

Scripture Reading:

Acts 14: “13 And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. 14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, 15 "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. 16 In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. 17 Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." 18 Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. 19 But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, 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. 23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

'The Persecutions of Paul'

As you can see from the sermon title this is not going to be a pleasant sermon subject this morning. It is a subject that we must address because we see many persecutions here in the Book of Acts, many down through Church history and many in the news today from around the world.

- It is not something that should surprise us because Jesus told His disciples that the world would hate them because the world hated Him.

It was a message woven throughout the long and final discourse from Jesus recorded for us by the Apostle John in chapters 13 to 17 of his Gospel:

- Something I would commend to your study!

Luke also focuses on the persecution of the Saints and does so with some dramatic literary form here in his orderly account. In recounting the early days of the Church in Jerusalem Luke tells us how Peter and John were arrested and warned in chapter four. Luke then tells us how all the Apostles were arrested and then beaten in chapter five and finally we have the arrest and stoning of Stephen in chapter 7.

- We have seen the same build up with the Barnabas and Paul here on their first missionary journey.

First they were merely expelled from Antioch, then in Iconia they had to flee the hostile crowds and finally here at Lystra Paul is stoned by the crowd and left for dead.

So this morning we will consider why we are persecuted as Christians and how we are to respond. I guess the first thing that we have to address is how we deal with the issue of persecution from the midst of our blessings and comforts here in America

It is difficult for us to even imagine or to relate to what we see here in Acts; we have the struggle to relate to the stories of the many martyrs we have from church history and even the struggles in the rest of our world today.

Yes, those folks at NPR said some bad things about Christians as they dined with men they thought were from the Muslim Brotherhood. Yes, we are locked out of many “intelligent” discussions today and made fun of if we take the Bible seriously.

People will say bad things about us if we stand up for the rights of the unborn or support Biblical marriage: The IRS might even refuse to let us take a tax deduction for money given to a church that says we should vote for a righteous candidate in some election!

But any of these are a far cry from being stoned, fed to the lions, burned at the stake, or how Shahbaz Bhatti, the only Christian in the Pakistani cabinet, was brutally murdered last week by Muslim assassins.

As I prepared for this sermon I passed along information from Gary Bauer in Washington about how since the fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt it has been "open season" on Coptic Christians in that country. Gary's report gave an account of how a Muslim mob in Cairo attacked Christians who were protesting the desecration of a church that was destroyed by fire and hammer-wielding Muslims. At least 13 people were killed and 140 others injured, most of them Coptic Christians, while the Egyptian army stood by and watched for hours. (The Coptic Church's roots trace all the way back to Mark, who brought the faith to Alexandria, Egypt.) Christians make up only 10% of Egypt's population. They are hardly a threat to the country's overwhelming Muslim population, but they face daily discrimination and threats of violence.

Many talk about our victory in Iraq and yet more and more, Christians in that nation must now worship in secret. Mr. Bauer also reported that when the Pakistani minister Shahbaz Bhatti was asked recently about the Muslim threats on his life, he calmly responded, "I want to share that I believe in Jesus Christ, who has given his own life for us. I know what is the meaning of the cross, and I am following the cross."

After sending around excerpts from Gary's daily update I was asked a thoughtful and in some ways troubling question: What can we do for these people other than to pray for them?

- **Truly it can be frustrating to see these things happening and to feel so helpless.**

We need to remember that it is important for us to faithfully uphold our brothers and sisters in prayer!

Here at Church of the King we try to pass along any opportunities that do arise where real help can be offered. But, I think this question also brings us back to my point about how difficult it is for us in the midst of our comfort to relate to such things. It is easy to even feel a little guilty that we are not facing similar treatment. This brings us to the first important lesson that Dr. Luke teaches us about persecution:

- **Just as we saw with miracles, it is the Holy Spirit who is in control!**
- **It is He who is filling the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus and we must trust His wisdom and direction as He does so!**

This means that we must be ready to trust Him if we face such persecutions at some point in our lives...

