

## Upside Down Part 3

### Standing Up for the Gospel: The Cost of Following Jesus

- After Jesus ascended to Heaven the church began expanding.
- The believers were meeting in homes, sharing meals, and retelling the stories of Jesus.
- The apostles were preaching in the temple courts and thousands gathered to listen...to the point that the religious leaders became so angry with the followers of the Way.
- They thought they had taken care of this Jesus at the cross, but His followers were more emboldened to preach His message...that His death and resurrection forgave sin.

#### **Acts 2:47b (NIV)**

*And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

- They arrested the apostles numerous times, questioning them before the council. Persecuting, threatening, and intimidating...all to try to stop what Jesus started.

#### **Acts 5:29, 41-42, (AMP)**

*Then Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men [we have no other choice]. <sup>41</sup> So they left the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered to suffer shame for [the sake of] His name. <sup>42</sup> And every single day, in the temple [area] and in homes, they did not stop teaching and telling the good news of Jesus as the Christ.*

- With this great growth came greater persecution. Jesus told them this would happen.

#### **Matthew 10:22 (NLT)**

*<sup>22</sup> And all nations will hate you because you are my followers.*

- Persecution can strengthen us instead of shaking us.
- As Christians, we should expect persecution and not be surprised when it happens.
- Instead of being afraid and doubting God, let's be faithful and trust Him even more.

#### **Stephen's Story:**

- The early church began to experience growing pains and it required organization to meet the needs of the community.
- So, the apostles find 7 reputable men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom to help, one of these men was Stephen.
- Luke says he was full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith, and full of power. He was bold and didn't back down from sharing Jesus with everyone he met.
- Acts 6 says that Stephen was so convincing about the power of God that they falsely accused Him of blaspheming God.
- When he was taken before the counsel, they let him defend himself. Instead, he preaches this amazing message about all the prophets pointing to Jesus. But that they rejected the message and killed the prophets and Jesus.

- At this, they dragged Stephen out of the city, laid their coats before a man named Saul and picked up stones to throw at Stephen. (Death by stoning was a brutal form of execution)
- He echoed Jesus on the cross saying. “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” As he gave up his spirit, **Stephen became the first Christian martyr.**
  - *As American Christians, it’s hard to relate to this because of our freedom to worship God the way we want. So, to be persecuted for our faith and put to death seems foreign.*
  - *Today, more than 365m Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.*
  - *In countries like North Korea, Afghanistan, Libya, Sudan, Columbia, China, ...men, women, and even children are being killed simply because they follow Jesus. (4,998 killed last year) more than any other time in history.*
- When I think about those suffering today and how Stephen stood boldly without shrinking back, I’m challenged in how I follow Jesus.

Transition: *I don’t want to follow Jesus just for what He can do for me. Just when He’s answering my prayers. Hanging around for the blessing but when things don’t go my way, I’m gone. Let’s learn from the life of Stephen. **Let’s build an unshakable faith. A faith that doesn’t bend or break, even when persecution comes our way.***

### **Show Video: Children’s Impact Network**

- As a believer, we should feel this in our hearts and spirits. The Church is a body, and this is part of our body that is suffering because of their faith. We share in the responsibility by: Pray, Give, Go.
- While most of us will never experience this kind of persecution, all of us will experience some kind of persecution in our walk with Jesus.

***What would have happened had the heroes in Acts allowed the persecution to stop them from getting the Gospel out?***

### **People were counting on them, and people are counting on you and me.**

- People who turn the world upside down are going to be persecuted for turning the world upside down.
- But we can have the kind of faith that doesn’t back down and is never silenced when challenged.
- What will you do when you are made fun of, ignored, or lied about because of your faith? What about when family that doesn’t act like family or friends at work or school kicks you out of the circle? All because you stand up for Jesus.

### **Prepare for It.**

- Ready or not, it's coming. Jesus said it would. Yay! The promise of persecution!

### **John 15:18-20 (NLT)**

*<sup>18</sup> "If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first.<sup>19</sup> The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it hates you. <sup>20</sup> Do you remember what I told you? 'A slave is not greater than the master.' Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you. And if they had listened to me, they would listen to you.*

### **2 Timothy 3:12 (NLT)**

*Yes, and everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*

### **1 Peter 4:12-13 (NLT)**

*<sup>12</sup> Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world.*

- All the disciples were killed for their faith. They tried to kill John but couldn't, so they exiled him to an island where he wrote more of the Bible.
- The extraordinary faith of the early believers led to them being kicked out of their cities and disowned by their families. All of them today would say to us, don't be surprised.
- When you prepare for it, you are ready for it. It's not going to take you out.
- You've thought through your response and easily recognize when it shows up.
- We may not be challenged to die for our faith like Stephen, but we all be challenged to live for it. You might not be thrown in prison or have physical stones thrown at you but maybe they throw this kind of stone:
  - Preachy (trying to tell me how to live)
  - Intolerant (trying to tell me what is right and true)
  - Judgmental (Don't you know truth is relative?)
  - Clueless (out of touch, old fashion, 2024?)
- These stones are meant to take you out. Will you allow the verbal stones that people throw at you to silence you? Maybe I should be quiet and keep my faith to myself.
- Nope, you can stand strong when you are prepared.

