

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH JOYFUL SUFFERING

Acts 5:27-42

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin this morning by reminding you that as we read this book of Acts we are reading history. However, it is history written with a purpose. This history of what happened following the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus to and through his disciples is recorded by Luke to reveal things that cannot be known about reality, that is, about God, about humans, about Christ, about salvation, about the future of the world apart from this story. God is speaking through Luke's story to tell us about himself and his purposes and his work in his created universe.

So what is it that God aims to tell us by our text this morning? There are a number of subjects that God speaks about in this story of the apostles' "trial" and beating by the Jewish ruling council. We could talk about the gospel as it is summarized by Peter in vv. 30-32. We could discuss the extent of civil authority and the relationship of the Christian to that authority; that is, when are we to obey and when are we to disobey the government? We could talk about, in light of Gamaliel's speech when we should act to squelch false teaching and when we should passively permit it. We could talk about methods of evangelism. We could look at how the church is the ongoing remnant of believing Israel. However, it seems to me that there is an overarching theological reality that Luke is concerned that we understand as he recounts this story. He is addressing one of the most vexing problems confronting every Christian, indeed, every human being who gives any thought to the existence of God and the presence of evil in the world. This story gives an answer to both why is it that bad things happen to people who obey God and how those who obey God and suffer are to respond to the fact of their suffering.

The apostles are obedient to God and yet they are subjected to an unjust arrest and imprisonment; the hatred of people whom they are trying to help; an unjust trial and a vicious beating. Yet, at the end of the story they are full of joy and continue to energetically declare the glory of God as he is revealed in the life and work of Jesus, who is the Messiah. Why do they suffer and how in the world can they be joyful about their suffering? How is that they continue to do the very things that are going to lead them into more suffering? These are the central questions we are going to seek an answer to this morning.

MAIN POINT

Obedient Christians suffer—with joy because...

I. They rejoice in doing the will of God (vv. 27-29, 32 & 42)

The most obvious thing about these apostles is that they are obeying God. The angel that God sent to set them free from jail commanded them to go into the temple and preach the gospel, which is what they did. In addition, they obey God by submitting to the authority of the commander of the temple police and going quietly with him rather than resisting and beginning an armed insurgency against the Jewish authorities. Three times in our text the fact of their obedience is emphasized. In v. 29, in response to the chief priest's complaint that they have disregarded his previous command to not preach in the name of Jesus, Peter simply tells him, "We must obey God rather than man." In v. 32 he asserts that they are witnesses by the HS's inspiration who has been given only to those who obey. Finally, the passage ends with them obeying God by preaching in the temple and from house to house.

The suffering they encounter, being unjustly tried and then unjustly flogged 39 times with a whip, is the result of their obedience to God. It is due to their obedience that they end up suffering. They love doing what God wants far more than they love comfort and safety. The commands of God are to them life, sustenance and

happiness, not a burden, regardless of the cost they must incur as a result of doing his will. They view God's commands the way children regard their parent's command to get out of bed on Christmas morning to open presents, rather than the way they view their parent's command to get out of bed in order to go to school. So they suffer while they obey and because of their obedience. Please note: there is suffering that comes because of disobedience. What I'm going to say this morning does not pertain to that sort of suffering. Getting a ticket for speeding or destroying your life by drunkenness is not the same as suffering as an obedient Christian and thus requires a different response than this.

The Scriptures teach that all kinds of suffering come to obedient Christians, not only the suffering of persecution. We have only to think of Job, who was regarded by God himself as the most obedient man on earth at that time. Yet, all kinds of suffering came to him, not just the suffering of persecution. Then there is Joseph, Jacob's obedient son who suffers the betrayal of his brothers, being sold into slavery, falsely accused by his master's wife, and forgotten in jail even though he is faithful to God. The apostle Paul as he describes his commitment to obey God in preaching the gospel to the Gentiles makes a list of the variety of suffering he endured while obeying God. Some of that suffering was the result of persecution but much of it was the result of the vagaries of life. He suffered hunger and homelessness and shipwreck and worry over the well-being of those he loved while he obeyed and as a result of his obedience to God.

