

The Persecuted Gospel

Acts 8:1-4

There is a sense in which the entire book of Acts can be summed up in Acts 9:16 when God, through Ananias said about the apostle Paul, “*he must suffer for the sake of my name.*”

The book of Acts is a book of exiled suffering, living as “*strangers and pilgrims*” (1 Peter 2:11).

Even before God saved Paul, the rest of the church was suffering at the hands of the Jewish leadership, the Romans and even Saul of Tarsus.

If you haven't yet read Acts 8:1, it speaks to the exile that the church, like Israel before it, is going to suffer.

Acts 8:1-4 - And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. ⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

Originally, I was going to talk about the church's exile. It's an important topic and one that we need to address. How do we live as exiles of the diaspora in the 21st century? Like Israel was exiled from the Promised Land, so we too, are exiled from our Promised Land. We are not more at home than they were in Mesopotamia. We have important lessons to learn, as individuals, as families and as the church, about how we should respond to life in exile. But, perhaps another time.

First: The World's Persecution. Acts 8:1-3

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a) Why does the world persecute the church?

1 – It is historic

Matthew 5:10-12 - “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

ILL – 1 - About 1,800 years ago, the church father Tertullian was compelled to offer a defense of Christians in the face of the persecution they were suffering. Keeping his keen wit, Tertullian both defended Christians and mocked their persecutors, saying,

“If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, ‘Away with the Christians to the lion!’ What! shall you give such multitudes to a single beast? Pray, tell me how many calamities befell the world and particular cities before Tiberius reigned—before the coming, that is, of Christ?”

2 - The major purpose of Augustine’s *City of God* was to defend the Christian faith in the Roman Empire after the sacking of Rome by barbarians in the early fifth century. Rome was again blaming Christians for every calamity and justifying persecution against them on that account. So Augustine wrote,

“With what effrontery, then, with what assurance, with what impudence, with what folly, or rather insanity, do they refuse to impute these disasters to their own gods, and impute the present to our Christ!”

3 - Another thousand years after Augustine, the Reformer John Calvin defended Christians against the charges brought against them (and the persecution those charges fueled). In the preface to his *Institutes*, Calvin implored King Francis to realize that the doctrines being taught by the Reformers were biblical doctrines. Calvin pleaded with the king to recognize the injustice of the persecution and to put it to an end. Sounding much like Augustine and Tertullian before him, Calvin said,

“...how great is the malice that would ascribe to the very word of God itself the odium either of seditions, which wicked and rebellious men stir up against it, or of sects, which impostors excite, both of them in opposition to its teaching! Yet this is no new example. Elijah was asked if it was not he who was troubling Israel (1 Kings 18:17). To the Jews, Christ was seditious (Luke 23:5; John 19:7ff.). The charge of stirring up the people was laid against the apostles (Acts 24:5ff.). What else are they doing who blame us today for all the disturbances, tumults, and contentions that boil up against us? Elijah taught us what we ought to reply to such charges: it is not we who either spread errors abroad or incite tumults; but it is they who contend against God’s power (1 Kings 18:18).”

Tertullian, Augustine, and Calvin demonstrate through history what Jesus, John, and Paul experienced personally: Persecution is not an anomaly for Christians; it is rather the norm.

The apostle Paul offered his pastoral protégé Timothy this sure promise -

2 Timothy 3:12-13 - *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse*

In November 2012, German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, absorbed ridicule from European leaders for her statement that Christians today are the most widely persecuted minority in the

world. Since that time, reports have surfaced corroborating her claim that Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world.¹

2 – It is really against Christ

Acts 9:1-4 - *But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*

There are at least three aspects of Christian persecution:

(1) For righteousness' sake

Matthew 5:10 - *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...*

But not just any righteousness....for Christ's righteousness

Matthew 7 includes more allusions to the Law, the Prophets, and the kingdom and concludes with Christ's teaching the disciples how to make sure they are participating in and manifesting kingdom life even though rain, wind, and floods may come.

These meteorological metaphors picture the trouble to come. Following the narrow way prescribed by Christ and building one's life upon the rock may, in fact, bring the rains and flood of persecution on account of Christ.

(2) Christ

Matthew 5:11 - *Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

The person to whom the persecution is ultimately linked is neither the persecutor nor the one being persecuted. Rather, the root provocateur of persecution is Christ. The exact cause of persecution is not the presence of obedient disciples. The precise cause is Christ himself.

¹ See, for example, *Rising Restrictions on Religion*, published by The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, August 2011. This report documents 130 countries in which Christians are officially targeted for harassment or other forms of persecution. This was the highest number of countries for any religion.