## How to prepare?

### 1. Know your enemy.

- This is spiritual first.
- If you don't know the enemy, you can't prepare, or you'll fight the wrong enemy.

### *Ephesians 6:12 (NLT)*

*<sup>12</sup> For we<sup>[a]</sup> are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.*

### 2. Know the Word.

- It's easier to stand in your faith when you know what you believe.
- Make it personal, make it yours. Your faith can start on Sunday, but it can't stop on Sunday. It is meant to be incorporated into every day. It must be if we are going to stand strong. (This is why Grow classes and groups happen. Vibrant nights and Forged Meet Ups, Grow Kids, and MVMNT, Revive Young Adults)
- We've got have a foundation of faith so that when things come against us, we are not shaken.

### 3. Know your people.

- Look around at who is fighting with you.
- The only battle you can't win is the one you try to fight alone.
- Church was never meant to be a place to attend. God designed it to be a people who lived life together.

## Pray through it.

- The only way to get through it is to pray through it.
- Instead of getting hurt or consumed by it, what if we prayed through it?

### *Acts 7:55-60 (NLT)*

*<sup>55</sup> But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. <sup>56</sup> And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!"*

*<sup>57</sup> Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him <sup>58</sup> and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>59</sup> As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.*

- Stephen wasn't looking around at the people throwing stones at him, he was looking up toward heaven
- We tend to focus on what people are saying and get defensive or offended. "Well, I just want to tell them this." "After all I've done for you?" We end up breathing more life into the dead things people say and do instead of lifting our eyes to Jesus.

### **Psalm 121:1-2 (NLT)**

*I look up to the mountains—does my help come from there? <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth!*

- Don't be an obnoxious Christian: We don't live to make a point, we live to point people to Jesus.
- Pray through the persecution, calling out to Jesus because He knows what you are going through. He's been persecuted. He knows how to deal with it.
- This is crazy...Jesus actually instructs us to pray for those who persecute us and He makes it personal.

### **Matthew 5:10-12 (NLT)**

<sup>10</sup> *God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*

<sup>11</sup> *"God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. <sup>12</sup> Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.*

- Persecution marks our journey with Jesus. **He continues...**

***Vs. 44 But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!***

- "Expose them for the liar..." "Open the eyes of their evil hearts!"
- This is not easy but this is how Jesus shows us how to get through it! Because while you are praying for God's best for them, it changes you. The Holy Spirit softens our hearts towards them. He removes the weight of contention and concern.

***Dietrich Bonhoeffer- "This is the supreme command. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, we stand by his side and we plead to God for him."***

- When you learn to pray through persecution, it actually become a platform for Jesus.
- When people are ugly to you and say nasty things against you, and your response is grace and kindness instead of retaliation...that shouts the goodness of God.
- Who is that you need to pray for?

## Grow because of it.

### **James 1:2-4 (NLT)**

*<sup>2</sup> Dear brothers and sisters,<sup>[a]</sup> when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.<sup>3</sup> For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. <sup>4</sup> So let it grow...*

- Let's look at the way God does. Instead of avoiding it at all cost, let's embrace it so our faith can grow stronger.
- **Don't let persecution shake your faith, let it make your faith.**
- In the book of Acts, the early church never asked God to stop the persecution. Instead, they prayed for boldness to be who He had called them to be.

### **Acts 4:29-31 (NLT)**

*<sup>29</sup> And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word.<sup>30</sup> Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." <sup>31</sup> After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness.*

- They were not whining or complaining, they prayed for strength. They were saying "Take us out, we are done." Instead, they were praying, "Keep us strong, there's more work to be done."
- Here's the secret: We will choose whether persecution pushes us closer to Jesus or pulls us farther from Jesus. We can respond by running to Him or doubting Him.
- There are some things you can't learn unless you go through a storm. The disciples went through storms and came out with a revelation of Jesus that they didn't have before. You will too.

### **Romans 1:16 (NLT)**

*<sup>16</sup> For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes.*

Prayer/Response:

- 1. Receive Jesus**
- 2. Receive supernatural strength for persecution you're experiencing**
- 3. Pray for the persecuted church around the world.**