Obedient Christians suffer in all kinds of ways and it is because they delight in obedience and not comfort and safety in this life that they continue to have joy even while they suffer loss. If you want to be a person who responds with joy to suffering than you need to be a person who delights in obedience to God. There is no suffering that can ever come to you that can prevent you from obeying God and so if obeying God is what makes you happy, then no loss can ever rob you of your joy.

Obedient Christians suffer—with joy because...

- *They rejoice in doing the will of God*
- *And because...*

II. They have been saved by a suffering and exalted Prince and Savior (vv. 30-31)

Verses 30-31 are an amazing display of the unmerited favor of God which aims to save sinners. The chief priest has accused the apostles of seeking to make them guilty of murdering an innocent man. He and his cohorts in the Sanhedrin believe that they justly executed a blasphemer and a rebel when they killed Jesus and so they are mad that the apostles are portraying them as having murdered the Messiah. What I want you to see is the grace of God in the reply of Peter to this claim. First he says that it is the “God of our fathers” who raised up Jesus. He acknowledges their common loyalty to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He asserts that it was this same mutually shared God who raised up Moses as his servant who also raised up Jesus as his servant. Second, yes, he does restate the fact that they did indeed kill the prophet like Moses that God had raised up. In fact, he does not spare them the brutal truth. They, according to Deuteronomy 21:23 which says that anyone who is hung on a tree is cursed by God, treated Jesus, the one God sent as though God had cursed him. Yet, this one they treated as cursed by God, God himself raised from the dead and brought him to reign at his right hand as his Prince and Savior. Notice in particular the end of v. 31. God exalted Christ as Prince and Savior “so that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.” Do you see what Peter is doing? He is telling these men who murdered Jesus that he offers to them repentance and forgiveness. He is willing to cover over their great sins by his great atoning death and resurrection. The apostles are not being belligerent but declaring the grace of God that is available to sinners, including these hate filled murderers. We know, from v. 33 that they did not hear the words of Peter as an offer of grace but merely as rebellion to their authority and confirmation that their accusation is true: the apostles are seeking to undermine their authority with the people by making them out to be the murderers of God's Messiah.

While the Jewish leaders do not view this message as good news, it is apparent that Peter and the other apostles are astonished by this gracious work of God in Christ. While it is not stated here, we know from their previous

statements regarding the death of Jesus that God sent Jesus to die. While here they are emphasizing the guilt of the Jewish leaders, yet they know that the death of Jesus was both the will of the Father and of the Son. They know that his death is the death of the Lamb of God for their sins. They know that the exaltation of Jesus to God's right hand was for the purpose of giving them repentance and forgiveness of sins. Please do not miss what Peter is saying here. He does not say that Jesus gives people the chance to repent but rather that he gives people repentance. The apostles know that the only reason they have repented and that the Jewish leaders have not repented is because God has been gracious to them by giving them new hearts that want to repent while he has treated the Jewish leaders justly, with fairness, giving them what their sins deserve.

There are at least two things in this gospel of sovereign grace that give joy in the midst of suffering. First, these men know that they are secure in the love of God. They know that no matter what is done to them they cannot be separated from the love of Christ because their entire salvation from beginning to end is a work of Christ and is not in any way dependent upon their efforts. Their courage and joy is the result of what Paul says in Romans 8:35, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... no, in all these things we are more than conquerors..." If you know that the best thing that can happen to a sinner has happened to you, you have been given the gift of repentance and faith in Christ so that you are forgiven of your sins and loved by God for the sake of Jesus, then you do not fear the loss of anything in this world, not even your life. This is because this best thing can never be taken from you.