- **AND we must trust His plan that has us enjoying the blessings of the Kingdom if that is our lot in this life!**

That might seem like a strange way to put things, but it has been a problem down throughout Church history. One of the things that the early Church Fathers had to guard against was the attitude that to be REALLY spiritual you had to be martyred. This is why it is important to look to Luke's orderly account for guidance.

- **The Holy Spirit used the death of Stephen in great ways to move the church out of Jerusalem as Jesus had intended.**

However, He also used all of the faithful Saints who faced little or no outward persecutions to build the early church communities that have been examples for us all for thousands of years.

We must learn to trust the Spirit as He chooses some of us for one type of service and others for different service.

This can be true even with individuals who serve in similar ways: Consider Stephan and Paul...

Both were stoned, but Stephan got to look up and see Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father and go immediately into His presence with words of forgiveness on his lips. Paul is also stoned, but he is not quite killed and has his body dragged through the city and dumped outside, left for dead, where the Lord revives him and sends him on for more service.

Now if we are honest, I think we can imagine how both might have looked at the other with a bit of envy: Paul thinks to himself, ouch, that was painful and now I have to go on and face other persecutions while Stephan gets to sit in the presence of Jesus! Stephan thinks to himself, wow, that sure ended quickly, I don't get to continue serving in the Church or be a major author of many New Testament Books like Paul does.

The bottom line is that we must learn more and more to trust the work of the Holy Spirit, knowing that He is in control and knowing His peace whether we someday face the threat of death or are given a quiet life where we raise faithful covenant children or serve others in the Kingdom.

Sometimes it is harder to be content with the later than with the former.

➤ So what does this mean for those of us who live here in midst of a blessed nation?

1) As I mentioned, we DO need to be more faithful in remembering our brothers and sisters in our prayers.

The many prayers that we have from the Apostle Paul or those in the Psalms can be very helpful here and we should review them, and pray them, often.

2) We need to be faithful disciples who are preparing ourselves, our covenant children and others entrusted to our care to serve the Church in difficult times or in difficult places.

This is accomplished through right worship, a strong knowledge of God's Word and applying the practical lessons we learn from God's Word to our everyday lives. We may not face the types of persecutions today that are as severe as what we see here in Acts, in history, or other parts of the world, but God still has important lessons for us to learn along the way.

We face in most of the western nations today a growing opposition to Biblical truths...

- You must have unquestioned faith in evolution to advance in the fields of science or medicine.
- You must support a woman's 'right' to end the life of her unborn child if you are going to be acceptable in the political realm
- And you must accept sodomy as a normal practice equal to the glories of the marriage bed if you want to teach or be in a position of authority.

The latest example of this comes to us from England where judges have ruled that Christians who believe that homosexuality is a sin are not fit to be foster parents. As part of their ruling they said, "there is no place in British law for Christian beliefs, despite this country's long history of religious observance and the traditions of the established Church." They acknowledged that England was historically a part of the Christian west, but went on to say, "there have been enormous changes in the social and religious life of our country over the last century."

- So we are not without ample opportunities to find ways to be persecuted and here is where the lessons of Acts are important.

As we learned a few weeks ago, the Gospel does divide the world and we, if we are serving our Lord faithfully bring the aroma of Christ into a room when we pass through:

- The sweet savor of life to those who are being saved and the stench of death to those who are being lost.

So the opposition that we see and may experience should not surprise us.

However, we must be VERY careful that it is the aroma of Jesus that they are responding to and NOT us!

- We bring the offense of the Gospel into many situations, but we must NEVER try to be intentionally offensive.
- Trust me, the later is much easier to do than the former!

In addition, we must take care not to assume that just one course of action is the most spiritual or the way the Spirit always works. After seeing Stephen martyred and the resulting growth in the Church, some might have argued that getting others martyred was the way to go. The truth of the matter is that the Holy Spirit used people fleeing such persecution to take the Gospel to all of Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the world. So it is better to flee or to be martyred?

- We must understand there is no pat answer to that question!

This illustrates why it is often difficult to determine the best course of action to help our brothers & sisters who are suffering in other parts of the world.

