

The Benefits of Persecution - Acts 7:54-8:8
Argyle – 7/30/17 – Studies in Acts

Introduction to Worship

What are your go to Bible verses? What are those verses that, when you are in a crisis, you hang onto for dear life? Isaiah 55:8 & 9 is one of the passages for me. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” God often does things differently than we would. That often surprises us. We are going to see that this morning in how he used persecution in the early church. You might want to add Isaiah 55:8 & 9 to your memorization list.

Introduction to Scripture

In last week’s Scripture passage we were introduced to Stephen, Philip and five others who were selected to manage the church’s food distribution to the widows in Jerusalem. Stephen was a powerful evangelist and that quickly got him in trouble with the Jewish authorities. In Acts 6 and 7 we read of his trial before the Sanhedrin, which was the Jewish ruling council. These were the same folks who had tried and condemned Jesus a few years earlier. In his trial before the Sanhedrin, Stephen reviewed Jewish history and showed them the link between Jesus and their Old Testament heroes. He pointed out how the Jewish people had a history of resisting the prophets God had sent in

the past and now they had killed Jesus, God's Righteous One. As you can imagine, they didn't respond well to Stephen's accusations. That is where we are going to pick up in the narrative. (Read) (Pray)

Significance of Stephen's Vision

The first thing I want to point out this morning is the significance of Stephen's vision. As he is being condemned, Stephen looked up and had a vision of heaven. He said, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." There are three significant things I want you to notice here - where is Jesus, what is he doing and what is his name?

First, where is Jesus? Only a few years earlier Jesus himself had stood on trial before this same Sanhedrin. When the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?," Jesus answered, "I am and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." The high priest accused Jesus of blasphemy for claiming to be God and they condemned him to death. And now a few years later, Stephen is claiming to see Jesus in that very place where he claimed he would be - at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. No wonder they covered their ears and started yelling to drown him out. None of us likes to be wrong, but the implications of them being wrong about Jesus were especially grievous. So rather than consider Stephen's message, they killed the messenger. They stoned him to death. So, where is Jesus? Right where he said he would be, ruling the universe at the right hand of his Heavenly Father.

And what is he doing in Stephen's vision? Jesus is "standing!" Every other place in Scripture where it talks about Jesus being at the right hand of God the Father, he is sitting. But here he is standing. As his servant, Stephen, is being killed for his faith, Jesus is standing. Jesus knows what is going on in the lives of his people. He cares that much about us. What is Jesus doing? He is standing to welcome his servant, Stephen, into heaven.

And third, what is Jesus' name? We might have expected Stephen to say, "Look, I see heaven open and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." Instead he refers to Jesus by his title, "the Son of Man." Stephen is the only person to call Jesus "the Son of Man" other than Jesus' himself. It was Jesus' favorite title for himself, yet none of the apostles or other early church leaders used it - only Stephen in this vision. Something very important is going on here and we don't want to miss it.

To understand the significance of this, we need to go back to the origin of this title in the Book of Daniel. In chapter 7 Daniel records a vision he has of God. He wrote, "As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. ¹⁰ A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened." Daniel was being a glimpse of God in heaven.

He went on, “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

Stephen referred to Jesus as the Son of Man because he understood Jesus to fulfill this prophecy from Daniel.

So, the vision that Stephen had of Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father was a confirmation of Daniel’s prophecy from 600 years earlier. Stephen was declaring that this Jesus who had been crucified had received authority, glory and power from God the Father. All peoples would worship him and his kingdom would never end. So, as he was about to die for his faith in Jesus, he was reminded that Jesus was, in fact, the Son of Man. He would die knowing that his Savior was in heaven at the right hand of the Father, ruling all of creation. And on this day, as his servant was suffering, Jesus was standing.

What Would Jesus Do?