This presents a challenge to the church. If we are going to be persecuted, let us be persecuted for Christ and his righteousness; for his kingdom – and not for our righteousness or kingdom.

(3) The authoritative Christ

The real problem, according to Jesus is –

John 3:19b-20 - *the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.*

ILL – **John 8:1-13** - *¹ but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴ they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” ⁶ This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰ Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” ¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” ¹³ So the Pharisees said to him, “You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true.”*

Persecution against the church is really a retaliatorily response to Jesus:

1 – General Revelation in Creation - **Romans 1:25** - *because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator*

2 – Specific Revelation in Scripture – **Romans 1:26** - *For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions....²⁸ - And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done....³² - Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*

Matthew's gospel presents a clear statement that the persecution of Christians happens on account of Christ. Christ was despised, rejected, condemned, and executed by sinful men when he took on flesh and made his claim to be king. In Tertullian's day, Christians were beaten, tortured, and killed by local rulers under the authority of the emperor, Septimius Severus. In

Augustine's day, following the sack of Rome, there was a growing hostility toward Christians in the Roman Empire. And the recovery of the gospel during the Protestant Reformation brought both unparalleled freedoms to believers and new experiences of persecution, as Calvin tried to explain to King Francis. Persecution is a continuous stream coursing through the history of Christianity and the reason is plain: Jesus Christ has established his kingdom, vindicating the righteousness of God. The world hated Jesus when he first made righteous claims of divine authority, and the world hates him still. His demand for righteousness is still unbearable to the unbelieving heart. Consequently, persecution persists against Christ.

- Gregory Cochran

Second: The Church's Response. Acts 8:4-5

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.

If Saul is a single picture, a summation of the church's persecutors, then Philip is a single picture, a summation of the church's response. And we have not one, but three examples of the church's response to persecution.

1 – vs 5-8 - Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. ⁶ And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much joy in that city.

Vs 9-13 - But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. ¹⁰ They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." ¹¹ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹² But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

2 – vs 26-39 - Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south^[d] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter

and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

3 – 40 - But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Philip's stories are of great success. **On the other hand –**

Acts 14:1-7 - *Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.^[a] ³ So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. ⁴ But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. ⁵ When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, ⁶ they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, ⁷ and there they continued to preach the gospel....*

Vs 8 -12a - Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰ said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking. ¹¹ And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" ¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes....

Vs 19-22 - But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, [18 miles] and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. ²⁰ But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. ²¹ When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

We will never know the results of our sharing Christ? Acceptance or rejection. But we are not sharing the gospel for results but for love of Jesus and others.

Application:

1 – If we are faithful to Jesus, persecution is normal, not abnormal

2 – Persecution should be based on our faithful presentation of Jesus

Conclusion:

ILL – Sixty-nine-year-old, Harry Hammond preached regularly in the town square in Bournemouth, England. On one occasion, 13 October 2001, Hammond held up a large double-sided sign bearing the words "*Jesus Gives Peace, Jesus is Alive, Stop Immorality, Stop Homosexuality, Stop Lesbianism, Jesus is Lord.*" Some passers-by became angry, a group of 30-40 assembled, and tried to remove the sign; some threw water and dirt at Hammond.

Even though the court record shows that Hammond was temperate in his responses to the crowd, two police officers arrived and arrested Hammond, charged him under section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 and the court found him guilty and fined him £395. No one in the crowd was arrested or charged.

His case was appealed and even Peter Tatchell, a British human rights campaigner better known for his support of gay rights, offered to testify on Hammond's behalf at the appeal, calling the case "an outrageous assault on civil liberties." But Hammond died before the appeal was decided. The High Court in London eventually upheld Hammond's conviction (posthumously), ruling that he ultimately incited the violence against himself and, therefore, was guilty of a crime against the public order.

Matthew 5:10-12 - *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ¹¹ "*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* ¹² *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Community Groups:

- 1 – How are you doing at this point in the New Year?
- 2 – Have you experienced Covid-19 personally? What about your family/friends?
- 3 – In what areas of your life are you finding joy, peace and encouragement?
- 4 – Have you ever studied the historic persecution of the church? If so, what did you discover?
- 5 – If you have studied persecution against the church, have certain people and their trials been of special meaning to you?
- 6 – Why do you think that godly people are persecuted, as Paul told Timothy?
- 7 – Against whom, is all persecution really leveled?
- 8 – What is it about the Gospel that is so offensive?
- 9 – How does general revelation convict people and make them angry?
- 10 – How did the church (in the person of Philip) respond to persecution in Acts 8?
- 11 – What were the responses to Paul's preaching in Acts 14?
- 12 – Why do we share Christ out of love for him and others and not for results?

