

MOSAIC
"Sacrifice"
March 15, 2015

"The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah."
Acts 5:41, 42 (NIV)

"A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria... But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went." Acts 8:1-4 (NIV)

"The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church."
—Tertullian, 2nd Century Church Leader

"...They don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word."
Matthew 13:20 (NLT)

Persecution has a way of separating the comfortable from the committed.

How should Christians respond to persecution?

- Prayer
- Financial support (<http://barnabasfund.org/>)
- Keep the issue in the public eye

"The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus."
Acts 5:41 (NLT)

Courage Builders:

- Unrealistic spiritual expectations always lead to disappointment with God. (Matthew 10:22; Luke 6:22,23)

Jesus: *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."*
John 10:10 (NASB)

- The battle is real and dangerous (Ephesians 6:12)

"Be sober and alert. Your enemy the devil, like a roaring lion, is on the prowl looking for someone to devour. Resist him, strong in your faith, because you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are enduring the same kinds of suffering."
1 Peter 5:8, 9 (NET)

- Lots of things don't make sense, yet. (Deuteronomy 29:29; Isaiah 55:8, 9)

"Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely."
1 Corinthians 13:12 (NLT)

When you learn to live with tension, you learn to live in peace.

- When it's all said and done, things work out in our favor. (Romans 8:28; 1 Corinthians 2:9)

"When you are reviled and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers—wonderful! Be happy about it! Be very glad! for a tremendous reward awaits you up in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted too."
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STUDY GUIDE

Mosaic - Persecution

Sunday, March 15, 2015

Welcome your group and be sure to make introductions all around if new people have joined you.

Opening Question:

Following last week's message on boldness, did you find any opportunities in the past week to demonstrate a willingness to take risks (either for Christ, or even in everyday matters)?

Main Idea:

Being bold and taking risks as a Christian today – whether by refusing to “hide” your Christian beliefs when in public, telling others what Jesus has done in your life, or spreading the good news (Gospel) of Jesus Christ around the world – can lead to negative, personal consequences. The same was true for the founders of the church, yet even with the severe persecution they faced they persevered and Christ's church flourished. Today we'll have the chance to see how Jesus can help us deal with the persecution we might face.

(Ask a member of your group to read this passage):

Acts 5:41-42 (NIV)

“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.”

Even after being arrested, miraculously released, and again brought back before the Sanhedrin, the apostles obeyed God and continued to tell the people about Jesus. What kept them motivated despite the troubles they were facing on a daily basis?

Although the apostles were released from the Sanhedrin this time, before they were let go, they still got a flogging and a stern warning not to speak the name of Jesus. They continued to do so anyway, and the persecution increased (ask another member of your group to read this passage):

Acts 8:1-4 (NIV)

“A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria... But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went.”

What happened when the church was persecuted? Somehow it flourished and multiplied like crazy! But on a personal level, Pastor Hank noted that **“Persecution has a way of separating the comfortable from the committed.”**

Have you ever faced bad personal consequences because of your Christianity? How did you respond to that situation?

If we're honest, many of us would say we've not faced a backlash because of being a Christian. What might that say about the way we are living out our faith? In what area of your life do you think you need to be bolder in telling people about Jesus?

As we think about where we might take more risks in Jesus' name, we can learn from the early church founders and take courage from these four principles:

1. Unrealistic spiritual expectations always lead to disappointment with God.

Many fights in our earthly relationships stem from anger that comes from unmet expectations. The same can be true in our relationship with God if we have unrealistic expectations of Him --- for example, that when God's involved everything is going to go great, or that He will give us great prosperity if we just ask for it, or that once we become a Christ follower our problems get fewer. But that's not what Jesus said:

Luke 6:22 (NIV)

"Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man."

In what part of your life have you held, or are you still holding, an unrealistic expectation of God?

Keep in mind that one of the most powerful tools the enemy has to deteriorate our faith is to get us to hold onto unrealistic expectations. Jesus reminds us:

John 10:10 (NASB)

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

2. The battle is real and dangerous.

Sometimes it's easy in our prosperous culture to focus on our own comfort...but when we do, we can easily overlook what's really going on around us (ask members of your group to read these passages):

Ephesians 6:12 (NIV)

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

1 Peter 5:8, 9 (NET)

"Be sober and alert. Your enemy the devil, like a roaring lion, is on the prowl looking for someone to devour. Resist him, strong in your faith, because you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are enduring the same kinds of suffering."

Signing up to be part of Jesus' great rescue mission can be dangerous...in fact, we should expect that the enemy will do everything he can to oppose our efforts.

Have you ever felt like you were under spiritual attack? What did you do about it?

3. Lots of things don't make sense, yet.

Isaiah 55:8-9

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Have you ever faced a situation that made no sense at the time, but now looking back you can see where God was at work in your life?

What's going on in your life right now that just doesn't make sense?

Truth be told, on this side of heaven we couldn't handle knowing everything that God has planned. But someday he will make us complete and our eyes will be opened (ask another member of your group to read this passage):

1 Corinthians 13:12 (NLT)

"Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely."

4. When it's all said and done, things work out in our favor.

(Ask another member of your group to read this passage):

Romans 8:28 (NIV)

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

This verse can bring great comfort, but it also can be misinterpreted. What are some *wrong* ideas that you've heard that incorrectly reflect what this passage tells us?

How can you correctly apply it to your own situation today?

Final Thoughts:

Matt. 5:11-12 (TLB)

"When you are reviled and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers—wonderful! Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a tremendous reward awaits you up in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted too."

We heard stories in Pastor Hank's message of people in today's world who have been persecuted because of their belief in Jesus Christ. Let's remember how Christians can and should respond to persecution around the world:

- Prayer
- Financial support (<http://barnabasfund.org/>)
- Keeping the issue in the public eye

Family Focus:

Lesson Plan: Bold Believers Around the World

Use this lesson plan as guide for introducing children in small groups to the concept of persecution.

Objectives for This Lesson

Students will learn the meaning of persecution. They will learn that people in some other lands are not free to pray, read the Bible, go to church, or tell others about Jesus.

Introduction

Explain: In some countries today, Christians can go to jail for offending someone of another religion, even if they did not commit a crime.

Recreate the size of some jail cells in countries where Christians are persecuted to illustrate the reality experienced by some Christians in other countries.

Needed: Empty space 8 feet wide and 10 feet long, marked off with tape or string.

Measure off a space 8 feet wide and 10 feet long. Ask six student volunteers to enter the space. Talk about where they would sleep and how they would do daily activities if they had to spend a long time in the prison. Let the students, or another group, sit in the "cell" during the rest of the lesson, maybe alternating groups after each segment of the lesson.

Overview

In our country, we are free to go to church and Sunday school, to read our Bibles, and to pray without anybody trying to stop us. But in many other countries, Christians do not have the same freedoms we have. Some of the countries have laws against building churches or printing Bibles. Others have rules against teaching children under 18 about God. In some places, people do not like Christians and try to give them a hard time.

Countries have different reasons why they make rules and laws to limit Christians. People in some nations worship other gods and they don't want anyone to show them a different way. In other places, government leaders want the people to honor the government more than they honor God.

How do you think Christians in these countries feel? (Accommodate answers.) Of course, most would rather not be treated harshly. But in many of the places, the churches are growing and the Christians are joyful! They are glad that God helps them stand strong for Jesus and guides them when they face problems. They feel joy when people in their countries trust Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The Christians are thankful that God has forgiven their sins and has promised to be with them forever.

They also appreciate it when Christians in our country pray for them. We will learn how we can pray for these Christians, and even for those who make problems for them!

Verse to Highlight

Explain: The Bible says, “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (Hebrews 13:3, NIV). The part that says, “as if you were their fellow prisoners” means to remember Christians who are having problems as if you were in jail with them. It would be hard to forget about someone who was in jail with you!

[If desired, pair the children off and give each pair a 12- to 18-inch piece of rope or string. Let one child in each pair hold one end of the rope while the other child holds the other end. Tell the children that the rope represents handcuffs, and explain that some prisoners are handcuffed together. Have them continue to stay in pairs and hold on to the rope as you finish talking about the following Bible verse and read the story. Encourage them to stay “bound together” throughout the story. Variation: Have only the children taking turns in the “prison cell” hold the ropes.]

One of the ways you can remember these Christians is to learn about their struggles. You can share what you learn with other Christians so they can remember, too.

