
Last week we observed how the life of Stephen…a Hellenistic convert to Christianity…in so many ways reflected the life of Jesus Christ. Having been filled by the Holy Spirit and discipled by the Apostles, Stephen’s life and ministry, his power and grace, and his strong teaching reminded us of Jesus. However, after being arrested for fallacious charges, Stephen is murdered by the Sanhedrin…the Supreme Court of Israel…who unjustly dragged Stephen out of town and mercilessly stoned him to death.

According to Luke, Stephen’s death by stoning ignites a widespread persecution against the Christians in Jerusalem beginning that very day. Now…we’ve seen this coming for some time. First the Apostles were arrested and warned, then they were flogged and warned again. Finally, Stephen is stoned, and whatever restraint the Sanhedrin had managed up to that point breaks loose and turns into the murderous persecution of the church.

Luke writes in 8:2, “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.”

The picture we get here is that the stoning of Stephen sets off a very emotional, very hostile reaction against the Christians that day in Jerusalem. Remember, Stephen was stoned as an act of rage, not justice. He was not executed by a court, he was murdered by a mob. Any observer of middle-eastern culture and history will attest to the dangerous nature of a middle-eastern mob. Once these dangerous men had blood on their hands, they quickly turned their sites towards other Christians to persecute. No doubt the word spread quickly among the church regarding Stephen’s brutal death by stoning, and Luke reports that many believers who were residing in Jerusalem were quick to leave town, such that they were dispersed throughout the region in Judean and Samarian cities.

Note, however, that Luke states clearly: “…except the Apostles.” I suspect some of you, like me, scribbled in a question mark next to that verse. If the church was persecuted in Jerusalem, how is it that the Apostles were not also driven out of the city? Luke doesn’t answer that question for us,
but I think we can make a pretty educated guess.

If you remember, Stephen’s lengthy defense before the Sanhedrin in chapter 7 directly challenged their veneration of the Temple. Again, you can review my message from two weeks ago to learn how Stephen essentially tipped over the three sacred cows of ancient Judaism including the centrality of the Temple. And remember that Stephen represented Hellenistic Jewish converts to Christianity, a group of people already considered to be foreigners as far as the Jerusalemites are concerned. So it could be that the persecution was directed primarily against the Hellenistic/Greek-speaking Christians, at least initially, because the Hebrew/Aramaic speaking Christians (such as the Twelve Apostles) would have been seen as more respectful of the Temple and it was known that they met there regularly.

The other possibility is that the Twelve Apostles simply refused to be run out of the capitol city, so they hid themselves in the homes of the believers until the persecution subsided. Whatever the case, the picture is clear: many, many Christians from the Jerusalem church flee the city and take up residence in various towns and villages in the surrounding regions.

Luke breaks from his description of the persecution to write that “devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.” I know that seems like a trivial detail, but once again, that detail takes on greater meaning with a bit of historical perspective. According to ancient Jewish traditions, a person who was stoned as capital punishment could be buried but not lamented. I know that seems odd, but I suspect the point was that the executed criminal received justice, so the lament was in appropriate given the crime. However, Luke makes a point of recording that Stephen was both buried and lamented by devout men. These men buried Stephen and publicly lamented his death as an act of protest against the murder of their friend who was a victim of injustice. And I do believe that is the point behind why Luke included that information.

Luke goes on to tell us that this persecution of the Jerusalem church is not without a leader. There is a particular young man, a zealous Pharisee who is also Hellenistic by birth, who is leading the charge, and his name is Saul. In 7:58 we learned that those who were busy stoning Stephen entrusted their cloaks to Saul, who also (according to 8:1) approved of Stephen’s execution. Then Luke tells us in 8:3 that Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.


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have heard…how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.” Luke is setting the stage for Saul the Persecutor’s dramatic conversion to Paul the Apostle of Jesus…that’s coming in just a few weeks. But for now, we must remember just how deeply Saul hated the church…his hatred led to murder, persecution, and the dispersion of the Jerusalem Christians.

Looking to vs. 4 we read, “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.” Herein lies the first hint of “redemptive suffering” as a result of persecution in Jerusalem. Luke reports that those Christians driven out of Jerusalem by persecution do not hide…they do not clam up…they do not recant or go underground with their faith. Instead, wherever they landed after the persecution, whether in a Judean or a Samarian city, they went about preaching the word.

