

1-10-21 Great Persecution, Great Joy

Acts 8:1-8

Matthew 5:4, “Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted.”

We were encouraged to lament our losses, to be sorrowful about our sins, to cry over the condition of Christians and non-Christians, and to weep for our world.

In times like these we are called to action as witnesses. Theologian John Stott: “We should not ask, ‘What is wrong with the world?’ for that diagnosis has already been given. Rather, we should ask, ‘What has happened to the salt and light?’

Read Matthew 5:13-16, “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. 14 “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. 16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Lifeway Research just released a study that found Christians are being shaped more by social media than Scripture. While 66% of evangelicals used Facebook at least once a day, only 32% say they read the Bible every day. To say it another way, Christians are twice as likely to open Facebook than to put their face in God’s Book. The authors of the study conclude, “Is it any wonder then, that churches are unhealthy and divided, with Christians gorging on social media fast food and skipping feasts of the Bible?

How about a provocative statement? What if God is using this calamity, chaos, riots, and pandemic to get us to scatter so we sow the seed of the gospel like never before? What if we were to take advantage of this time for proclaiming of the gospel? What if, rather than arguing, getting angry, depressed over every on social media/media, what if we scattered and sowed the seed of the gospel?

Here’s a thought: instead of being worried about what’s happening in the world around us, what if we worked harder to take the Word to the world around us?

Read Acts 8:1-8

I see three truths in these verses:

I. Persecution is a promise

- Stephen’s death was the starting point of great persecution in Jerusalem. The word “great” is the word megas, which means “huge, widespread, intense, violent, large and loud.” One pastor refers to the killing of Stephen “like the pulling of the pin on the hand grenade of the devil’s wrath against the church.”
- Persecution is promised to every believer.

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. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.”

2 Timothy 3:12, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”

- When persecution broke out, “they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” The word used in **Acts 8:1** and **Acts 8:4** means, “to be scattered in order to be planted.”
- In one day, these persecuted believers lost their key leader, their safety and security, their ability to gather as a large group for worship, their sense of togetherness, their ministry momentum, and their contact with the apostles. In addition, they had to leave family, homes, jobs, and possessions, much like many persecuted believers are experiencing around the world today.
- Would you notice where they went? They were sent to “Judea and Samaria.” Judea is the area surrounding Jerusalem and Samaria was the region where the hated Samaritans lived.
- To the Jews, Samaritans, half breeds were more revolting than a gentile. **John 4:9** says, “**Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.**”
- Jesus broke down these barriers when He ministered to a Samaritan woman in **John 4:4**: “**And He had to pass through Samaria.**”
- Question to ponder: is there anyone you’re avoiding right now? Any race or culture or subgroup that fills you with rage? Ask God to change your heart.
- **Verse 3** reveals the level of persecution, “Saul, he made havoc (ravage) of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.”
- Saul was a demented ravaging beast, hunting down believers. **Read Acts 9:1**
- God takes the difficulties, the opposition, the hardships, and persecution and turns them for his glory and our good.

II. **Problems can be a platform for proclaiming the gospel**

- **Read verse 4**
- Wherever they went, they preached the Word. To “preach” is the word “evangel,” also translated as “evangelizing the good news” or “publishing good tidings.” One pastor refers to it as “gossiping the gospel.”
- When Jesus taught His disciples about the promise of persecution, He also reminded them that their persecution will be a platform for proclaiming the truth, the gospel.
- Throughout the Book of Acts, when persecution came, the practice of believers was to proclaim the gospel. (**Acts 11:19-21; 12:24; 19:20**)
- Notice, they were committed to preaching and speaking the Word. This is a good reminder for us. Amid all that is going on in the world today, our primary message should not be our convictions about COVID, or our political persuasions, but a proclamation of the Word of God. Our strong views may put up barriers to the gospel message. Instead, we must do all we can to build bridges to people. Be the bridge, not the barrier for the gospel.

One pastor writes:

"I know you think that the entire world needs to hear your opinion on politics, COVID, masks, school and business openings, conspiracy theories and everything controversial. But the truth of the matter is, they don't. In fact, I would argue that in most cases, it does more damage than good. If you're going to burn a bridge with someone, do you really want that to be the bridge you set on fire?"

- John Knox once said, "You cannot antagonize and influence at the same time."

