesus.
- I cringe every time I hear someone say, “well if it’s from God, it will last. Or it must be from God, there is blessing all around.”
- Can I remind you that God allowed Satan into heaven, allows him still, allowed him to test the faith of Job, and that daily he is at the throne of God accusing the believers?
- God uses people and problems to accomplish His purposes. God is over all and nothing happens without his permission or his sending.

Look at the religious leaders third response

III. Horribly Harmful (v.40)

- **Read verse 40**

- They agreed with Gamaliel's thoughts.
- To "beat" means, "to scourge, flay and strip the skin off." This is the first incidence in Acts of severe physical persecution. Each apostle was scourged 39 times with a whip with stones in it, causing the skin on their backs to be shredded.

Deuteronomy 25:3: "Forty stripes may be given him, but not more, lest, if one should go on to beat him with more stripes than these, your brother be degraded in your sight." ESV

- The reason they stopped at 39 is because they didn't want to miscount their mistreatment.
- The Mishna describes scourging in detail. The accused would have his hands strapped to two posts and his shirt would be stripped off. The man with the whip stood on an elevated stone and was required to swing with all his might. One-third of the stripes were delivered on the accused's chest and the other two-thirds landed on his back. One by one the apostles were lined up, having to watch and listen to their partners scream in excruciating pain. Each of them would have been beaten within inches of death. (is the first major written collection of the Jewish oral traditions known as the Oral Torah.)
- Jesus predicted this would happen in **Matthew 10:17: "Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues."**
- According to **2 Corinthians 11:24**, the Apostle Paul experienced this more than once: **"Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one."**

Responses

I. **Departed Joyful (v.41)**

- **Read verse 41**
- This is counter-intuitive, isn't it? After getting beaten, they burst into joy! The tense of "rejoicing" indicates they were "continually rejoicing." The apostles were simply being obedient to what Jesus commanded in

Luke 6:23: "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, For in like manner their fathers did to the prophets."

- How did they do this? For them, to suffer like their Savior meant they were somehow worthy to follow His name. Most of us don't think this way, do we?
- The only way to do that is to consider the extent of what Jesus went through for us. When we do, it puts our problems into perspective.

II. **Daily Determined and Dedicated (v.42)**

- **Read verse 42**
- They went about with the gospel, defying what they were told. "should not speak in the name of Jesus..."

- The disciples spent every day, all day, in the temple, in every house, teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. The promised Messiah, God's planned salvation for all mankind.

Acts 20:20, "how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house,"

Conclusion

How are you doing at going with the gospel?

Would you consider committing to have at least one gospel conversation every week, month, quarter, year?

Jonathan Edwards, one of America's greatest theologians from the 1700s, once wrote: "Resolved: Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can. Resolved: to live with all my might while I do live."

While it's true the gospel has raced around the world, the need is still staggering. The need is great, right here in the great U.S.A.

God uses people and problems to accomplish His purposes. Will you let Him use you?

I can think of no better way to end our service than to focus on the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. As we consider what He went through, it will help us to depart with joy and to be determined and dedicated with the gospel.

If you're going through a hard time, think of the hard nails that were pounded into Him. If you're suffering, think of His suffering. If you're being persecuted, ponder how He was mocked, slapped, spit upon, scourged and crucified. He did all that for us, instead of us, in our place so we can experience the grace of salvation and suffering.

Will you let Him use you?