

The Persecuted Church

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July 25, 2010

Acts: The Irresistible Church

Acts 4

It was on July of 2007, just about 3 years ago now, that 23 South Korean missionaries, a group comprised of pastors, doctors, nurses, and students, traveled to Afghanistan to share Jesus with the people there. They took seriously the words of Jesus who said, “Go and make disciples of all nations,” so risking all they had, even their lives, they traveled to one of the most dangerous places on the planet for a Christian. One day, as this group was traveling by bus through the Ghazni Province, they saw two men walking by the road and offered them a ride to the next village. These two men, upon boarding the bus, took out their guns and revealed that they were members of the Taliban. For the next month, these 23 missionaries were held captive while the Taliban demanded money for their release. And when the negotiations weren’t going the way they had hoped, the Taliban shot and killed the leader of the group, pastor Bae Hyeong Gyu, who was 42, and another man on the team, Shim Seong Mim, who was 29. Eventually, the rest of the team was released and were able to return home safely.

The news of this ordeal made national headlines, and in the aftermath of this great tragedy, this missions group came under scrutiny by the public and even some Christian organizations. They said, “Why did you go to such a dangerous place – a place where you knew they persecuted and killed Christians? Your own government warned you of the dangers! It was too costly! It was too risky! It was too dangerous!”

There is obviously an argument here to be made for using great discernment and wisdom in our missions endeavors, especially in hostile countries; that being passionate about the gospel is not a license to be careless. *But*, shying away from things that are costly, avoiding things that are risky, or running from things that are dangerous is not an option for the followers of Jesus. The Bible teaches us over and over again that being a Christian is a dangerous endeavor. Martin Luther, the Great Reformer, went so far as to say that *the* mark of a true Christian is suffering. So we read verses like these:

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.

2 Thessalonians 1:4

Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

2 Timothy 3:12

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

And Jesus says this to his disciples:

John 16:33

In this world you will have trouble...

I'm pretty sure he wasn't just talking about taking a hit on our 401(k). Jesus says, "You *will* have trouble!" Not, "You may, or could, or might." But, "You *will* have trouble! You *will* experience suffering! You will encounter persecution!" *But* he goes on to say:

John 16:33

But take heart! I have overcome the world.

Five weeks ago, we began a new sermon series on the book of Acts called, "The Irresistible Church." And we are taking this summer to go through the first half of the book of Acts to study the birth of the Christian church, so that we can learn, grow, and be inspired by what God did through a small group of dedicated men, women, and children 2,000 years ago – a story of which you and I are a part of this very day! And today, as we study chapter 4 of Acts, we will see that one of the great hallmarks of the early church was that it was birthed out of suffering and persecution.

I've titled my sermon, "The Persecuted Church." Let's pray together and then dig into Scripture.

Please turn with me to Acts 4:1-7:

Acts 4:1-7

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. 2 They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. 3 They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. 4 But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand. 5 The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. 6 Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. 7 They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

Rich taught last week on "The Healing Church" from Acts chapter 3, where we saw this man who was crippled from birth marvelously and miraculously healed so that he was able to walk for the first time since birth. This beautiful scene plays out where he is jumping up and down and praising God and there is this great buzz around town and everyone is talking about what God did in their midst. You talk about an irresistible church, there you have it! But, the story takes a very drastic turn in chapter 4, which we are looking at today. Here we witness the church at its very best experiencing its very worst. Persecution is unleashed upon the church and every single one of the 24

chapters that remain in the book of Acts, with the exception of 3, we see that persecution is a major theme. And Luke, the author of Acts, goes to great lengths to proclaim to the world that the church of Christ was birthed out this very persecution - that the advancement of the gospel goes hand-in-hand with persecution. Luke boldly declares that the Kingdom of God advances forward by not merely the words and the works of Christ, but also through the wounds of Christ! So, it's always the proclamation of the gospel, along with the demonstration of signs and wonders, *and* through suffering and persecution that the Kingdom moves forward! That's why Jesus says in John 15:18-20:

John 15:18-20

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: 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

Jesus is telling us that persecution is a normal Christian experience, so let us be ready for it.

Persecution is a normal Christian experience, so let us be ready for it.

Have you ever thought of persecution as being a normal Christian experience? Or maybe to ask an even simpler question, "What would you consider to be a 'normal' Christian experience?" I think that for many of us, we would define a normal Christian experience as going to a church once, maybe twice a month, and giving a few dollars when we can. I think we would define a normal Christian experience as love and charity towards the poor, the sick and the needy. I think we would define a normal Christian experience as deep community and doing life together, praying for each other, expecting and demanding the best of each other. These are all very, very good things, *but* where did we get the idea that this is "normal"? It certainly did not come from the Bible. You cannot read through this book and fail to see suffering and persecution leaping out from just about every page. The very symbol of our faith is a cross - an instrument of death!

The moment that you choose to live as Jesus lived, you too, will be persecuted. And Jesus tells us that in order to follow him, we must, as he did, take up our cross.

Persecution is a normal Christian experience and it comes in many forms and shapes. Persecution can be emotional or physical torture and violence. And at times, persecution can even lead to death.

This past April in Boto village in Nigeria, Pastor Ishaku Kadah and his wife, Selina, were dragged from the headquarters of their church, which was also their home, and they were beaten to death and their bodies were torched in flames by suspected Islamic extremists. This same group set fire to their church building in January, just days after

the church took in some Christian refugees who needed shelter. The brutal killings of this pastor and his wife are just the latest in a series of violent attacks against Christians in northern Nigeria.

And just a month ago, Maoist rebels in Nepal attacked Christians who had gathered to pray. The rebels ordered the Christians to stop the meeting. And when the pastor gently asked the group to come back the next day so that they can talk in private, the rebels began to beat him with sticks. When church members, including the pastor's father and women in the church, tried to defend the pastor, the rebels attacked them, too. The rebels also burned Bibles and hymnals during the attack. The following day, local villagers accused the Christians of not paying the "temple tax" and of "converting the local people to Christianity." Each family was ordered to pay the exorbitant tax, and Christians have been warned that they will be expelled from the village if they do not pay.

There are about 300,000 who die each and every year because of their Christian faith. As a matter of fact, more Christians were killed in the 1900's than all the previous centuries combined. About 14 million people died for their Christian faith from 33 AD to the year 1900. But in just the last 100 years alone, there have been almost 26 million people who died for their Christian faith! Persecution against Christians is not declining; it is on the rise!

But persecution is not merely physical and emotional violence from rebels. Persecution often comes from people closest to us. When we identify ourselves with Jesus, and we commit to live as he lived, persecution will follow. So when we, because of our faith in Christ, choose to not cheat on our taxes or our spouse, our friends may mock us. When we, because of our faith in Christ, choose to save sex for marriage, our boyfriend or girlfriend may ridicule us. When we, because of our faith in Christ, choose to stand up for the rights of the immigrants in our midst, our closest friends may abandon us. When we, because of our faith in Christ, choose to have that baby even though he has Down syndrome, our family members may criticize us. And there may come a day, when people will ask you, as they did Peter and John, "By what power or what name did you do this?" And at that moment, we have the incredible opportunity to make Jesus famous and give witness to Christ who lives in us. Some of us need to redefine what a normal Christian experience is!

Let's go back to Acts 4. In verse 7, Peter is asked, "By what power or what name did you heal this man?" And in response, this is what happens:

Acts 4:8-13

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 11 Jesus is "the stone you builders rejected, which

has become the cornerstone.’ 12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.” 13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

Persecution unleashes the Holy Spirit, so let us boldly proclaim the name of Jesus.

In the book of Acts, we see that in times of great persecution, God gives us his Holy Spirit. Persecution unleashes the Holy Spirit, so let us boldly proclaim the name of Jesus.

Acts 4:8

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them...

And later in verse 31, we read:

Acts 4:31

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

In order to truly appreciate what we see happening in this scene, we must realize that what is on everyone’s mind here is another similar incident that happened not too long ago that involved this same group of religious leaders who had brought Jesus to trial which ultimately led him to be crucified on a cross. So can you imagine what is going through Peter and John’s mind right now? Especially for Peter, he remembers that day all too well. He remembers how he had denied Jesus three times right after he made this radical declaration saying, “Jesus, even if everyone abandons you, I will never leave you!” He remembers how Jesus looked into his eyes after his third denial. He remembers running away and sobbing because he felt so ashamed and utterly broken. So when he is asked, “By what power or what name did you heal this man?” a flood of emotions must have coursed through his body. But we read in verse 8:

Acts 4:8

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them...

Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and that made absolutely all the difference in the world!

As I shared earlier, if persecution is a normal Christian experience, this leads to an obvious and rather challenging question for some of us: What if I am not experiencing any persecution for being a Christian? What if my normal Christian experience up to this point in my life has not involved persecution?

And if that's you, then my next question for you is, Are you an undercover Christian? Are you a Christian with a secret agent status? Are you so deep in disguise that no one has been able to discover your secret identity? To put it more seriously, are you a salt that has never made it out of the salt shaker? Are you so entrenched in Christian circles that you have never come in contact with people outside of the church? What's holding you back? Is it fear? Is it anxiety? Maybe you think you have nothing to share. Maybe you are afraid that you won't have all the answers. Maybe you are afraid of saying something wrong. If that's you, the story of Acts tells us that in times of persecution, in times where we are treading on dangerous waters, that it is *exactly* in *these* times that God fills us with his Holy Spirit to boldly declare the wonders of the cross. It is not in the safety of the boat where we experience the power of the Holy Spirit. It is when we step out of the boat in faith that God pours out his Holy Spirit.

John Wimber used to say that if you think the gospel is powerful inside the walls of this church, you should see just how powerful it is out there in the streets!

D.L. Moody, the great preacher and pastor from Chicago, when he was young, one of his friends told him:

The world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to him.

Moody was startled by this statement. He thought to himself, "My friend didn't say this man had to be an educated man or a brilliant man, or anything else. Just an ordinary man. Well, by the Holy Spirit in me, I'll be that man!" And the life of Moody is truly a demonstration of what God can do with man fully consecrated to him, a man filled with his Holy Spirit.

It is only by the Holy Spirit that we are able to do the impossible. It is only by the Holy Spirit that we are able to pursue the extraordinary. So, church, let me ask the question that one pastor asked his congregation:

What are we attempting which could not be accomplished without the Holy Spirit? What is there about our lives which demands an explanation? We will be "filled with the Holy Spirit" when we dare to do what could never be accomplished on our own strength and insight.

It is only by the Holy Spirit that the church was able to pray in verses 29 and 30:

Acts 4:29-30

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. 30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

In the midst of persecution, their prayer was not for their safety. Their prayer was not for their well being. Their prayer was not for deliverance from suffering. But by the Holy Spirit, their prayer was first, that they would be obedient to Christ's command to preach

the gospel, and second, that God will show his power through signs and wonders. And in response to this great prayer, we read this in verse 31:

Acts 4:31

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

The very place they are praying in begins to shake, and God fills them anew with the Holy Spirit, and they begin to speak the word of God with boldness and courage. When God pours out his Holy Spirit upon his people, what is birthed in their heart is courage, and strength, and power, and boldness to declare the word of God to the ends of the earth!

So let me ask you again: What are you attempting which could not be accomplished without the Holy Spirit? What is there about your life that demands an explanation?

Look at Acts 4:19 with me:

Acts 4:19

But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! 20 As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Those who are near to Jesus, those who are filled with the Holy Spirit, cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.

What have *you* seen and what have *you* heard? Are you merely living a Christian life based on borrowed faith and secondhand convictions? Are you talking about what your parents and friends saw, or what your neighbor and pastor heard?

It is perfectly good and fine for a child to grow up borrowing the faith of their parents. It is perfectly good and fine for a child to grow up borrowing the convictions of their parents. I believe that this is one of the most important things that Christian parents must do for their kids. *But* there must come a time when that child must stop borrowing and start living a Christian life based on their personal faith and their personal convictions.

Or maybe you are talking about something you saw or heard a year ago, 5 years ago, 10 years ago, and you feel as though the best days of your faith journey is behind you. And it is perfectly good and fine for us to remember what God has done for us in the past. We must do that! *But* a journey of faith cannot be based solely on our memories. We worship a God who was, and is today, and will be tomorrow and forever more.

So what are you seeing personally right *now*? What are you hearing personally from God right *now*? Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus right *now*, or are you living from memories of what was and used to be?

Look at verse 13 with me:

Acts 4:13

13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

When these men saw Peter and John, they knew right away that these men had been with Jesus. Wherever these men went, Jesus oozed out of them because they had been with Jesus. When you spend time with Jesus, people know. When you spend time with Jesus, people around you will feel it. You don't have to say anything. You don't have to do anything. When you spend time with Jesus, people know.

As I was preparing this sermon for the past two weeks, this has been my prayer for us, that the world will know us as the people who have been with Jesus, a people who exudes the presence of Jesus! And that no matter what suffering, hardship, or persecution may come, that we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard, because we are a people who is always spending time with Jesus, that we are always seeing what he is doing in our midst, that we are always listening to what he has to say to us. God may it be said of us this day, that we are a people of the presence of Jesus! God may it be so!

If you are here today and you want this personal relationship with Jesus, that people would know that you have been with Jesus, in just a few minutes, I want to give you an opportunity to enter into that personal relationship with Jesus! For some of you, you would say of yourself that the Christian life that you have been living has been one that has been based on borrowed faith and secondhand convictions. And if today, you want to have that personal relationship with Jesus, in just a few minutes, I want to give you an opportunity to take that step today.

Let me read to you these powerful words that Jesus spoke in his Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:10-12

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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.

Persecution is an opportunity for us to demonstrate the maturity of our faith in Jesus Christ, so let us persevere even unto death.

Persecution is an opportunity for us to demonstrate the maturity of our faith in Jesus, so let us persevere even unto death.

In the face of persecution, suffering, trials, and even death, we can persevere because friends, you and I know how the story ends. We know what is written in the last chapter of this great story. We know who wins. The great reward for those who persevere, even unto death, is the kingdom of heaven. The great reward for those who persevere, even unto death, is Jesus!

In Acts chapter 6, we are introduced to a man named Stephen, who the author Luke describes as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; a man full of God’s grace and power.” And Stephen, like Peter and John before him, is arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. And in response to their questioning, Stephen gives this marvelous speech which we read in Acts chapter 7, where he begins with the story of Abraham and declares how Jesus is the promised Messiah. And hearing this, the Sanhedrin is so filled with rage and anger that they drag him out of the city and begin to stone him. And while they are stoning him, we see this amazing scene play out:

Acts 7:59-60

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen was a man who knew how the story ends. He knew in his heart of hearts who wins. And in the face of persecution, in the face of suffering, even in the face of death, he persevered. And he received the kingdom. He received Jesus.

As we close, church, let’s read out loud together in unison these great words found in Romans 8:

Romans 8:38-39

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen! Let’s pray!

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1. Persecution is a normal Christian experience, so let us be ready for it.
2. Persecution unleashes the Holy Spirit, so let us boldly proclaim the name of Jesus.
3. Persecution is an opportunity for us to demonstrate the maturity of our faith in Jesus, so let us persevere even unto death.