

The Gospel Will Prevail

Acts 6:8-8:4

We are continuing to seek God's vision for our church together in the book of Acts and today we are going to see why God wants us to be a church that continues to prioritize global missions and have a passion for spreading the gospel among all nations, even in those areas that are the hardest to reach because of persecution.

One of the things that most of us are looking forward to is the day when Christ returns to establish his kingdom. The Bible tells us it will be a glorious day, filled with rejoicing for those who are in Christ – and it will only be the beginning of an eternity of overwhelming joy in Christ. We long for Christ's return more and more as the world around us sinks deeper into darkness and sin. Things are going downhill and it seems that it's picking up speed.

But when will that day come? The church has been waiting for almost 2,000 years and after so long it's easy to begin to wonder if it's ever going to happen. There are a couple of chapters at the end of the book of Matthew where Jesus talks about this with his disciples and he tells them what to look for – things that have to happen before his return. One of the things he told them is in Matthew 24:14: *“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”* This is a key verse behind the efforts of our denomination – The Christian & Missionary Alliance as we seek to reach the world with the gospel. Just this week in the Alliance Life magazine, the opening story had this quote: *“Jesus Christ coming in great glory and power to establish the Kingdom of God on earth is our principle motivation for completing the Great Commission in our lifetime.”* So if we want to do our part in preparing the way for Christ's return, we need to be a church that is passionate about the spread of the gospel, especially among people groups who have never heard.

The problem is, most of the people that have never heard are also those who are living in nations that are closed to Christianity. These are some of the strongest atheist, communist, and Muslim countries where it's illegal to preach the gospel and for those who dare, persecution is heavy.

One example from the most recent newsletter of News Service 2,000 is that of a man named Bahgat, a 40 year old veterinarian in the Egyptian city of El-Arish.

Bahgat and his family were Christians, but they lived in peace with their Muslim neighbors and had good relations with them. But according to his wife, things changed when Palestinian immigrants arrived. They had a very strict view on Islam. They reportedly spread leaflets warning Christians to leave the city or die. Bahgat was one of the first victims. According to his wife, he woke up early on a Sunday to go to church. After that, he went to work at the veterinarian clinic of one of his Muslim friends. Another Muslim friend witnessed the attack. Two young masked men entered the pharmacy and dragged him outside. They told him to kneel in the street. There they put two guns at his head and told him to convert to Islam. But he shook his head. Then they shot him.

It's hard for us to believe this kind of stuff is happening, but it is – every day in counties that are opposed to Christianity. With this kind of persecution going on, how will the gospel ever be preached in every nation? And if it's not, how is Christ's return ever going to happen? It can be a dismal and discouraging outlook. Today we are going to look at a passage that will give us hope. And more than that, it will give us a vision for the kind of church God wants us to be – a church that is passionate about supporting missions and the spread of the gospel in the hardest to reach places.

When we left off last week the church was enjoying a time of peace in Jerusalem. Gamaliel had convinced the Jewish leaders to back off and leave the Christians alone because their movement would eventually fizzle out and if it didn't, it might be because God was actually in it. Then, what we saw in the last verse we read last week – Acts 6:7 – “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” So things were rather calm and peaceful in Jerusalem. But then something happened that changed the future of that church forever. Some Jewish people from northern Egypt and Asia Minor were in Jerusalem and saw some things that alarmed them and they stirred up major trouble for the church.

Read Acts 6:8-15.

⁸And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words

against Moses and God.”¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

These foreign Jews did not like what Stephen was doing and confronted him, but they couldn't stand up to him and I imagine it was a blow to their pride. So they devised a plan to take Stephen out in an underhanded way – similar to what happened to Jesus. They convinced some men to bring false accusations against him and get the people riled up. And it worked. The people became very agitated. So they seized him and brought him before the council where more accusations were made.

The high priest gave Stephen the opportunity to defend himself, and his answer is in Acts chapter 7. Because it's so long, I'm not going to read it, but basically Stephen shared some of the history of the Jews to show them that their fathers were stubborn and rebellious against God the whole way. And then he turned the attention directly on them.

Read Acts 7:51-53.

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

With prophet-like authority he boldly confronted them and infuriated the whole gathering.

Read Acts 7:54-60.

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

This was the first time that a Christian was murdered because of his faith. The truth he spoke was more than they could bear so they killed him in their rage. And there was one man who seemed to be the main instigator and caused all kinds of problems for the church.

Read Acts 8:1-3.

¹ And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

We know from later on in Acts that Saul was from Tarsus, which is in Asia Minor and he was likely one of the foreign Jews who instigated this whole thing. And after Stephen's execution, he became the leading enemy of the church. He hated Christianity and sought to snuff it out with a zealous rage. The persecution he started was so intense that the people in the church had to flee for their lives and scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

So the church that was growing so rapidly and doing so well was suddenly devastated because of persecution. Things had changed so quickly and it appeared that the church was done for. With the people scattered the church would soon completely dissolve... you would think. I'm sure that's what Saul thought. But look what it says in verse 4.

Read Acts 8:4.

⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

That's a powerful verse. The persecution of Saul hadn't actually destroyed the church. What it did was cause the church to break out of Jerusalem and begin to spread like wildfire. The fire of the Holy Spirit that was in people's hearts could not be snuffed out. So as they scattered, they also spread the gospel. God used Stephen's death and Saul's rampage against the church to cause the gospel to spread more and more. The very thing Saul was trying to stop was now happening – because of him. God had flipped it completely upside down.

It reminds me of something we read two weeks ago – something Gamaliel said to the Jewish council and senate when they wanted to kill the apostles. He said this in Acts 5:38-39: *“So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”* Persecution cannot stop the spread of the gospel because God is behind it and he cannot be stopped.

In Matthew 16:18 Jesus told Peter, *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”* God has determined to build his church and nothing – not even the gates of hell – will prevail against it. The gospel will prevail. Persecution can't stop it because God can use it to spread the gospel more and more.

There's an ancient church leader named Tertullian who lived in the 2nd century when Roman persecution against Christians was very intense. He wrote to the Roman governor to tell him why they should change their policy against Christians and one of the statements he made has become quite famous. He wrote this: *“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”* In other words, *“If you keep persecuting and killing Christians, it will only cause the church to grow more and more.”* That's what God can do. Persecution can't stop the spread of the gospel. The gospel will prevail.

For this reason, we can be encouraged and have great hope that even though the last people to be reached with the gospel are in the hardest to reach places, eventually it is going to happen – as Jesus told his disciples, the gospel *“will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”* This is a promise and we can see it happening. The darkest places in the world are being penetrated with the gospel. We just spent a week with Tim

Lennox who told us about how the gospel was spreading in the Middle East and people were coming to Christ. The denomination we belong to has hundreds of workers in similar places, planting seeds, and sharing the gospel. The gospel will prevail, and that means that we need to continue to be a church family that supports these efforts as we look forward with great anticipation to Christ's return.

Each of us needs to ask ourselves, "What can I do to be part of this effort?" For some, this means answering God's call to actually go to these places. We have sent some from our very own church that are in them right now. We can also support those who are there through prayer and financial giving to support their work. Each of us has a part and as Christians continue to press onward we will see the nations reached and we will see the return of our King!