Now, I just want to remind you of something that we read not long ago. Remember Gamaliel from back in chapter 5? Gamaliel was the wise old Pharisee who served on the Sanhedrin, and he was the one who essentially said to his peers, “Hey, lay off the Christians, and just wait and see what happens. We’ve seen these kinds of movements pop up before, but after those leaders were killed and their followers were dispersed, those movements came to nothing, and that’s probably what’s going to happen here as well.” Gamaliel was using good logic, and the underlying assumption was this: the death of a movement’s leader, and the dispersion of his followers, will normally end a movement.

However, look at what happens among the Christians when their leader Jesus, and one of their champions, Stephen, are murdered…resulting in their forceful dispersion throughout the region. Instead of killing the movement, martyrdom and persecution have only served to scatter the seeds of faith on new ground. Wherever the Christians are forced to flee to, the gospel is preached!

In a Christian, biblical worldview, this is what is meant when we use the term “redemptive suffering.” God allows suffering, but He doesn’t waste it. Paul would later write to the church in Rome, “We know that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.” The martyrdom of Stephen and the violent persecution of the Jerusalem church were hard, difficult, and tragic…but God can and often does bring about redemptive purpose and Kingdom value out of hard and tragic situations.

Luke provides an illustration of this tendency in vss. 5-8 as he writes about Philip. “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord

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paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. 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.”

Note that Philip is not Philip the Apostle; rather this is Philip the deacon. Philip, like Stephen, was one of seven Hellenistic believers appointed by the Apostles to manage the ministries of the Jerusalem church. Luke tells us that Philip went down to a city of Samaria and proclaimed Christ…which is to say that He lifted up Jesus to the Samaritans. Now, just a bit of context there for those not familiar with the term “Samaria” or the “Samaritans.”

If you remember your ancient history, you may recall that the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. When the Assyrians conquered Israel, they hauled off many Israelites into exile and sent other conquered nations to live in Israel. The end result was that foreigners moved in and intermarried with the Jews who remained in the region. Not only did they intermarry, they also interweaved the practices of the Jews with other religious practices from those who came to occupy the land.

In contrast, when the southern kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians in 587 BC, the Jews who were carried off into exile and those who remained in the southern territories did NOT intermarry, so those who returned from exile, who now in the first century occupy Jerusalem and the surrounding villages of Judea, took great pride that they were “pure bred” Jews and not half-breed Jews like the Samaritans.

And now, after hundreds of years, the hostility between Judea and Samaria was at an all time high. Such was the reason that Jesus’ story about the “good Samaritan” was such a scandal and a shock to his Jewish audience. It also explains why the Samaritan woman in John 4 is so surprised and even indignant that a Jewish man would speak to her in broad daylight.

Theologically, the Jews and the Samaritans parted ways primarily on two main points: 1) The Jews believed that God resided in the great temple in Jerusalem; whereas the Samaritans believed God made himself known and was to be worshiped on Mount Gerizim. And 2) the Samaritans only accepted the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, to be authentic scripture, so they did not have a very developed concept of a Messiah. They did, however, hold to the belief that a great prophet would return who was like Moses, in fulfillment of Deut. 18:15 when Moses proclaims, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me.” Remember, Stephen actually quoted that verse in his defense against the Sanhedrin.

So, ironically, the Samaritans and the ostracized Hellenistic Christians like Philip had quite a bit

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in common! They were both shunned by the Jews in Jerusalem, they both dismissed the centrality of the Jerusalem temple, and now Philip helps them to see that Jesus Christ, the one rejected by the Jew leaders, crucified on a Roman cross, and now resurrected and ascended to the Father, is indeed the One they have been waiting for, the fulfillment of Deut. 18:15. The Samaritans listen with great openness, and apparently, they are incredibly receptive to the proclamation of Jesus Christ and His gospel.

Let us not forget that Jesus has already made a pretty great impression among many of the Samaritans. They have no doubt by now heard of his teaching that exonerated a merciful Samaritan over and above pious Jewish officials. They have likely heard the story of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at Jacob’s Well and gave testimony that He prophetically knew everything she had ever done and even so offered her living water! Luke also reports that the Holy Spirit worked powerfully through Philip, such that people were being set free from evil spirits and many were being supernaturally healed. The gospel was received, and Luke concludes by writing, “So there was much joy in that city.”

Now…how does any of that teaching on the book of Acts intersect with your life and our culture and the great challenges that we face in our day to day living? Let me give you a few things to think about.