- What is required is unyielding trust in the Holy Spirit.

That is easy to say, but requires a life dedicated to such a task. For example, you see an older couple who have been faithfully married for many years, you are often amazed by how well they know each other and can often anticipate how they will react in a certain situation [*finishing each others sentences.*]

It is also possible to find older couples who have not lived faithfully in their marriage where there is constant strife and hatred with neither understanding why the other does what they do.

If these couples suddenly face a crisis, like the death of a child or grandchild, you would see the practical result of how they have trained themselves: The faithful couple would know where their strength for the moment must come from and they would not only be mutually helpful to each other, but likely they would even grow closer together in the midst of the great trial.

The other couple would have nowhere to go but to their individual inner strength they had always trusted in, which would collapse as Jesus said any house built on sand would and the crisis would not bring them together but likely lead to divorce if there was no repentance and turning to the Lord. Now we all might be able to think of a case where it took such a crisis to bring some couple to repentance and a right relationship, but we must not allow the exception to override the normal patterns that God has established.

- It is the principle Jesus taught in the parable of the talents.
- So the point is that IF we want the Holy Spirit to guide us in times of trouble, it is best to have established a strong pattern of looking for His guidance in ALL of our lives!
- As Jesus said, we must be faithful with little to be trusted with much!

Let me touch on just a couple of practical examples:

As the case in England shows, it is becoming more and more difficult for Christians to participate in the foster care system.

On the one hand, wise counsel might be to avoid the land mines by staying out of that field because they are no lack of opportunities to serve in other ways. On the other hand, there may come a time where we need to be involved... [*tell the story of the twins*]

So either course can be proper, but we can also sin in the pursuit of either:

- IF we avoid the system out of fear or cowardice, that is clearly wrong.
- IF we confront the system just looking for ways to get ourselves in trouble, that is wrong as well.

Another area of constant conflict is that of witnessing: Now we don't face the death penalty for sharing the Gospel yet in this country as some of our brothers and sisters around the world do, but that does not mean we do not face critical choices.

I have had conversations with several men in recent months about the tensions they face in the work place. Sometimes it is hostile co-workers who make a BIG fuss anytime any close to Jesus is discussed and more and more employers are demanding that nothing be said or done in the workplace when it comes to our faith. Now we need to remember that we have a command to preach the Gospel, to disciple the nations: But these men also have the command to provide for their families, with Paul saying that one who does not provide for his family is worse than in infidel!

Obviously these two can be in conflict!

It is real easy to show someone how to get fired in most workplaces today by simply standing up in the middle of the office and loudly preaching the Gospel with their Bible in their hands. This might seem like a dramatic way to obey the Great Commission, but it would be a very presumptuous sin when it comes to providing for one's family.

On the other hand, we could see how easy it would be for a Christian to just decide to keep their head down and not cause trouble by not even letting anyone know they are a Christian. Now they have no threat of losing their job, but are they being faithful to the Great Commission?

- **Such is the tension of the Christian life and if you are not wrestling with such tensions you are NOT trusting the Holy Spirit.**
- **That may seem like a strong statement, but it is what we see from Genesis to Revelation if we read our Bibles honestly!**

So yes, we must pray for those in the midst of persecutions in other parts of our world that we struggle to even imagine going through.

And yes, we must help them in any practical ways that we can with advocacy or financial help as we are doing this week and next with Japan.

BUT we must also remember our responsibly to be faithful where God has called us:

- **Always striving to learn those lessons that allow us to be used by God wherever He may need us to serve.**
- **And taking seriously our responsibly to train up the next generation of God's servants!**

I want to close this morning with some very familiar verses that we quote often from the Book of Romans:

They give us great comfort, but we should note how Paul frames them in the midst of the many persecutions that we and all Christians must face:

Romans 8:12 "So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope.

For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

29 For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called he also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified. 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?

33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died--more than that, who was raised--who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Communion Meditation: Psalm 23:

"Jehovah is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of Jehovah forever.