

## Persevere Through Suffering

### Acts 8:1-8

Sept. 26, 2010

As we read about the fierce persecution endured by the Early Church it is likely that we have some difficulty identifying with these Christians. Professing Jesus in the 21st Century, in this region of the globe, may be unpopular but it most certainly is not dangerous.

I have preached almost every Sunday for the last 12 years, and not once have I wondered whether I would be physically harmed following the service.

And yet, as we relate our own circumstances to what is going on in the 1st Century Church, what we do have in common is *the experience of suffering*.

What we observe in Acts chapter 8, and what is confirmed by our own experience, is that *God permits Christians to suffer*.

I doubt that there is a person here today whose life has been untouched by pain and personal tragedy. And the sobering reality is that, for many of us, our most difficult trials still await us.

One of my duties as your minister is to help you endure the day of trial in such a way that your confidence in God, and your love for God, is actually greater than before you experienced the adversity.

On the one hand, I have seen professing Christians come close to abandoning their faith altogether because of an encounter with suffering. On the other hand, I have also seen Christians drawn into closer fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ because of their trials.

As your minister, my prayer is that the latter be true of you.

Perhaps, there are some of you here today who are at crossroads in your relationship with Christ. There was a time when you embraced Christ; a time when you embraced the doctrines of the Bible; a time when serving Christ in the church was the most important thing to you. But something changed that.

For some of you, suffering changed that. A death of a loved one; a destroyed relationship; the trials of life have changed the way many of you view God, the Bible, and the church.

Beyond the sheer pain of our own suffering, we are also troubled by the fact that our suffering usually comes without any explanation and often baffles our sense of justice. It is very difficult for us to make sense of the torture caused by a disease like cancer or Lou Gehrig's, or to comprehend the cruelty of a disease like Alzheimer's.

I am thankful that the Bible says a great deal about suffering. And I find it interesting that in all that the Bible says about suffering, the one question that it seldom seeks to answer is the question, "Why?".

For most of us, this is the question we most want answered—“Lord, WHY did You allow this to happen to me?”

What we find instead, within the Scriptures, is the answer to another question, “What is God doing in the midst of our suffering?” This is the question I’m interested in addressing this morning.

God allows bad things to happen to His children. Let’s not try and candy coat what we know to be true. We know this to be true because bad things have happened to us, and to those we love.

The Scriptures teach us that God, who has the power to prevent these bad things, instead chooses to use these "bad things" in such a way that a most blessed outcome ultimately results. And this is precisely what we find in the persecution of the early Church.

Up until now, all of the ministry has taken place in Jerusalem. No one had moved out to Judea and Samaria. But Jesus had said in Acts 1:8 that the coming of the Holy Spirit was meant to empower missions in Jerusalem and beyond: **"you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."** And now, Luke seeks to demonstrate how this commission was fulfilled as a result of intense persecution.

The persecution of the early Christians reaches a new level in chapter 7 with the stoning of Stephen. In chapter 8, we are introduced to Saul (soon to be known as Paul) who we learn was **“in hearty agreement with putting (Stephen) to death”**(8:1).

It appears that the execution of Stephen touched off a massive wave of persecution, for we read that, **“on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles”**(8:1).

Luke also makes special mention of Saul’s role in this persecution, writing, **“Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison”**(8:3).

Bad things are happening to Christians in the early Church. Some are being killed. Many are being taken from their homes and thrown in prison. And God, being all-powerful, had the power to prevent all of this. But He doesn’t.

God, in His sovereign wisdom, did not prevent suffering of those Christians, but instead, chose to manage the outcomes for the greater good of the Church and for the advancement of His own glory.

You might recognize this principle from that familiar verse, Romans 8:28, **“God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”**

This is a hope-inspiring Scripture.

Friends, your suffering may be significant, it may even be severe, but *your suffering is never in vain.*

Now, as I bring these principles of consolation to you from the Scriptures, I wouldn't want you to think that I am diminishing the seriousness of suffering in any way. Nor would I want you to think that God's interaction with us when we suffer takes away all of the hurt—it doesn't.