The second way this gospel of grace gives joy is they can see in Jesus the pattern for their own lives. Christ's great sufferings led to the greatest of exaltation. In the same way we who belong to Christ suffer with him and will be exalted with him as well. This is exactly what this same Peter says in his first letter, "Do not be surprised brothers at the painful trial you are enduring as though something strange were happening to you but rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." For the Christian, all suffering ends in joy, always. Whatever difficulty that we encounter, it is always temporary and always will end in eternal joy with God, just like it did for the exalted Prince and Savior we trust.

I know many of you have heard me describe how I sat weeping at the bedside of my oldest son after his accident, waiting to see if he would live or die and in the midst of that overwhelming sorrow I had a great sense of joy in the knowledge that both Jared and I were safe in the love of God and that we trusted a suffering Savior. I rejoiced in his wounds which were for me and for my son. I rejoiced in the presence of a wounded Savior who sympathized. I rejoiced in the knowledge that this Savior's suffering ended in glory and so I knew, right away that this is temporary and will end in glory for Jared and for our family.

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- *They rejoice in doing the will of God*
- *They have been saved by a suffering and exalted Prince and Savior*
- *And because...*

III. They know God determines the kind and amount of suffering (vv. 33-42)

The Jewish leaders upon hearing Peter's gracious appeal are full of fury and have but one thought, these men must die. You can just hear the clamor in the meeting place as furious men curse and scream for the execution of these troublesome men. At that very moment, help arrives from a most unlikely source. A member of the Sanhedrin, probably the most well-known and honored Bible teacher within Judaism at the time commands that they put the apostles outside the room so he can address the entire body of Israel's leaders. He makes a very simple and straightforward observation. Jesus isn't the first person they have known in their lifetimes to have risen up and persuaded lots of Jewish people that he was somebody important. Two men, Theudas and Judas, each convinced large groups of Jewish people to follow them. However, in each case, after each man died their followers disbanded and all the uproar came to nothing. In the same way he implies, if Jesus is merely a man and if his reputation is of merely human construction, these apostles and their followers will soon pass from

memory. However, he also warns them that if it turns out that Jesus is indeed from God and that these men are indeed speaking for God, then they, by killing the apostles will be adding to their rebellion against God. They will be fighting the God whom they claim to serve. So he counsels that they exercise restraint.

Gamaliel's wise counsel persuaded them and so they do not kill them. However, while Gamaliel kept them from killing the apostles the Sanhedrin does not believe that Jesus and the apostles were sent from God. They are convinced that these men are not sent from God because they again command them to stop preaching and then they seek to intimidate them by flogging. They flogged all 12 of the apostles, most likely with the whip that was made out of strands of leather with pieces of bone and glass tied to the tips of the strands. This was a violent and painful beating. They were each stripped and lashed 39 times with this whip.

Notice that in v. 41 the beaten apostles leave the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they were counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the sake of the Name. Who counted them worthy? Obviously, God counted them worthy. In other words, they understood that, just as God had ordained that the Jews and the Gentiles execute Jesus, so he had ordained that they be flogged by the Sanhedrin. They understood that this entire course of events, beginning with their original arrest, their deliverance from jail, the defense of Gamaliel and their beating was all under God's sovereign control. They were not at the mercy of men or demons but the kind of suffering and the amount of suffering was determined by God, just as it had been for Jesus.

I have praised God repeatedly that in his mercy he enabled me to understand this many years before Jared's accident. Jared and I discussed on many occasions, prior to his accident that God himself, not demons and not men, was in charge of the suffering we experienced in our lives. We knew and know that God always has good purposes for the suffering he sends to us. While there is great pain and sorrow in this suffering, yet there is a deep seated joy that is rooted in the knowledge that our loving heavenly Father determined, before the ages began that this suffering most fully accomplishes his good purposes to glorify his name and to give us eternal joy. I know that for many this sounds wrong. However, you have to explain hundreds of verses in the Bible that say exactly what v. 41 says, the apostles were counted worthy by God to be disgraced by this flogging. It was God's will that their backs be turned into raw meat by these cruel and unjust men. As we know that he is perfectly wise and loving and just, we must therefore conclude that this suffering is for their good and the good of the church and the glory of Jesus.