Another way to remember is to pray. Some Christians in other countries are in prison because it is against the law in their country to become a Christian or to follow Jesus in the way the Bible commands. If you were in a dark, dirty cell in another country, you might not get much to eat. You could be in a cell all alone, or with prisoners who do not like Christians, or even with mice, rats, and bugs!

If you were in a jail like that, what would you like people to pray for you? (Accommodate answers.) The Bible tells us to do to others what we would want them to do to us. (See Luke 6:31.) So the things you would like people to pray for you are probably good suggestions for what to pray for Christian prisoners.

Bible Story: Daniel in the Lions’ Den

Ask: Does anyone know the Bible story of Daniel in the Lions’ Den? (Ask each of those who know the story to tell one thing they remember about the story. As you tell the story, acknowledge the parts they have already mentioned.)

Explain: At the beginning of the story, King Darius named 120 men to be leaders over his kingdom. Then he named three other men to be the bosses over those leaders. Daniel was one of the bosses.

Daniel was an excellent worker. He was so good that the king thought about making him the main leader over all the other officials. The other leaders were probably jealous. What does it mean to be jealous? (Possible answers: Feeling angry or upset toward someone who has something good, or who has done something well; wanting something someone else has.)

So the other leaders decided to try to tell the king something bad about Daniel so the king wouldn’t like him anymore. But they couldn’t think of anything he had done wrong!

Everyone knew that Daniel honored God. Over the years, he had made it clear that following God was the most important thing in his life. In fact, he prayed three times every day in front of an open window in his room.

So the officials tricked the king. They pretended to have a plan to give special honor to the king.

The leaders told the king, "We have agreed that you should make a new law. The law should say no one can pray to any god or person except you for the next 30 days. Anyone who doesn't obey the law must be thrown into a den of lions." The leaders actually wanted people to pray to the king as if he were a god!

King Darius liked the law, so he had it written down. Of course, Daniel knew that God's children must worship only the one true God, not other gods or people. That day, Daniel knelt to pray and thank God, just as he always did. The officials saw him, because they were watching him carefully. Then they went to the king and told him that Daniel broke the law.

King Darius liked Daniel, and he was angry with himself for making the law. He thought for hours about how he might help Daniel escape his punishment. But the king could not think of a plan. The law was the law.

The king had Daniel thrown into the den of lions. "Maybe your God will save you!" he said to Daniel.

A giant stone was placed in front of the opening to the den so Daniel could not get out. Then the king returned to the palace. He did not eat or sleep because he was so worried about Daniel.

The next day, he hurried to the lions' den to check on Daniel. He called out to Daniel from outside the den, "Did your God save you?"

"Yes!" replied Daniel. "God sent his angel to shut the lions' mouths and they have not hurt me!"

The king was delighted. He commanded his servants to let Daniel out of the den. Then he wrote a statement "to all peoples" saying that Daniel's God was great and should be honored by everyone.

Discussion Options

[Collect the ropes that "bound together" the children.]

Ask: Does anyone remember what Hebrews 13:3 says? (Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.)

Explain: The verse reminds us to remember persecuted Christians as if we were in prison with them. You have been holding ropes that represent handcuffs, as if you were in prison together. Do you remember who was holding the other end of your rope? (Accommodate answers.) It would be hard to forget someone who was in prison with you!

In the story about Daniel, why was King Darius angry with himself? Why do you think it was so easy for the officials to trick him? (Possible answer: It made him feel good that people were honoring him.)

What could the king have done differently when the officials asked him to make a new law?

Have you ever wished, like the king, that you had not done something you did?

Concepts to Introduce

Ask: What is persecution? (Possible answers: Persecution can mean someone is teased, picked on, or made fun of, or it can mean someone is arrested, put in jail, or injured. In some places and times, Christians have even been killed for their faith.)

How was Daniel persecuted?

Why do people in some areas persecute Christians? We have already discussed a few of the reasons: in some places, the leaders of the country want people to honor them and not God. Or most of the people worship different gods and don't want Christians telling them a better way.

The Bible also tells us some reasons Christians are persecuted. In John 15:20, 21, Jesus tells his disciples that they will be persecuted because people do not know the one who sent Jesus into the world; that is, they don't know God. But the Bible tells us that Jesus will be with us always and will reward those who follow him to the end. (See Matthew 28:20. Revelation 2 and 3 tell of various promises Jesus gives to those who continue to follow him.)