

Message Date: 10-04-20

To the Ends of the Earth- ACTS Part 4: Courage!

Message Title: Week 4, Suffering and Joy

- *We last left ACTS with the martyrdom of Stephen. We saw how Stephen- in his life, but even more in his death, was a portrait of COURAGE... and his courage to stand with peace, with grace, with love for even those who lied about and ultimately killed him- this courage came from the LORD.*
- *We began that message with the question... “How would you respond if suddenly you found yourself facing great opposition, even persecution”*
- *Today, lets start with as similar question...*
- *As a Christian, what is it that sustains your faith in the face of severe, and sustained, hardship? From another perspective, if you were going through that kind of trial- over time mind you- how important to you would your faith be? In my experience as a pastor, I’ve seen people walk away from their faith because of ongoing hardship and suffering, while others would say that their faith was the single and greatest thing that sustained them, and their faith grew and was strengthened, not damaged.*
- *Let me add one more thought- again thinking of a time of sustained hardship and suffering.. what emotion would you associate with that kind of experience.*
- *Our story- text- from Acts today is set in the immediate aftermath of Stephens’s death, as we see the outbreak of widespread and severe persecution against the community of Christ Followers. This is a sobering passage, but at the same contains one of the great mysteries – great hopes- of LIFE IN CHRIST... that even in the midst of suffering, we may experience the powerful gift of JOY.*
- *AND SO! Our text today is ACT 8:1-8, it is SUNDAY October 4th, I’m Pastor Ethan, and this is TRINITY ONLINE.*

^{8:1}And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ²Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. ⁴Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.

- *There are two things going on in this part of the story, one following the other. First, Luke describes the outbreak of a severe and widespread persecution against the church. A few things to note here:*
- *The first is really the ending to the story of Stephens death, which is that Saul, this young man full of religious zeal, saw and approved of what happened to Stephen.*
- *This tells us that the persecution that broke out wasn’t random, it was the next step in an increasing pattern of opposition, and was triggered by Stephen’s death. If you think back across the story, we first saw the Sanhedrin giving a warning to Peter and John (to stop talking about Jesus), following by a flogging of all the aposltes (again at hands of the*

Sanhedrin), followed by Stephens murder- by the Sanhedrin and a larger crowd, followed by the general persecution of the church by Saul and likely others with the support of the Sanhedrin.

- In verse 1, we are told that the persecution breaks out against the church- the word here is ‘Ekklesia’, which translates a bigger idea that what often mean by the word ‘church’. The idea of a church as a building, or even an organization, is still years away. In 1st Century Jewish society, an ‘ekklesia’ referred to a variety of assemblies where people would gather for a specific reason, or because they shared some common identity.*
- So, when Luke described these Christ Followers as an Ekklesia, he was describing, principally, a community. These were not just individuals responding with personal faith in Christ (which is how we tend to characterize being ‘a christian’)... these were followers of Christ who in their very spiritual DNA experienced their faith as a community, as an assembly of men, women, and children who held in common the shared purpose and identity of being followers of Christ.*
- Detail I don’t have time to delve into, but when this general persecution began, it’s very likely this disproportionately impacted the HELLENIST believers, the culturally and traditionally distinct Hellenistic- or culturally Greek Jews, of which Stephen was a part. Paul himself was a Hellenist Jew, and seeing his own people come to faith in Christ was especially offensive to him and those like him.*
- SO, when the persecution began, Luke says that ‘all’ (most, larger part) of the church was scattered, and only the Apostles remained in Jerusalem. Why did they stay? Different theories, one being that because they were not Hellenists, the persecution may not have been as big a threat to them. Later in Acts we will see that there remained a thriving, albeit smaller, Christian community in Jerusalem, most likely comprised of non-Hellenist Jews who were not driven out of Jerusalem in this initial persecution.*
- Scholars also believe the apostles stayed because they felt a great sense of duty to remain in Jerusalem, as the founders of the Christian movement. It is also been pointed out that at this time – prior to the general persecution- the church is 5-7 years old. Since some time has gone by, why haven’t the apostles, and the church in general, begun to follow Jesus’ command of the Great Commission, to take the Gospel into Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth? Why are they still only in Jerusalem?*
- It’s possible that the apostles were waiting for Christ to return and fully establish the kingdom of Israel, believing THEN the great commission would be fulfilled, taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. But we know this is not what happened- in Romans 11 Paul describes how it was Israel’s rejection of Christ that led to the Gospel moving to the gentiles, and it is HERE IN ACTS that we are seeing this transition occur... the Gospel coming first to the Jews, being rejected by Israel, and then moving into the Gentile world.*
- An important part of the story, here in Acts 8, is that the Great commission begins to be fulfilled NOT because the planning or initiative of the Apostles, but because of the persecution that drives these Jewish believers- these witnesses to the Gospel- out of Jerusalem and into all of Judea and Samaria. It won’t be until after the conversion of Paul that the last stage of the great commission will begin, as the church expands across the breadth of the Roman world at that time.*