Dane Ortlund in his book "Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers" says: "The cumulative testimony of the four Gospels is that when Jesus Christ sees the fallenness of the world all about Him, His deepest impulse, His most natural instinct, is to move toward that sin and suffering, not away from it."

- During this time of being scattered, let's move toward sin and suffering and sow the seed of the gospel. Evangelism is the very lifeblood of the church.
- Verse 5 tells us about another of God's men stepping up. Notice in this time God isn't using His Apostles, He is using any and everyone that is willing. The New Testament pattern – the gospel was spread by ordinary Christians who received power from the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses
- Do you see your problems as a platform for proclaiming the gospel? That's how the Apostle Paul approached his imprisonment. **Philippians 1:12** says he found God's purpose in his problems: "**I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.**"

III. Proclaiming the gospel unleashes power!

- **Read verse 6**
- It's fascinating to me these crowds came together in "one accord," which means they were unanimous in their interest to hear more. When good news is shared in love, people want to learn more. When they see signs of life-change, they want to see if their lives can change as well.
- The power was put on display in **verse 7**. The gospel breaks bondage and barriers.
- When proclaiming the gospel unleashes God's power, we can't help but to rejoice. That's what happened in Samaria according to **verse 8**.
- Our cities in America need joy today, don't they? That will only come as we take Jesus to them.

1 Peter 1:8, "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"

- Our passage begins with great persecution and ends with great joy, all because regular believers saw their problems as a great platform for the proclamation of the glory of the gospel.

Conclusion

If we are not careful, we can come to a place where we worship and love our blessings more than the giver of these blessing. I call it American Christian entitlement. I think it has ahold of many of our lives and confused us. We desire the house, two car garage, 3.5 kids, white picket fence, work a job, make

good money, worship God at an arm's length, give a portion of our income to charity, maybe volunteer here and there, rarely ever sacrifice anything.

Then God's will happens and it doesn't fit according to our plans. If His will upsets our apple cart a little, we claim we have grown closer to Him. But when His plan is the total opposite of what we would ever want, we shut down. We grow angry with Him; how dare He do that?! He owes it to me to do better, what I want.

Entitlement; the fact of having a right to something:

- God uses problems, pandemics, political unrest, and persecution to demonstrate His power, justice, and mercy.
- In the beginning of a tragedy, we rarely see what God intends to do in the end.
- We must respond with compassionate gospel witness toward sinners and sufferers.

Let's affirm today that God is sovereign, and Christ is head of His church. He is building His church and He will use all the craziness, political theater, riots, Covid-19, and all the unrest and the polarization for His purposes. And part of His plan is to use His people.

Let's build bridges and not barriers. Actually, let's be the bridge for the gospel to travel to hurting hearts around us.

"We should not ask, 'What is wrong with the world?' for that diagnosis has already been given. Rather, we should ask, 'What has happened to the salt and light?'"

- Look for ways to extend love and grace to everyone you talk to.

Colossians 4:5-6: "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."

I came across a phrase some time ago that I come back to often: "You will never look into the eyes of someone God does not already love." God wants to use us to reach all people, even those we might not like, or who might not look like us, or who disagree with us politically. He loves to send His people into places where we are stretched to trust Him, so we see others like He does.

- Pray for the peace and welfare of our country. After being deported to Babylon, Jeremiah gave some helpful exhortation about how to handle living in a godless society.

Jeremiah 29:7: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

Should we express our thoughts and concerns respectfully about our country? Of course, we should. But we must make sure we're praying and seeking the best for our community and country through our engagement and involvement.

- Look for creative ways to build bridges so you can share the gospel of Jesus Christ with people.

When someone is talking about something controversial, ask them to explain more about their thoughts. You may discover the person is afraid or worried or unsettled. If we listen carefully, we may hear people wondering if life is worth living. Use these conversations as a bridge to the gospel message.

2 Corinthians 5:18-20, "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling[c] the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

If you are not yet reconciled to God through the new birth, put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ right now. You could do so by praying this prayer.

Jesus, I admit I'm a sinner. I repent by turning from how I've been living and trust what You did on the Cross when You died in my place, shedding Your blood to pay the price for all that I've done. I want to be at peace with You. I believe You died on the Cross and rose again on the third day, showing Your victory over sin, Satan, death, and fear. Now I receive You into my life. I open the door to You. Save me from my sins. I want to be born again. Now give me resurrection power to live the rest of my life for You and under Your leadership. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.