

When Times Get Tough

Isaiah 55:8-11, Romans 8:28-30, Acts 8:1b-8
August 17 & 18, 2024

Good morning. For those of you that don't know me, I'm Jason Stewart, an Elder at First Reformed Church in Oostburg and a recipient of God's grace. It is an absolute pleasure to be here today at Fountain Park Global Methodist Church! The church I was born and raised in. That I was baptized in. That my children were baptized in. The place God saw fit to give many teachers and mentors an extra dose of patience as they nurtured my spiritual growth, starting all the way back to Sunday School teachers – Eileen Bailey I'm looking at you 😊. It doesn't seem that long ago when I was running up to lectern after service to get a small metal cross from Pastor Falk, or that I was in confirmation classes with Pastor Kotwicki, or that I was getting schooled in racquetball and invited to Wednesday night hymn sings by Pastor Tom, that I was being challenged to grow spiritually by Pastor Kerry, coached by Pastor Steve, and now encouraged and coached by Pastor Warren. I am eternally grateful for this church and this faithful church family.

When Pastor Warren reached out and asked me to preach, I was overjoyed. When I excitedly asked what topic I'd be preaching on - hoping for something that would be uplifting, inspiring and relevant (maybe the Prodigal Son for example?), Pastor Warren answered – Acts 8:1b-8, the persecution of the church. Of course. That's much better. 😊

God's plan was a bit different than my plan. That should come as no surprise though as the Lord told us this in Isaiah 55:8-11:

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Isaiah 55:8-11

⁸ *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"
declares the Lord.*

⁹ *"As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

¹⁰ *As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it*

*without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

Yes, God clearly tells us His ways and thoughts are greater than ours and he goes on to tell us why. The Elliot family knows this well. Inspired from an early age by Christian missionaries, Jim Elliot would attend Wheaton College and together with his wife, would follow the call of the Lord to the jungles of Ecuador where he would feel God's call to share Christ with the Auca tribe. A tribe known for its violence.

On January 8th, 1956 after some successful peripheral contact from an airplane, Jim Elliot and four other missionaries landed their plane and made direct contact with the Auca. The day started out well, with three Auca venturing out to spend time with the missionaries on that sandbar in the river where they landed. But by the end of the day, all five men would be martyred for their efforts.

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Was death part of God's original plan? No. God created a perfect world, where death did not exist. But our disobedience changed that. Did God abandon us for our disobedience? No. Instead he continued to work through it, as evidenced in Romans 8:28-30.

Romans 8:28-30

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who^[a] have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Jim Elliot didn't know what would happen next as he risked his life for others to know Jesus, but he knew whatever happened, God would work through it for good. Jim's wife knew this too as she continued to pray for the Auca tribe to know Jesus after Jim's death and would later go on to reach out, even live with the very tribe that killed her husband so they would know Jesus. Jim's son knew this and would later meet and forgive the man that killed his father and together they would share their story across the world so others would know Jesus (his testimony can be found here: <https://youtu.be/3vcv9vjNO8w>). And even though the book of Romans had not been written yet, the disciple Stephen knew this too.

Last week, in Acts chapter 7, we saw Stephen, after he was seized, boldly addressing the Sanhedrin (think of it as the Jewish Supreme Court), in a speech that details the Jew's long history of rejecting God's message and His prophets, and even goes so far as to call out the hardened hearts of the very council he's speaking to for rejecting the Messiah, God's son, Jesus Christ, which would cost Stephen his life.

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Let's pick up this week in Acts chapter 8:1b-8 and see how God works through Stephen's death.

Acts 8:1b-8

8 On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. **2** Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. **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. **4** Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. **5** Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. **6** When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. **7** For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. **8** So there was great joy in that city.

If the Apostles were surprised there was more persecution to come, they shouldn't have been. Jesus made it very clear that they too would be persecuted and scattered.

John 15:18-21

18 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. **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. **20** Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.'^[a] **If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.** If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. **21** They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.

And just a chapter later, Jesus reminds them:

John 16:31-33

31 "Do you now believe?" Jesus replied. **32** "A time is coming and in fact has come when **you will be scattered**, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. **33** "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Jesus made it very clear what was coming. But persecution wasn't new for the Apostles.