- **JUST WHERE ARE JUDEA AND SAMARIA? Let's take a look at the geography of what is beginning to happen... MAP TIME**
- **BACK into the story- Luke tells us 'Godly Men'- fellow believers- buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. While this was happening, Saul begins to destroy the church.**
- **Need to focus here for a minute to really comprehend what is happening- easy to just blow by this. The situation for these believers in Jerusalem is desperate.**
- **Destroy- 'ravage, assault'... Dragging off men and women to prison. Families are being torn apart, homes lost. We aren't told this directly, but likely people were killed. The believers who fled Jerusalem fled for their lives, and were refugees in every sense of word. Likewise, Saul's action is nothing less than religiously motivated terrorism. For the church, this is a time of unprecedented upheaval, uncertainty, loss, trauma and suffering.**
- **Not only that, but the believers who fled into Samaria were entering the land of a people the Jews had hated and looked down upon for generations. The Samaritans were not likely to welcome them with open arms, but rather with distrust and resentment.**
- **IN THAT SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES, having lost everything, running for your life into a potentially unwelcoming land, what would this do to your faith? If it was your faith in Christ that led to these events, how would you express your faith now?**
- **This leads us to verse 4, which is one of the most remarkable statements in Luke's entire history of the church...**

⁴ *Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.*

- **The greek word translated 'scattered' is where we get the word 'DIASPORA'... But even as these followers of Christ were pushed out of their homes and dispersed like sand in a wind, they didn't abandon their faith. They didn't even hide their faith. Rather, they continued to proclaim the message and hope of Christ wherever they went.**
- **WHY? What was it about these first believers that led them, empowered them, to share their faith, their hope, when they were in survival mode?**
- **Possible they had the great commission in mind, and realized that they were being driven into the land where Jesus had told the apostles they would go. But it couldn't have been just that. The presence of a command doesn't lead to obedience, especially in the midst of great suffering, unless there is something deeper going on. AND THERE WAS.**
- **The only explanation is that these refugees were people whose lives had been transformed by the Gospel. Christ wasn't just a tradition or religion, He was their very life. For these believers, sharing the Gospel wasn't an obligation, it was the only thing they could do. They couldn't help but tell the miracle that Jesus was the Messiah, and through repentance and faith He brought forgiveness, hope, a direct relationship with God, and a new life.**
- **I can imagine a scene where one of these refugee families arrives in a Samaritan town, seeking help, shelter, even food. The Samaritans saying to them... You are Jews! You hate us! Why are you on the run, and why are you running to us? In reply... "Let me tell you..."**

let me tell you why even now, we have hope. We have peace. Let us tell you the truth God has revealed, not just for us, but for you as well”

- *Luke goes on to tell us the specific story of one of these refugees, a man named Phillip. Phillip was one of the seven servant leaders raised up by the church back in chapter six, and like Stephen, The Holy Spirit was working through Phillip in a unique way, enabling him to perform signs and miracles as the Apostles had been doing. Pick up in verse 5, and I'm reading here from the NASB*

⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and *began* proclaiming Christ to them. ⁶ The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing.

⁷ For *in the case of* many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out *of them* shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much rejoicing in that city.

