

## **God's Providence Over Persecution**

**Acts 8:1-4**

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Good morning! It is great to see you today. I want to get started right away because we have a big topic to learn about today. So, if you would, turn in your Bibles to Acts 8:1-4.

Last week, Eddie Riley, who is one of our leadership team members, small group leader, and member of the Pastor Search Team preached a powerful message on the life, ministry, and death of Stephen in Acts 6 and 7. Today, I am picking up where he left off last week. After the crowd stoned Stephen for standing up and preaching the gospel, we read starting in Acts 8:

**Acts 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.**

**Acts 8:2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.**

**Acts 8:3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.**

**Acts 8:4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.**

I want you to imagine the following scenario. Imagine a day where it becomes illegal to share the truth of the Gospel. In this scenario, the Good News that sins can be forgiven and lives transformed through Jesus Christ has been outlawed as hate speech.

As a result, a special division of law enforcement in our government is tasked with cracking down on anyone breaking this law. (fortunately, I think there would be some push back from our police department, and I thank God for our first responders in Slidell)

But imagine in a worship gathering like this, the doors opening and a group of men coming down the aisle to handcuff me and all the other pastors who have preached the message of Jesus from this stage.

Imagine now that you have to make the decision to start meeting in secret in homes because there is too much exposure for you to meet in this large gathering space.

Imagine the same situation then happening in homes. The homeowners who host these gatherings are arrested and jailed for lengthy periods of time. It's hard to hold down a job from jail and to pay your house note, and so by the time you get out, your family no longer has a home to call your own.

So, you turn to family and friends for help and many of them refuse because either they fear the same retribution happening to them or they agree that your punishment is appropriate because of your beliefs. Imagine becoming a refugee and having to figure out where to live because of your faith.

I have trouble grasping a scenario like this because we live in an era of unprecedented peace in a country with unique religious freedoms. However, it is possible that we are just a few decisions away from this becoming reality for the Christians of our nation.

It would be no surprise given the fact that a large portion of the Christian population of the world lives in nations where persecution is part of their daily lives. And, our passage for today shows us this level of persecution has been a reality of Christian life from the very beginning of the church.

Therefore, we need to be ready. We need to be prepared. And, so we look to God's Word today to find the answer to the question:

### **How do we prepare our hearts to face persecution?**

#### **How Do We Face Persecution?**

##### **I. Expect It**

Persecution should not be a surprise to believers because Jesus tells us that it will certainly happen.

**John 15:18** "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

**John 15:19** If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

**John 15:20** Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

**John 15:21 They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.**

This prophecy of Christ was fulfilled to full measure in the early church. Starting with our text in Acts 8, we see a pattern of persecution emerge and continue from generation to generation in the life of the church.

## **Expect the Pattern of Persecution**

### **1. Scorning**

The pattern begins with an intensification of scorn among those who mock the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The scorn, the intense hatred of Jesus and his followers had been building since Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

A few weeks ago, I preached a message from Acts 4 on the boldness of the New Testament Church. In this chapter, the church began experiencing milder forms of persecution such as censorship and suppression of speech. The Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews, ordered the apostles to no longer speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

Also, in Acts 4, and continuing in Acts 5, we see suppression and censorship intensify to false accusation, false accusation leading to trials, trials leading to imprisonment, and imprisonment leading to torture as the apostles were flogged.

Then in Acts, 6 and 7, we come to the trial of Stephen, one of the first deacons to ever be ordained in the church. During his trial, Stephen boldly shared the gospel of Jesus and called out the leaders of the Jews for their stiff-necked resistance to the Holy Spirit and rejection of the Messiah.

In response, Stephen is tortured by having rocks hurled at his body resulting in persecution intensifying to its fullest extent, death. Stephen became the first Christian martyr recorded in Scripture.

So, we see the scorn of mockers intensify within a very short time. Why? Well, In his sermon, Stephen emphasized God's redemptive concern for all mankind above race or nation, and this was a threat to the religious leaders. Therefore, we see this rise of evil in their unbelief. It was national pride and racial prejudice coupled with the pursuit of power and political gain which created the environment for their fierce attacks.

And, it is at this point in the Biblical narrative where we see the rise of the chief hater of Christians at that time, Saul of Tarsus, who would later become the Apostle Paul. He was especially cruel and unapologetic in his approach to confronting Christianity. In Galatians 1:13-14, Paul shares his testimony as the persecutor:

**Gal. 1:13 For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.**

**Gal. 1:14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.**

According to Saul, the only way for the old Jewish order to be preserved, was for this new Christian faith to be eradicated. It was Saul who agreed with putting Stephen to death. He even guarded the clothes of Stephen's executioners as they stoned him.

So, we see the pattern of persecution always begins in the hearts of mockers and overflows to increasing levels of intensity in their actions to persecute the church. And, like Saul, there are always zealous and energetic leaders of persecution who throw themselves fully to the task of attacking the followers of Christ.

### **Expect the Pattern of Persecution**

- 1. Scorning**
- 2. Suffering**

The pattern of persecution then shifts from the scorn of mockers to the suffering of the saints. Verse 1 makes it clear that the persecution that broke out on that day was extremely severe. Those early Christians experienced incredible loss, starting with the loss of life. Verse 2 gives us a glimpse of their suffering. It says,

**Acts 8:2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.**

Last week, Eddie described the kind of man they lost in their brother Stephen. He was a man of strong godly character. He was a man who was fully content in Christ with his life, and chose to follow Christ even unto death. This was a tragic loss which caused intense mourning and grief.

And, just when things couldn't seem to get any worse, they suffer the loss of their freedom. Verse 3 says

**Acts 8:3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.**

By disrupting their meetings and dragging church members to prison, Saul inflicted a level of persecution which also resulted in the loss of relationships in their community and their homes.

Like Stephen, most of those now homeless were Greek speaking Jewish converts. They were already considered liberals in the Jewish community. Their conversion to Christianity ostracized them even more.

Just recently, they had been partakers of the fullness of joy found in Christian fellowship. Remember in Chapter 4, they were of one heart and mind, holding everything in common, meeting each other's needs, devoting themselves to the apostles' teachings of Christ. How quickly things changed!

So, the pattern starts with the scorn of mockers which gives birth to persecution. The pattern then results in the suffering of the saints - their loss of life, freedom, community, homes, and livelihoods. Naturally, the pattern of persecution progressed to the scattering of the church.

### **Expect the Pattern of Persecution**

- 1. Scorning**
- 2. Suffering**
- 3. Scattering**

Verse 1 says,

**Acts 8:1 All except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria.**

The apostles were able to stay home. Perhaps they were able to avoid the brunt of persecution because they were Hebraic Jews, and not Greek speaking Jews. Or, it is possible the Jewish leaders had grown tired after failed attempts to take them out. Or, maybe the apostles felt that they should stay and keep a strong home base, sending missionaries to the ends of the earth. Maybe it was a mixture of all three.

But, for the rest of the Christians, their whole lives were uprooted and they were scattered. It's important to note the scattered saints were not the clergy or hired staff, but laymen in the church - ordinary, Christian men and women like you. And, all of the

sudden, they are refugees, strangers in foreign lands, trying to survive, and discover where God will plant them next.

How do we face persecution? First, we expect it. Second, with the milder forms of persecution we endure now and with what is possible in the future, we face persecution by trusting in God's providence

### **How do we face persecution?**

- I. Expect It**
- II. Trust God's Providence**

Providence is one of the subjects we learn a lot about in seminary.<sup>1</sup>

**Providence refers to God's guidance and rule of all things toward His desired end of history, including the actions of people, heavenly angels, and fallen angels.**

Throughout Scripture, we see God's divine providence on display in three different ways:

#### **God's Providence**

- 1. He causes some events.**
- 2. He permits sin and evil**
- 3. He sometimes uses sin and evil**

Just take the cross as an example. God planned and knew that Jesus would die on the cross for the sins of the world. However, he did not cause the sin of those who crucified him, for scripture says that God never tempts anyone to sin.

But, always acting in ways that are holy and right, without destroying the free will of man, God permitted the sin and evil inflicted upon Jesus. Then, he used the whole event of the cross to bring about his desired outcome of salvation for humankind.

Joseph also provides us with an example of this concept in his remark to his brothers. After they sold him into slavery, and he spent years in prison as an innocent man, he said to them,

**Genesis 50:20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.**

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<sup>1</sup> The content for this section on God's Providence was adapted from Adam Harwood, *Christian Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Systematic* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 222-236.

But, Jesus is the best example of this principle! Why? Because God's desired outcome for the end of history is heaven with whosoever shall believe in the finished work of Jesus Christ for eternal life. So, what the enemy intended for evil with the cross, God used it for the ultimate good for humanity. All glory, honor, and praise be to God in Heaven that we are given the right to partake in his glory as his children, and the privilege of inheriting his kingdom as heirs in Christ.

And God, in his providence, does the same with persecution. It is not his will that any man should perish. His desired end is for the nations to come to faith in his son. So, he permits and uses the sin and evil of persecution to scatter his church among the nations. Jesus promised this scattering would happen. Earlier in Acts, He told his disciples:

**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."**

What Saul intended for evil to destroy the church, God used for good to scatter the church as his mouthpiece to the rest of the world! It is because of God's providence over persecution that we are even here today in America, and that we as Gentiles have access to the gospel of Jesus Christ! So, God is in control. He is at work, and we can face persecution by trusting in God's providence. But how?

## **II. Trust God's Providence**

### **A. Through Our Rejoicing**

The first way that we trust God's providence over persecution is through our rejoicing. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said to his disciples,

**Matthew 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**Matthew 5:11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.**

**Matthew 5:12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

In his first epistle, the Apostle Peter writes to some of the same exiled Christians who were dispersed and now living in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. He says,

**1 Peter 4:12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.**

**1 Peter 4:13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.**

**1 Peter 4:14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.**

Church, remember this message today when it is our turn to participate in the sufferings of Christ: You can trust the Providence of God. Remember, this world is not your home, and God is working things for good so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

You can rejoice in the midst of persecution because the Spirit of God rests upon you. He will give you what you need to endure and mature through any circumstance, and your reward will be great in heaven. So, trust God's providence by rejoicing.

- II. Trust God's Providence**
  - A. Through Our Rejoicing**
  - B. Through Our Living**

Secondly, we trust God's providence through the way we live. The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to Timothy:

**2 Timothy 3:12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,**

**2 Timothy 3:13 while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.**

**2 Timothy 3:14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of...**

Show of hands, who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus? If your hand is up, you will be persecuted. Take it from Paul who writes these words to Timothy from a prison

cell. If you think it is getting rough in America, Paul says evildoers will go from bad to worse. You can count on it. Expect it. But do you trust God's providence to do what Paul says: "Continue living in what you have learned and have become convinced of"?

One of Satan's greatest weapons to cripple the American church is creating an expectation of safety and comfort which leads to idleness and complacency. I'm concerned that we often forget that Christ's call to take up our cross and follow him is an invitation to die to self.

When we experience peace in the physical realm, we often become blind to the reality that there is a war going on in the spiritual realm between Christ and Satan, truth and falsehood, belief and unbelief. And, we can't afford to play it safe. In his book, *Don't Waste Your Life*, John Piper combats this "play it safe" mentality. Instead, he challenges the church to live with a war-time mindset and lifestyle.

In WW2, our entire country lived with a wartime mentality. From the soldiers on the front lines to the mom at home, everyone was sacrificing and contributing to the war time effort - from collecting resources, rationing food, to building the equipment and weapons sent around the world.

Brothers and sisters, you must understand that we are soldiers in the army of Christ, and we are in a spiritual war with much higher stakes. The stakes of this spiritual conflict are higher than any other war in history. The battle in this war is for heaven or hell, eternal joy or eternal separation and suffering.

So, when you have a wartime mindset, you don't turn a blind eye to a world that is perishing separated from God. Having a wartime mindset means you remain informed and focused on the importance of missions to unreached people groups.

Perhaps God is calling some of you to go to the nations, to the unreached people groups who don't have access to the Gospel. If you have a wartime mindset, you will be seeking discernment from God about that call.

Having a wartime lifestyle means we prioritize our resources, time, and energy for kingdom-focused initiatives. We make sacrifices at home to help support those who are on the frontlines. Having a wartime mindset means we continue to be of sober mind and stay alert spiritually, always being prepared to give a reason for the hope that we have in Christ.

As our wartime mindset affects the way we live, we are actively showing our trust in God's providence over persecution.

- II. Trust God's Providence**
  - A. Through Our Rejoicing**
  - B. Through Our Living**
  - C. Through Our Sharing**

Lastly, we show our trust in God's Providence over persecution through our sharing.

**Acts 8:4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.**

They didn't just scatter in silence, but in proclaiming the gospel wherever they went, they became the first missionaries of the gospel. The persecution opened their mouths, made them bold, filled them with fervor and zeal. Even though they lost everything materially, they proclaimed from their mouths everything they gained spiritually.

This response to the pattern of persecution frustrates the enemy of the gospel. For the attempts of the scorners to censor, suppress, and crush the gospel actually causes persecuted Christians to speak louder the Gospel message that saves. Their efforts to forcibly pluck, or snuff out the gospel causes Christians to value the gospel even more.

Church, when our time comes and persecution comes knocking on our door, we will show our trust in God's Providence by continuing to share the Good News that set us free. Chaos can be all around us, but the peace of Jesus Christ that surpasses all understanding will guard our hearts. That is the message this lost and dying world needs to hear.

There are many scorners in the world like Saul who relentlessly mock the gospel. And God is still in the business of using us to share the message that changes their hearts and gives them a new name, a new nature. Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul, the self-labeled chief of sinners and persecutor of the saints. Listen to how the gospel changed his heart and purpose:

**2 Corinthians 4:5 For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.**

**2 Corinthians 4:6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.**

**2 Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.**

**2 Corinthians 4:8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;**

**2 Corinthians 4:9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.**

**2 Corinthians 4:11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.**

In just a few minutes I will give some tangible ways for us to respond to this message. But before I do, I want to invite a dear family to come on stage.