Stephen was stoned to death for preaching Jesus. And while God ultimately brought good out of this horrific event, we ought not to gloss over the intense grief experienced by those who loved Stephen. Have a look at chapter 8, verse 2—Luke says **“Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.”**

I figure that I have officiated more than 150 funerals since I entered the ministry in 1998. I have presided over a funeral for an infant, and I have also officiated the funeral for a 12 year-old boy. I have seen profound expressions of sadness and been speechless.

Being a Christian does not insulate a person from grief. The pain is real, and sometimes the pain is enduring. *Being a Christian does not insulate a person from grief, but it does connect us to hope.*

God is not absent in our suffering, nor is He there as a helpless bystander. God has both the capacity and the desire to bring good from evil, and joy from pain.

Acts chapter 8 is one among many examples from Scripture where God demonstrates His ability to manage suffering in such a way that something immensely positive emerges.

Verse 4 begins with the transitional word, “**Therefore**”—that is, because of the persecution—“**Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the Word.**”

Bible commentators point out that there are different words for “**scattered**” in the Greek. One of the words means “dispersed” so that the item is gone from that point on. This is not the word used in Acts 8. The word used here means, *scattered in order to be planted*.

The disciples were scattered as a result of persecution. But, by causing the Christians to scatter, the Christian community became planted in many new places where they would then proceed to “**preach the Word**” ...and what ultimately followed the preaching of the Word was the expansion and growth of the Christian Church.

As John Stott points out, “(the devil’s) attack had the opposite effect to what he intended. Instead of smothering the gospel, persecution succeeded only in spreading it.”(Stott, *Acts*, 146).

Do you see the concurrent forces at work in the midst of suffering? On the one hand, the devil means to harm us and to dismantle our faith through suffering. On the other hand, God means to govern and limit our suffering in such a way that what ultimately results is something good and holy.

We have already said that suffering is bad. We all agree here. It's painful, it's unpleasant, it's disheartening. Yet, what is good is *what God produces in us through suffering*. And, as many Christians have recognized, what God does in us through suffering is usually more profound than what He does through prosperity.

Have you ever heard anyone say, "The most satisfying and growth-inducing days of my life have come in times of extended ease and comfort"? Nobody says that. It isn't true. What is true is what Samuel Rutherford learned when he was put in the cellars of affliction: "The Great King keeps his wine there".

What is true is what Charles Spurgeon discovered: "They who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls."

Charles Spurgeon, a man who suffered quite extensively in his life, wrote: "I am afraid that all the grace that I have got of my comfortable and easy times, might almost lie on a penny. But the good that I have received from my sorrows, and pains, and my griefs, is altogether immeasurable."

The Bible is clear on this point: Our Heavenly Father has a plan when He permits His children to suffer. Admittedly, the plan is sometimes difficult to see and, in some cases, we do not see the reasoning behind God's plan on this side of heaven.

We want our suffering to cease. I get that. We want our suffering to go away and to never come back. And so we pray accordingly, “Take this cup from me”, is our petition. “Lord, remove this thorn”, is our plea.

But I want to prepare you for the day when the cup of suffering remains. I want to help you to be ready for the occasion when the thorn of affliction is not removed.

You may find yourself in a terrible situation at the moment.

Nevertheless, I want you to remember that when you find yourself in the valley of the shadow of death, you are not alone. God is with you. His rod and His staff will comfort you. You have a reason to not be afraid.

Moreover, God promises to provide grace sufficient for your situation. He promises to work the circumstances in your life for your ultimate good and His ultimate glory.

In a few minutes, we will be singing the hymn, “It is Well”, written by Horatio Spafford. The event which occasioned the writing of this hymn is significant. In 1873, Spafford’s wife and four young daughters were on Ville du Havre sailing for England when it was struck by another vessel and sank. Anna Spafford survived, but all four of the Spafford’s young daughters perished.

Horatio Spafford sailed to England to grieve with his wife, and it was on this journey that he penned the words to this hymn.



My prayer is that God might grant to each of us the ability to sing this hymn in the day of trial.

My prayer is that our faith in God's goodness may allow us to declare, "When sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul". Amen.