- *As with the other believers scattered by the persecution, Philip also proclaimed the message of Christ, and the Holy Spirit enabled him to perform miracles.*
- *But we see that the crowds weren't just interested in the miracles, they listened intently- all of them- to what Philip said.*
- *We see here God continuing to use these signs- healings, casting out evil spirits- to authenticate the message that Jesus was the messiah... that what Philip and these other believers spoke of was TRUE... what these Samaritans saw in the life of the Christ followers was the result of GODS PRESENCE AND WORK in their lives.*
- *(a side note- when Luke says that Philip cast out unclean spirits, this isn't just a superstitious view of diseases like epilepsy, seizures, or even severe mental health diseases. This is spiritual warfare, and we will look at this in greater detail next week)*
- *But as amazing as these miracles were, Luke's emphasis is that the people of the town listened with great attention as Philip shared the Truth and Hope of Jesus.*
- *Again, I can imagine a scene where a family from this town were at home, discussing over dinner what they had seen and heard. "Did you see how our neighbor was healed? YES, I saw that, and more... BUT DID YOU HEAR WHAT HE SAID?!" This man Jesus- the one we heard about from the woman in the other town here in Samaria... this man is the MESSIAH! He's not just a good man who didn't look down on us like most Jews, HE actually is God's SON... If he really did rise from the dead as so many of these people personally witnessed... what if this is real, and what if this message is also for us?*
- *And then, in verse 8, we see the inevitable result of what happens when people see the evidence, and hear about the Good News and the hope of Jesus Christ... "THERE WAS GREAT JOY IN THAT CITY"*
- *Now, you could argue that these peoples joy was from the miracles of people being healed, but that would be to ignore Luke's emphasis of how intently the people listened to what Philip was teaching. Remember, the Samaritans for generations had been looked down upon, treated as second class citizens. In relationship to the people surround them, they were the 'less than'... If God had indeed sent his messiah to the Jews, surely that hope wouldn't also be for them... AND NOW, these Hellentist Jews... the most passionate Jews you could be... were proclaiming this great hope- this JOY- WAS FOR THEM.*

- **OK.. This story is a turning point in the book of Acts, and an important part of OUR HISTORY as followers of Christ. But how does this speak to us, in our lives, today?**
- **God is ALWAYS at work, often in ways we don't expect.**
 - **When the first disciples heard Jesus' great commission, they probably didn't think.. "and this will happen by us facing persecution, and being put in a position of great weakness and struggle"...**
 - **When we face great struggle, we don't wish for this, and it's not our place to say whether or not God led these things to happen. BUT WHAT WE DO KNOW, is that God is at work. And God's works ALWAYS for the Good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**
- **The miraculous evidence of the Hope of Christ may just be YOU.**
 - **We tend to read stories like today, and focus on the miracles, signs and wonders God used to authenticate the Gospel... we think, well, if God just did those miracles today, then people would believe. And there are times when HE does.**
 - **But friends, the miracle of Christ's power is not limited to what we would call supernatural events or miraculous healings. When we increasingly TRUST.. live in the good of our relationship with Christ... come to experience Christ as LIFE ITSELF.. This inevitably leads to our experiencing the FRUIT of the Spirit in us... and that is miraculous... that even in the midst of uncertainty, struggle, even suffering, we may know- and express- LOVE-JOY-PEACE-PATIENCE-KINDNESS-GOODNESS-FAITHFULNESS-GENTLENESS-SELF CONTROL.**
 - **When people see this in our lives, this is a powerful witness to the truth of our faith in Christ... THEN, when God opens the door and we TELL of our faith in Christ, God will use this in a powerful way.**
- **Last- This story illustrates one of the great gifts of Jesus to his disciples...**
- **Regardless of our circumstances... even in times of suffering, sadness, grief... like a deep current and foundation in our soul...**
- **Christ is our source of JOY.**
- **Just consider a few scriptures....**

1 Thessalonians 1:6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

2 Corinthians 8:1-2 And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ²In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

James 1:2-4 ²Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Psalms 16:11 You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy