

# Insanity of Obedience: Persecution

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Acts 16:20-34

October 29, 2017

We are in week 2 of our series on the Insanity of Obedience. What we are discovering is that Jesus calls us to live a life that may be radically different than what we learned. Some of Jesus' instructions sound uncomfortable and are even potentially dangerous. We are called to live sacrificially for the cause of Christ. We are called to live counter culture lives for the sake of the gospel but often we choose to ignore it: things like deny yourself and take up your cross, love your enemies, go the second mile, turn the other cheek, live generously. But when God asks us to do something that seems insane to us, we

are to step out in full-fledged obedience, relying on and trusting God.

And that means being faithful.

*There are good things that come from suffering*

Being faithful can be challenging. You may be misunderstood, laughed at, insulted, and maybe even threatened.

In Acts 16 we find the story of Paul and Silas. They were preaching and starting new churches in the city of Philippi. They met a slave girl who was a fortune teller and made a very good income for her owners.

Paul saw the plight of the girl, the bondage she was under, and set her free from the evil spirit.

When her owners found out what had happened, they were furious. This was an important revenue stream and they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them to the magistrates. Let's hear the story beginning at verse 20. *"They brought them*

*before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar<sup>21</sup> by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."*

*<sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. <sup>24</sup> When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks."*

Imagine yourself bloody, bruised, and humiliated. Unjustly thrown into jail without a hearing on trumped up charges. What would be your frame of mind? What are Paul and Silas doing? They are singing hymns to God. All the prisoners are listening in disbelief. They are having a jail house revival! Suddenly there is an earthquake and all the prison doors open up and their chains fall off.

The jailer came down to see what was going on, saw what had happened and assumed everyone had fled the prison. He prepared to take his own life, knowing that would be a more humane ending than the punishment for neglecting his post. But none of the prisoners have left. Paul calls out, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" The jailer falls down trembling before these two men of God and asks, "Sirs, *what must I do to be saved?*" They shared the gospel with him and he came to faith, took them home, cared for their wounds, fed them dinner, and he and his family were baptized.

It's insane! The doors were opened. Walk out; better yet run out Paul and Silas! High-tail it out of Philippi. It seems crazy not to leave. But they chose to stay. Not only that, when the magistrates came to ask them to leave town, they were in no in a hurry to leave. They have church matters to attend to and then they will leave.

Paul kept his focus on his purpose; sharing the gospel. He knew he could not surrender to his circumstances so he chose to surrender to his mission. He wasn't concerned about his imprisonment; he was concerned about spreading the gospel of Christ. He didn't complain about the unfair treatment he had received. He didn't ask for a petition drive demanding his release. He didn't even complain about the other preachers who were using Paul's imprisonment to denigrate him. He was only thinking about how God was using his incarceration for good. Paul says "*because of my chains*", not in spite of my chains, "*most of the brothers and sisters have been made more confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.*" When we stay focused on our purpose, everything else takes its proper place.

### ***There is a cost to being obedient and faithful***

But there is a cost to be paid.

Take for example the story of four young Hebrew men named Daniel, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego. In 586 BC the empire of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. The walls were razed, the temple was torn down and all the sacred vessels used in worship were taken to the pagan temple in Babylon, along with these four men.

They lost their homes, their culture. They lost the relationships they cherished. They would lose even their Hebrew names and the practice of their religion. They would live and die in a place that they never wanted to be. They would never go home.

But King Nebuchadnezzar wanted some young Israelites trained for government service. So they were put through a three year training program to make them

forget their roots and win their loyalty. It was quite a move up to go from being a slave to being in the King's service and they soon proved themselves to be good employees. Then Daniel interprets a dream for the King and they are promoted from civil servants to high level administrators in the government. Who would have guessed at this turn of events? They now have wealth, power, prestige, and access to the king of a powerful empire. All they would need to do is keep their heads down in order to keep their heads on. And that meant never questioning the king's orders.

But they do. In chapter three King Nebuchadnezzar builds an image of gold about 90 feet high. It's amazing. The project is complete and it's time for the dedication service. He invites all the important officials. It is announced that when the music begins, that everyone is to bow down and worship the image. When the king finds out that Meshach,

Shadrach, and Abednego are planning on not worshipping the image, he is furious. He calls them in and questions them. *"Is it true that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up?"*

Seems insane doesn't it? What's the big deal? Bow down and pretend to worship the image. They might have reasoned, "God knows what's in our hearts. Let's go along to get along. We can compromise a little."

Or maybe they thought, "No one will be harmed if we join in. There is no harm to anyone else. This is a victimless sin."

It must have been tempting to think these things. To think that living for the Lord is painless, easy, and fun. But sometimes there is a cost to being faithful.

Listen to how they respond, *"King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this*

*matter. <sup>17</sup> If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. <sup>18</sup> But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."*

The Bible records that the king was furious with this response. No one had told him no before. He ordered them to be thrown into a furnace heated seven times hotter than normal. It was so hot the soldiers who threw them in were killed. But not the three. In fact they are dancing in the flames...and now there are four in the furnace, not three and the fourth looks like "a son of God."

The king was shocked. He ordered them to come out, and everyone crowded around to take a look. Not only are they unharmed, they don't even smell like smoke. The king is so overwhelmed he

gives praise for the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and commends them for their courage to trust in God and defy his command. Then he promotes them.

Year ago when we were young and poor, some well-meaning church members invited us to become a part of an organization they had joined that would earn us some extra money. All we had to do was invest some money, invite 10 other people to do the same and the money would start pouring in. It sounded great. We told them we wanted to think about it. But I couldn't figure out how it worked, where all the money would come from. They continued to really push us to join. I dreamed of paying off all our bills and getting out of debt. I called my dad and asked his opinion.

"Mark, that's called a Ponzi scheme. Stay away from it." I argued back. "These are good church people. They say I can make

a lot of easy money.” Dad said what he always said, “Mark, there is no free lunch” It was tempting but I decided to listen to my dad’s advice. And about six months later the organization went bankrupt and our church members lost the money they had invested.

A friend of mine was in a business meeting in which one of their clients tried to persuade his boss to cut some corners that were unethical, if not illegal. Zach’s boss blew up and told him to leave and that their relationship was over. Then he stormed out of the office—and it was his office. Zach and the client sat there, dumbfounded. Fifteen seconds later, his boss came back into the office. “Did you hear me? The meeting is over. Zach will show you to the door.”

Zach knew his boss desperately needed the business the client offered, but he didn’t want the money bad enough to cheat others.

This man’s predicament is not unique to them. In all ages God’s people have been pressured to compromise what they know is right. The pressure comes from lots of sources; the government, employers, friends, family, our own desires for fame and fortune.

*We can’t be faithful and comfortable*

Sometimes we obey and are rewarded. But more often than not, we will find that we can’t be faithful and comfortable.

It’s tempting to think, “God wants me to be happy. He would *never* ask me to do something that makes me unhappy.”

Then we hear these words from Jesus found in John 15, “*If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.*”

There are some who say the Bible promises Christians that if they have faith and truly believe they will have

success, riches, and good health. It sells very well and there is a little bit of truth in it. What Jesus does promise is that you will be persecuted. You may be thinking “It seems insane to follow a religion that promises that bad times may be in my future. Who would want that?”

Did you know that all the Disciples died a martyr’s death except John and he was sent away into exile on Patmos? In Acts 5 the disciples were arrested and thrown into jail and flogged. Verse 41 says, “*They left rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name.*”

That’s exactly what Jesus had promised, his prophecy was fulfilled. In verse 21 it says “*they will treat you this way because of my name.*” Not because of your political position. Not because of your stand on social issues. Not because you are obnoxious or offensive but because of the name of Jesus.

### *Martin Luther*

On October 31, 1517, All Hallows Eve, 500 years ago this Tuesday, a German monk by the name of Martin Luther, nailed 95 theses upon the door of Wittenberg Castle church, hoping to start a public debate on the selling of indulgences. Instead he started the Protestant Reformation. An indulgence was sold by the church and bought by individuals either for themselves or on behalf of the dead that would release them from punishment in purgatory. Tetzel was the man commissioned by the church to sell them in Augsburg. He would say, "Once the coin into the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory heavenward springs!"

In the sixteenth century, the world was divided about Martin Luther. One Catholic thought Martin Luther was a "demon in the appearance of a man." Another who first questioned Luther's theology later declared, "He alone is

right!" In our day, nearly 500 years hence, the verdict is nearly unanimous to the good. Both Catholics and Protestants affirm he was not only right about a great deal, but he changed the course of Western history for the better.

He was born to peasant parents and raised in Mansfeld, where his father worked at the local copper mines. His father did well in the business and when Martin was only 13 years old, he was sent to the University of Erfurt to study law. There Martin earned both his baccalaureate and master's degrees in the shortest time allowed by university statutes. He proved so adept at public debates that he earned the nickname "The Philosopher." The next step was to go to law school.

Then in 1505 his life took a dramatic turn. As the 21-year-old Luther fought his way through a severe thunderstorm on the road to Erfurt, a bolt of lightning

struck the ground near him. "Help me, St. Anne!" Luther screamed. "I will become a monk!" The scrupulous Luther fulfilled his vow: he gave away all his possessions and entered the monastic life.

Luther was extraordinarily successful as a monk. He plunged into prayer, fasting, and ascetic practices—going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold without a blanket, and flagellating himself. As he later commented, "If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I."

He was trying to earn God's love but he found no peace. He was increasingly terrified of the wrath of God. During his early years, whenever he read Romans 1:17—his eyes were drawn not to the word *faith*, but to the word *righteous*. The text was clear on the matter: "the righteous shall live by faith." Luther could not live by faith because he was not



righteous—and he knew it. Meanwhile, he was ordered to take his doctorate in the Bible and become a professor at Wittenberg University.

During a study of the Book of Romans, he began to see a way through his dilemma. "At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I ... began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith... Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open."

Luther understood that salvation was by faith in Christ, not by our good works. He began to see that the church was not an institution, but the community of those who had been given faith. Salvation came not by the sacraments but by faith. Humility was no longer a virtue that earned grace but a necessary response to the gift of grace. Faith no longer consisted

of assenting to the church's teachings but of trusting the promises of God and the merits of Christ.

It wasn't long before the revolution in Luther's heart and mind played itself out in all of Europe. This threatened the church and Luther was threatened with excommunication. But he would not back down.

He was called to an assembly at Worms, Germany, to appear before Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. Luther arrived prepared for another debate; but he quickly discovered it was a trial at which he was asked to recant his views. The pressure was intense but Luther replied, "Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning ... then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience." Then he added, "Here I

stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen."

With the threat of arrest, he escaped to Wartburg Castle. Under the protection of Frederick the Elector, the reform movement began to spread. His legacy was profound. The Bible was translated into German. He wrote the hymn we sung today, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God"; and published his Larger and Smaller Catechism, which have guided not just Lutherans but many others since.

Luther's legacy is immense and cannot be adequately summarized. Every Protestant Reformer—like Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, and Cranmer—and every Protestant stream—Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, and Anabaptist—were inspired by Luther in one way or another. It resulted in over a billion new Christians around the world. His reform unleashed forces that ended the Middle Ages and ushered in

the modern era. One man, who refused to back down, changed the world.

### *Conclusion*

Whenever we stand for something we will face criticism. Sometimes we risk everything. We should never forget that hundreds of our forefathers and foremothers in the faith were burned at the stake because they believed in sola fide, faith alone, sola gratia, grace alone and sola scriptura, Scripture alone.

It seems crazy that one would risk their career or life. And you probably think you will never have to make that choice. But I want you to watch this video of Rachel Jacoby. Many of you know her; she grew up in this church and then Jesus really got a hold of her life and she has given up all to serve the poor in Mexico.

(Video)

Why would Rachel do that? Why would she give up the comfort of home, family, a

good paying job, and the rewards of success to do what she is doing?

Rachel does it for the Gospel. That's the most important thing in her life.

So let me ask you a question? What's the most important thing in your life? Why are you here? Do you know? For what purpose did God create you? How far are you willing to go to follow Jesus?