Obedient Christians suffer—with joy because...

- *They rejoice in doing the will of God*
- *They have been saved by a suffering and exalted Prince and Savior*
- *They know God determines the kind and amount of their suffering*
- *And because...*

IV. Their highest joy is Christ (v. 41)

The main reason for the joy of the apostles is they knew that God personally considered them worthy to be dishonored by this flogging. Being considered worthy of dishonor is an oxymoron. What God appears to be saying about the apostles is something like this: "I consider you to be so valuable, so faithful that I want you to be humiliated and afflicted with this extreme amount of pain." Usually when a person is considered worthy it means they are rewarded with some positive thing, like a trophy or a cash award. Do you see how this sentence is exactly the opposite of what those who preach the prosperity gospel say? The prosperity preachers say that God considers worthy of his blessing of money and health those who trust Jesus to give them prosperity without wavering. However, what v. 41 says is that God gives people over to dishonor, to extreme suffering because they trust in Jesus. I regularly criticize the teachers of the prosperity gospel not only because it is a great heresy, a false gospel but also because I regularly hear members of our own congregation use the same logic. Anytime you act as though God is in some way obligated to be nice to you because of your good behavior or great faith you are adopting the same mentality. God never acts towards Christians because we have earned his

kindness by our actions or faith but because he delights to have mercy upon his children. He acts on our behalf because of who he is, not because of who we are or what we do.

What exactly is the source of joy for these apostles? John Piper in his book “Desiring God” when discussing how it is that the Bible commands us to be joyful when we suffer (Matthew 5:11-12, Romans 5:3, etc.) says this, “The ‘...joy’ comes from the sense that you have endured with the help of Christ. You have been proven in the fire and have come through as genuine. You did not recant. Christ is real in your life. He is for you the all-satisfying God he claims to be. This is what the apostles seemed to experience in Acts 5:41... The joy came from the thought that their faith was regarded by God as real and ready to be proved in the fire of affliction.” In other words they are joyful because they are confident that God considers them Christians. The fact of their enduring the suffering fills them with confidence that they do indeed belong to Jesus. It isn’t that God views them as strong but that God views them as genuine objects of his grace. The fact that they suffered and endured proves that Jesus, the suffering and exalted Prince and Savior has indeed given them repentance and forgiveness of sins.

When life is going your way, you really cannot know if your faith is truly in Christ or in your savings account or your faithful spouse, or your successful children, or your secure job or your good health. However, when God counts you worthy of suffering disgrace then you find out Jesus really is your treasure and so you are filled with joy, even while you grieve in the pain. While this text does not say so, you can be sure that the joy these men experienced was accompanied by grief. I know this because Peter says exactly this in 1 Peter 1:6, “In this (coming salvation) you greatly rejoice even though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” The joy is due to belonging to Jesus and it is experienced while you suffer grief in the trial. That is why I have long insisted that the Christian life is joyous grief or grieving joy. This is the normal condition of the Christian.

No one in here, at least to my knowledge, has been counted worthy of being flogged for the name of Jesus. However, some of you, while living in obedience to Jesus, have been counted worthy of suffering in a difficult marriage, of suffering chronic illness, of suffering financial distress, of suffering the loss of a job, of suffering the scorn of friends and family for your Christian profession, of suffering the loss of a child through death or disability or rebellion. While you suffer the grief of the trial you will also rejoice as you discover that indeed God has saved you and given you a true faith in the true Christ. You will grow in the joy of God’s coming salvation while you grieve the loss and the pain of the suffering. As Christ is your treasure you will experience the reality of joyous grief when you suffer loss in this world.

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- *They rejoice in doing the will of God*
- *They have been saved by a suffering and exalted Prince and Savior*
- *They know God measures out their suffering*
- *Their highest joy is Christ*

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