What would Jesus do in such a situation? “What would Jesus do” became a popular phrase in the 1990’s and was often shortened to just (picture) WWJD. Although the phrase became trivialized and twisted, it is still a helpful guideline as we see with Stephen. In reading about Stephen’s unjust execution it is hard not to see Jesus in his actions. Just like Jesus asked the Father to receive his spirit as he was dying on the cross,

Stephen asked Jesus to receive his spirit as he was being stoned to death. Just like Jesus asked the Father to forgive his killers, Stephen asked Jesus to forgive his killers. Jesus was such a part of Stephen's life that he just leaked out in Stephen's words and actions.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (I Corinthians 3:18) The Christian life is a process of the Holy Spirit working in our lives to make us more and more like Jesus. In our everyday thoughts and actions, Jesus ought to just leak out, even to the point that like Stephen we forgive those who have wronged us and trust God with our future.

What would Jesus do if he were in your circumstances today? You might want to follow Stephen's model and follow the example of Jesus.

God's Ways are Not Our Ways

The last thing we want to look at this morning is the fact that God's ways are not our ways.

Right before he ascended to heaven Jesus said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) So far in these early chapters of the Book of Acts the church hasn't gotten out of Jerusalem. But that is about to change in an unexpected way. Following Stephen's death, a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem and we read in Acts 8:1 that "all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria." Judea and Samaria - interesting. In verse 4 we are told

“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” And then we are given an example of Philip doing just that. So, after the coming of the Holy Spirit the believers were witnesses in Jerusalem, but that was pretty much it. But now, the gospel witness was being extended to that next concentric circle - Judea and Samaria. And how was God getting his people to go to those places? Persecution! It would seem like persecution would be bad for the church; might even kill the church. But, God’s ways are not our ways. The church grew through this early persecution because the persecution got Christians on the move. In 197 AD, early church leader, Tertullian, wrote: "The blood [of martyrs] is the seed of Christians". He was referring to the fact that the more Christians who died for their faith, the more the church grew. Persecution has often led to the growth of the church. When the communists came to power in China in the middle of the 20th century, they expelled all of the Christian missionaries. Christianity was banned and Christians were persecuted. Was this a good thing or a bad thing? From a human perspective this was a bad thing and the expectation was that the church in China would die. For years there was little information coming out of China about the state of the church there. But as China has opened up in recent years we have discovered that the Chinese church of 700,000 in 1950 has grown to between 31 and 67 million depending on which study you read. God’s ways are not our ways.

In my life God used a scarcity of teaching jobs to train me to be a truck driver which I have used in my service as a firefighter; he used a failed ministry in Young Life to get me to go to seminary; he used a computer error in Presbyterian headquarters to get

my dossier to Argyle; and a broken leg playing basketball to reveal a bone thinning problem. And that is not to mention the girlfriends that broke up with me that led to me marrying Kim. God's ways are not our ways.

And, if you were God and you were going to pick someone to be your agent in taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, would you pick your greatest enemy. In this narrative we are introduced to a man named Saul. First, there are two brief and strange comments. Stephen's killers laid their coats at "the feet of a young man named Saul" and "Saul was there giving approval to [Stephen's death]. Then a few verse later we are told that Saul was trying to destroy the church. All of this is a prelude to chapter 9 where Jesus confronts Saul in a vision and Saul became a follower of Jesus, eventually changing his name to Paul. He went all over the Roman world telling people about Jesus. He wrote half of the books of the New Testament. God's ways are not our ways.

Conclusion

Throughout this series in Acts, Bryan and I have been sharing some of the techniques and tools we use in studying the Bible. I would like to conclude this morning by sharing one last technique. It's actually a question. So what? The goal of studying the Bible is not to just accumulate information. The goal of studying the Bible is a transformed life. Studying the Bible should lead to transformation in our lives. And so, we need to figure out how to apply what we have learned. So what that Jesus is in heaven at the right hand of God the Father? So what that Jesus stood as Stephen was being killed? So what that Jesus fulfilled a prophecy of Daniel from 600 years earlier?

So what that Stephen did what Jesus had done as he was being unjustly killed? So what that God ways are different than our ways. Bryan and I will often suggest some possible answers to the “So what?” question for you to consider, but ultimately we each are responsible to answer the “So what?” question for our individual lives. We are the ones who best know our situation. We are the ones who the Holy Spirit has been speaking to this morning. Hopefully, we have been listening. So, today sometime reread this morning’s Scripture passage and reflect on what you have heard in this sermon and ask “So what?”