1) Let me begin by pointing out the very last verse. Luke writes, “So there was much JOY in that city.” Authentic Christianity…coming to know Jesus as our Lord and Savior who sets us free and brings about healing in our lives… is a source of deep JOY! Joy is so important of a concept. Joy is a deep, abiding assurance that we are loved, we belong, we are forgiven, we are saved, and we are going to be OK. Joy runs deep. Joy can withstand great tragedies and pains because it is not based upon circumstances…it is based on truth. Joy is often expressed emotionally, but joy is not simply an emotion when it’s all said and done. Joy is a condition of the soul made possible by a personal relationship with our SOURCE…our Heavenly Father and Creator. It is finally discovering the one Love that our hearts have always longed for…the one Love that is truly unconditional and never-ending. It is seeing the one Face that never turns away, and there is only one Face who never turns away: it is the face of Christ. It was that face that served as Stephen’s joy even moments before he was stoned. It was the face of Christ that helped the Apostles endure flogging and led them to rejoice that they might be counted worthy to suffer for the Name. Joy is what led the persecuted Christians to continue spreading the hope of the Gospel. Joy is discovering who God made you to be and finding your place in the world…again, our identity and our purpose are bound up in Christ, the one who gave up His life for us while we were still slaves to sin. Joy is one of the greatest treasures of the Christian life. Jesus said in John 15:9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments,
you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” Joy comes from knowing Christ and having Christ in us the presence of his Holy Spirit…the final and ultimate Source of Joy that cannot be taken away. Jesus promises in John 16:22, “No one will take your joy from you!”

2) On more than one occasion, we have seen JOY rejected and murdered. Jesus embodied joy, as did Stephen, and yet JOY was rejected and murdered. Why? Look closely, and you will discover that the pathway to JOY is ultimately repentance and surrender. To enter into joy, we must first acknowledge our universal condition of sin and dependence. Sin entered into the world through a conscious effort to be “god-like.” Sin is inevitably driven by self-governance, self-determination, and self-centeredness. To place SELF at the center of our existence may provide for momentary pleasures, but ultimately JOY is not something we can muster up on our own. Joy is given to us from a source that is outside of us. Not only must we set aside the idolatry of self, we must also recognize our dependence upon our Creator and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Joy is a gift for those who will lay down their own crowns and come into the Kingdom of God as those deeply loved, forgiven, and chosen. Remember, even Jesus himself attributed his joy to being under his Father and obedient to His commands.

This is why children can have so much joy! Children do not play god…children are quite content to be dependent upon their parents and within that dependent relationship they experience freedom and joy! That joy is contagious and infectious, but it’s also wild and free! Sometimes parents crush the joy of their children in order to control the child, and that is tragic. Joy is the natural expression of a dependent soul who feels safe at home, but should that home no longer feel safe, or should that soul set out to be independent as did the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, there will be no joy.

So what we find is that those who murder joy are not willing to repent because they are unable or unwilling to hear the truth of their own condition. They are insufferably independent and they reject the hope that lies in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and the restoration of their relationship to God. They are unwilling to yield, and thus their response to JOY is hostility.

3) In the absence of JOY, we seek pleasure. Pleasure is a very poor counterfeit of joy. Pleasure is fleeting and ultimately empty, but in the absence of joy, we will most certainly seek pleasure. It is this obsession with pleasure that now dictates so much of our culture, so much of our economy, and demands much of our own finances. The pursuit of pleasure has many consequences. In most cases, pleasure costs money, so the pursuit of pleasure drives us to

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become greedy. We may well believe that pleasure awaits those who have power, so we thirst for power in order to achieve pleasure. Many times our pleasure is looked upon as immoral, so we may seek to redefine morality as a means of sanctioning our personal pleasure of choice. Pleasure becomes elusive once we have indulged, so it takes more and more stimulus for us to feel the pleasure we long for…thus our addictions, our obsessions, and our chronic unhappiness. I cannot help but theorize that the Sanhedrin…the 70 men in robes who stoned Stephen to death…somehow reasoned that their “pleasure” was linked to their position, their wealth, and their system of religion. That was likely true for Saul…it is likely true for most people. But what I want us all to chew on this morning is this: JOY is the longing of every human heart…not pleasure. And JOY is what Jesus promises to all who will take a knee before Him. JOY awaits those who will repent and call upon His name. JOY is the fuel that runs the engine of your life, so if you’re running on empty…if you don’t have much to live for and you certainly lack something to die for like Stephen…take heart and listen closely to these words from Hebrews 12:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (like Stephen and Philip and so many others), let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfector of our faith, who for the JOY that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider HIM who endured from sinners (like us) such hostility against himself…why?...so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

The power that you long for is the power of JOY, and that JOY can be yours through the only One who suffered a cross for your sins. Call upon His name…His name is Jesus.

Let’s pray.

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