

POWER of PERSECUTION

Text: Acts 8:1-8

Prayer

Introduction:

It has been calculated that more Christians have been persecuted for their faith in the 20th century than all the previous centuries combined.

Why?

One reason is there are more Christians in non-Western countries than ever before.

In 1960, 70% of all evangelicals lived in North America.

Today, 70% live in non-Western nations.

Just as the early church **was new and threatening to society** so are these growing churches.

It is estimated that since 1985 more than 2 million people in southern Sudan have perished - many of them Christians - as a result of genocide being carried out by the Islamic government. One Christian who was severely burned in a government attack on a Sudanese church, described what happened:

"They caught the pastor and slaughtered him. Many people were burned in the church. Then they tied me and left me in the sun. After they burned the church with the people inside, they threw me in the embers of the church and left.

There are thousands of stories like this.

What you need to know is that God has a strategic plan in allowing the persecution of his church

Luke 21:12-13

"But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. [13] This will result in your being witnesses to them.

God uses the persecution to spread the truth of the gospel

This may not seem like an encouraging message

I want to encourage you this morning from Acts 8:1-8

God rules!

And when persecution comes HE uses it to spread
Good News and
spiritual power to a lost and dying world.

We may be tempted to look at situations like Sudan and the persecution that is going on there as a defeat of the church

Let me encourage you

If you look at things God's way,

What you will see is that

in every setback there is a positioning for a greater advance

and a greater display of God's power and love.

This is the main point of Acts 8:1-8

Let me break it down into four parts:

And share Four facts concerning the power of persecution

1. GOD MAKES PERSECUTION SERVE THE GREAT COMMISSION.

Persecution is not a random affair

It does not serve the Devil

Nor does it serve human ends

It serves God's purposes

And God's purposes are to reach the Lost

Jesus had said in Acts 1:8
But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Up until this point in the book of Acts all the ministry that had taken place had taken place in Jerusalem.

No one had moved an inch toward Judea or Samaria.

You know what Inertia is? (in this case) it is the tendency of something that is standing still to stay standing still

The church at Jerusalem had an inertia problem

– they were stuck

They had all kinds of spiritual power but they were isolated in Jerusalem

Things were going good for them.

They had peace

We would think that a time of peace would produce continued growth in the church

Because we have freedom and opportunity to go and do

You would think people would go and grow

But instead what it truly produces is a preoccupation with security.

We have to keep what we have together.

Or worse yet a self centeredness that causes people to squander what God has given --on themselves.

On that same day Steven spoke the church at Jerusalem got over their inirtia problem.

Acts 8:1 says

A great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

One day they were cozy and satisfied in Jerusalem and the Next day Persecution came along and they were refugees for Jesus sake.

Acts 11:19

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

In other words, the persecution not only sent the church to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1) but also beyond to the Gentiles

As you can see God makes persecution serve the Great Commission

2. GOD'S SERVANTS ARE HONORED AND NOT BLAMED.

The persecution in Jerusalem began because of one person

One guy named Stephen got the whole group in trouble.

God is looking for some Stephens!

I can imagine some well-meaning believers in Jerusalem saying:

"Stephen's Sermon was COMPLETELY uncalled for.

There are other ways to defend the truth

How could he have called the Sanhedrin 'stiff-necked people who always resist the Holy Spirit' (Acts 7:51).

You know...

It's always hotheads like this that get the church into trouble.

Now the whole city is against us.

Look at the waste of life and property and time.

Look at the families that are being broken up.

Look at the homes being lost

Look at the children being taken away from all their friends.

Now we have to live like refugees and exiles in Judea and Samaria.

Why didn't Stephen think before he spoke?"

OF COURSE GOD'S VERSION OF THE STORY IS A LITTLE DIFFERENT

Stephen is a man full of grace and power

Luke says he was filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:55).

And here in Acts 8:2 Luke says that

Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.

Stephen is honored not blamed for the persecution

--at least by godly men.

Worldly people might be more worried about goods and kindred and status.

But the godly people,

Who think the way Jesus thinks about life,

they "let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill,
God's truth abideth still."

So the second fact here is this:

When persecution comes

Courageous, faithful, God-honoring, obedient, godly people don't
blame the servant of the Lord.

They give honor.

A THIRD FACT.....

3. WHEN PERSECUTION STRIKES SOMETIMES OUR WORST ENEMIES BECOME OUR BEST FRIENDS.

Acts 8:3

But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

The Saul mentioned here is the one who would be dramatically converted and become the best friend Christianity ever had.

We need to live in this hope

- Fearsome enemies can become precious friends.
- Adversaries can become advocates.
- Critics can become comrades.

For most of us it's pretty easy to believe that an intimate disciple can become a Judas.

That's the way the world is.

But we need to remember that a deadly persecutor can also become a great ally and partner in the Cause of Christ.

That's the way God is.

That's the kind of power God has.

Look on your adversaries with the eyes of faith—

That someday,

by the power of God

they could experience a turn-around as amazing and unexpected as Saul's.

4. FINALLY, EVEN THOUGH THE WORD OF GOD BROUGHT PERSECUTION AND EXILE, IT IS STILL GOOD NEWS AND BRINGS JOY.

Acts 8:4 says

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

WHAT WERE THEY ANNOUNCING?

They were announcing the same word that brought persecution in Jerusalem....

How was it received?

Acts 8:8 says

So there was great joy in that city.

How could it be that the word that brings persecution can also brings joy—

Jesus and the apostles had confined their ministry to Israel
But it was confined no longer

Acts 8:5-7

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.

By Christ's power the demon possessed were delivered

By Christ's power People's bodies were healed

By Christ's power people were saved from their sins and their lives were made right with God

- If you have Christ,
- If you know him and trust him,
- Then no matter how severe the persecution is,
- No matter how great the suffering of life,
- You have hope and you have joy.

Have you put your faith in Jesus Christ?

If you have then all these facts about persecution become very real

- 1) Our loving God allows persecution that it might serve the unstoppable mission of the church--
- 2) If your faithfulness brings trouble to the church (like Stephen's did), you will be honored and not blamed--at least by the godly.
- 3) Your worst critics can become your precious comrades by the power of Christ's converting grace.
- 4) And the very word--the gospel--that sometimes brings persecution, always brings joy