

06-23-13 - Power for Progress Released by Persecution
Acts 2:22-41; 4:1-31; 8:1-4

The book of Acts is an encouraging document showing how effective we can be for the Kingdom of God through the Holy Spirit's power in our lives.

I hope you are realizing the focus on the Holy Spirit in every one of our sermons in this series. The powerful acts that are performed and individual experiences are great and part of God's plan, but it's not about them; it's about carrying out God's Eternal Plan to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit working in the lives of the Church.

When Jesus ascended into Heaven, He exchanged His own resurrected body on earth for a different kind of body on earth - the Church - the Body of Christ. It is a 24/7 Body that He can work through by the infilling Holy Spirit everywhere at the same time.

The key of Pentecost was not the signs, wonders, wind sounds and languages. The key of Pentecost is the formation of a new and distinct community - The Church. The book of Acts is all about the building and growth of the Church through the Holy Spirit.

We will be looking at three chapters in Acts today as we look at some outcomes of persecution and how the Holy Spirit uses adversity to forge the work forward.

Persecution strengthens spiritual resolve, releases spiritual power, produces spiritual growth, and propels spiritual progress through the dispersion of Jesus' followers.

Illustration:

An unusual evergreen is the lodgepole pine that is seen in great numbers in Yellowstone Park. The cones of this pine may hang on the tree for years and years, and even when they fall they do not open. These cones can only be opened when they come in contact with intense heat. But God has a reason for planning them this way. When a forest fire rages throughout parks and forests all the trees are destroyed. At the same time, however, the heat of the fire opens the cones of the lodgepole pine; and these pines are often the first trees to grow in an area that has been burned by fire. (Benjamin Browne, *Illustrations for Preaching*)

TEXT: Acts 8:1-4

The Church is Born Through Persecution:

Jesus is put to death by wicked men (2:23)

But you followed God's prearranged plan. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to the cross and murdered him.

Jesus was actually persecuted before the church existed. It was through his persecution and martyrdom that God's Plan could be inaugurated. God used Roman pagans as well as religious Jewish leaders to accomplish His Eternal plan of salvation through persecution.

God raises Him up (2:24, 32, 36)

However, God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life again, for death could not keep him in its grip.

"This prophecy was speaking of Jesus, whom God raised from the dead, and we all are witnesses of this.

So let it be clearly known by everyone in Israel that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified to be both Lord and Messiah!"

The persecution that caused Jesus' death was all part of a master plan to prove his deity as God raised Jesus from the dead, conquering the grave and furthering the very mission that the enemy attempted to kill by putting Jesus to death. Instead of stopping it, the mission of God moved ahead.

The Holy Spirit is poured out (2:33)

Now he sits on the throne of highest honor in heaven, at God's right hand. And the Father, as he had promised, gave him the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us, just as you see and hear today.

Through Jesus' persecution, God was able to propel the work of the Kingdom of God by giving Jesus the Holy Spirit to pour out on all believers forming the Church - the Body of Christ that would house the Spirit of Christ and empower individuals to carry out the work of Christ bringing the Gospel of Christ to the world.

Converts repent, are baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit (2:38-41)

*Peter replied, "Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **39** This promise is to you and to your children, and even to the Gentiles -- all who have been called by the Lord our God." **40** Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, "Save yourselves from this generation that has gone astray!" **41** Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church -- about three thousand in all.*

The gift of the Holy Spirit is promised by God over and over again in the Bible to ALL who believe in the plan of God. Everyone has been invited, but not everyone chooses to believe. It is conditional - you must turn from your sins and turn to God - then you will be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit and join the team of God in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ everywhere we go.

The Church is Emboldened Because of Persecution:

Church leaders are first arrested (4:1-3)

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the leading priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and some of the Sadducees came over to them. 2 They were very disturbed that Peter and John were claiming, on the authority of Jesus, that there is a resurrection of the dead. 3 They arrested them and, since it was already evening, jailed them until morning.

The Sadducees controlled the Temple guard and the captain of the guard was always a Sadducee. The disciples were doing a couple of things that really bent the Sadducees out of shape. First they were teaching the people – not a job for such as the disciples. This was the job of the Sadducees and Pharisees.

Second and more importantly, they were teaching that in Jesus there is resurrection from the dead and life beyond this one. This was strictly prohibited. The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection – that's why they were Sad-U-See :-). The apostles' message was deeply offensive and motivated the harsh reaction Peter and John received. The Law stated that no one could be punished unless they knew and understood their violation according to the Law. The Sadducees stated that Peter and John were unschooled ordinary men – they could not be punished under the Law.

Peter and John were arrested and imprisoned over-night. **Persecution!** They were then warned to cease and desist with their preaching vocation about Jesus. This set them up for subsequent harsh treatment since they would now be knowledgeable about their crime having been warned and instructed.

Church leaders are filled with the Holy Spirit and show courage (4:8-13)

*Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Leaders and elders of our nation, **9** are we being questioned because we've done a good deed for a crippled man? Do you want to know how he was healed? **10** Let me clearly state to you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed in the name and power of Jesus Christ from Nazareth, the man you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead. **11** For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says, 'The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.' **12 There is salvation in no one else! There is no other name in all of heaven for people to call on to save them.**" **13** The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men who had*

had no special training. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus.

Peter and John had just worked a miracle for a crippled man who was begging at a gate to the Temple. The people rejoiced and praised God; the healed man was jumping around and praising God. However, the religious leaders were indignant and offended. They questioned Peter and John and even put them in prison - They were persecuted. The people marveled at the boldness of these two apostles. They testified about Jesus. It was Jesus who healed the man not them; it was Jesus who they killed but could not stop; it was Jesus in whose name they preached; it was Jesus who was raised from the dead and they were eye-witnesses to this fact; it was Jesus alone by whom every human being must be saved from eternal separation from God; it is Jesus who fills with the Holy Spirit to give such boldness to ordinary men and women to proclaim the message of salvation in Christ in the face of persecution.

Church leaders pray for boldness and receive it (4:23-31)

*As soon as they were freed, Peter and John found the other believers and told them what the leading priests and elders had said. **24** Then all the believers were united as they lifted their voices in prayer: "O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them -- **25** you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor King David, your servant, saying, 'Why did the nations rage? Why did the people waste their time with futile plans? **26** The kings of the earth prepared for battle; the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' **27** "That is what has happened here in this city! For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. **28** In fact, everything they did occurred according to your eternal will and plan. **29** And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give your servants great boldness in their preaching. **30** Send your healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." **31** After this prayer, the building where they were meeting shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. And they preached God's message with boldness.*

Wow! That's a powerful prayer that was answered by God immediately. They were praying according to the will of God, to carry out the work of God more effectively. The signs and wonders are incidental to the mission, but proves further the work and power of the Holy Spirit in their lives and ministries. We all need this kind of power, and we need it all the time - over and over. Those praying were already spirit filled believers - It says "all the believers" were united and prayed. All were filled with the Holy Spirit. And all went about preaching the message of God with boldness. Do you need more boldness today? I need more boldness every day. We face situations daily where we could speak a word about Jesus, act more like Jesus, deal with people more like Jesus.

We need to be filled daily with the power and boldness of the Holy Spirit to accomplish God's plan.

Illustration:

A shipwrecked man managed to reach an uninhabited island. There, to protect himself against the elements and to safeguard the few possessions he had salvaged, he painstakingly build a little hut from which he constantly and prayerfully scanned the horizon for the approach of a ship. Returning one evening after a search for food, he was terrified to find the hut completely enveloped in flames. Yet by divine mercy this hard affliction was changed into a mighty advantage. Early the following morning he awoke to find a ship anchored off the island. When the captain stepped ashore, he explained, "We saw your smoke signal and came." Everything the marooned man owned had to be destroyed before he could be rescued.

(Walter A. Maier, *Decision magazine*)

The Church and the Gospel of Christ is Spread Through Persecution:

Great persecution hits the Church (8:1-3)

Saul was one of the official witnesses at the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem, and all the believers except the apostles fled into Judea and Samaria. 2 (Some godly men came and buried Stephen with loud weeping.) 3 Saul was going everywhere to devastate the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into jail.

While the church was beginning to grow, it was still contained within Jerusalem. Saul/Paul was a high ranking Pharisee and hater of this new movement that was growing in number among the Jews. He persecuted the believers mercilessly and was present and approved of the stoning of Stephen - a deacon in the new movement. Stephen became the first martyr and Saul was instrumental in scattering the believers away from Jerusalem. He thought he was doing a good thing for the Jews, but he was actually being used by God to do a great thing. Jesus told the apostles they would receive power and be His witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). Our text just indicated the beginning of the expansion of the church to Judea and Samaria. This great persecution hit the church of Jesus Christ and caused great unrest and fear and scattering, but God was at work.

Great persecution forces the Church to scatter (8:1-4)

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Jerusalem, and all the believers except the apostles fled into Judea and Samaria. 2 (Some godly men came and buried Stephen with loud weeping.) 3 Saul was going everywhere to devastate the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into jail. 4 But the believers who had fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching the Good News about Jesus.

So what happens when Spirit filled believers travel and settle in other areas? God will not leave us alone. God's Holy Spirit is in us as it was in them. Wherever we go we bring God with us. It soon becomes evident to others. We don't have to try, but filled with the Spirit's boldness and desire to do God's work, we are propelled to speak about Jesus - just as Peter and John told the council. They could not stop from preaching in Jesus Name. Let's see what happens when the Holy Spirit is active in believer's lives.

Great persecution forces scattered believers to preach everywhere (8:4)

But the believers who had fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching the Good News about Jesus.

The scattering of the believers due to persecution advanced the Gospel in new areas. They preached the Good News about Jesus everywhere they went. The church grew and fulfilled Jesus instructions. Eventually the church would expand beyond Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. I want to jump out of the text and talk about Saul the persecutor who became Paul the persecuted and all he accomplished through imprisonment and affliction, but I hope we'll get to that soon enough in our series.

Illustration:

A movie was made about Jill Kinmont's 1955 experience titled *The Other Side of the Mountain*. She was a wonderful athlete destined for the Olympics but a skiing accident left her paralyzed. Unable to cope with this tragedy, her fiancé wouldn't marry her. Then a new love came into Jill's life, but he was killed in a plane crash. The story does not have a happy ending. Many things in life do not.
(Arthur Bennett, *Valley of Vision*)

If God promised His servants an unbroken run of prosperity, there would be many counterfeit Christians. Don't be surprised at famine ... it is permitted to root you deeper just as a whirlwind makes the tree grapple deeper roots into the soil.
(F. B. Meyer, *Abraham*)

"Persecution is part of the fabric of the Church which is woven intrinsically so as to keep us from becoming complacent and remind us that there is a cost associated with becoming a follower of Jesus. The Early Church was born through persecution, refined through persecution, released through persecution, scattered abroad through persecution, and empowered through persecution. Persecution and opposition occur

both inside and outside the Church because the gospel of Jesus Christ is an offense to many (1 Cor. 1:23-27)." (Now is the Time: Acts - A Thirty Day Journey)

Challenge:

Persecution and opposition are a part of the experience of every believer. When faced with persecution and opposition, pray for boldness, and to be filled with the Holy Spirit afresh, and step out in boldness to proclaim the Good News of Jesus.

If you have received Jesus' sacrifice personally for forgiveness and are filled with the Holy Spirit, you have nothing to fear in times of persecution or even at the time of death. Persecution is not something we look forward to, but it can be used by the Holy Spirit as Power for Progress for the Kingdom of God.