In fact, it's all they'd ever known. They had lived their entire lives under the polytheistic (fancy

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word for many Gods) Romans who conquered Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E. They had seen their promised Messiah put to death despite not having committed a single crime and now they had just seen one of their brethren stoned to death by their fellow Jews as the Jewish leaders attempted to stomp out the burning fire of the early church. But while these Jewish leaders were experts of the law, it was clear they didn't know much about physics. Because anyone with basic knowledge of physics knows whenever you stomp on a fire, embers fly everywhere and start new fires.

But stomp they did.

Acts 8:1b

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Fresh off his defeat at the cross, Satan hasn't thrown in the towel. He now desperately tries to stop Christianity from growing in Jerusalem. And to that end, he succeeds for the moment. The population of the Jerusalem church plummets as the disciples flee persecution in Jerusalem and are scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

But something's different. We see that immediately in the next verse,

Acts 8:2

Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.

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The Sanhedrin law of the time forbade public lamentation for executed criminals. Doing so would be considered a public protest and unacceptable, a crime even. Doing so for a man they themselves put to death would be even worse. Yet it happened. Even as persecution was rampant.

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.

There is a confidence, a boldness that we haven't seen before. What a much different behavior than when Jesus was seized and crucified! The Holy Spirit is on the scene here and working! But not just in Jerusalem....

Acts 8:4

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

It's unlikely the disciples were able to take much with them as they fled Jerusalem under duress, but we know they took the two most important things with them – the Gospel message and the boldness to share.

They were beaten, but they kept preaching. They were robbed, but they kept preaching. They were imprisoned, but they kept preaching. They were lied about and slandered, but they kept preaching. They were flogged, but they kept preaching. They were stoned to death, **but they kept preaching**. The crucifixion of Christ, the murder of Stephen, the persecution in Jerusalem by Saul created opposite reactions: These believers were not afraid, they were bold!

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Ironically – SPOILER ALERT – Saul would later understand this paradox first hand and write about

it after his own conversion and subsequent imprisonment:

Philippians 1:12

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters,^[a] that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.

Some translations read *"I want to report to you, friends, that my imprisonment here has had the opposite of its intended effect"* Where did the Apostles and disciples get this courage?

This boldness? The Holy Spirit obviously had a hand in it, but James reveals more to us later in

the new testament:

James 1:2-4

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

These believers were truly a new creation in Christ [2 Corinthians 5:17], their faith had been tested, they persevered and found the JOY in their trials. Perhaps they heard The Joy of Persecution sermon by Pastor Warren last month, but suddenly Matthew 5 made sense:

Matthew 5:11-12

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

Their transformation is evident in Acts 5:

Acts 5:40-42

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin,

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rejoicing because they had been counted **worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.** ⁴² Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, **they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.**

The Apostles and scattered disciples were a blessing to all they met, even in the midst of their persecution. When we look back in *Acts 1* they were given the direction:

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."

By Acts 8 they are executing that direction:

Acts 8:5-8

⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

God was working powerfully through the Holy Spirit, through the Apostles and disciples.

So powerfully, that even the Samaritans accepted Christ despite a long history of hostility between the two groups. And there was joy in that city because of it. What remarkable proof of

Romans 8:28!

Romans 8:28

²⁸ *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who^[a] have been called according to his purpose.*

Satan wanted the church to weep, instead the church rejoices. Satan wanted the church to suffer, instead the church advances. Satan wanted the church to be buried, instead the church is resurrected. Satan wanted the church to know pain, instead the church knows joy.

How is this possible? Let's go back to Isaiah 55 again:

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It will not return to me empty,
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Brothers. Sisters. Jesus was clear to the Apostles, to the disciples and to us. As believers, we will have trouble in this world. Read Matthew 24 for more details. But he was also clear that God's thoughts and ways are higher than ours. That His purpose is always accomplished. That God is working for the good of those who love Him ALWAYS and in all circumstances. That His will, will be done. This assurance, along with the promise of our salvation through Jesus Christ, is how we find joy and boldness in our temporary suffering. Joy and boldness when our faith is tested. And we are blessed for it.

Whatever circumstances or challenges we find ourselves in, may we all never stop seeking, teaching and proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and the great love of our Father, God almighty with joy and boldness. In Jesus name, amen.