

"Overcoming Persecution"

5/5-6/07

6 p.m.; 9 & 10:45 a.m.

Acts 6:8-8:3

OPEN to Acts 6:8 (**PAGE** 1700)**INTRODUCTION**

Today we're looking at **"Overcoming Persecution."**

We're going to see from Acts 6 that **the goal of persecution is to silence believers who are witnessing about Jesus Christ.**

Persecution itself will never come to an end, but the goal of persecution can be overcome. ...

Since the goal of persecution is to silence believers who are witnessing about Jesus Christ ...

... to overcome persecution, we must keep speaking about Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit."

Around our world today, suffering for Christ can range from insults and rejection all the way to imprisonment, torture and death. Brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering at the extreme ends of persecution right now all around the world.

Just this last week the following was reported:

- In **Uzbekistan** a pastor has been sentenced to four years in a labor camp for preaching Christ.
- **Chinese** authorities released four American Christian workers and their interpreter from detention, but at least six Chinese pastors arrested with them remained behind bars Thursday.
- Two Christians were detained and tortured in **Vietnam**'s Central Highlands after security forces discovered they had been helping impoverished people in Jesus' Name.

- Last week in **Sudan**, an Egyptian and three Sudanese Christians were killed after holding an evangelistic meeting in Sudan's Nuba Mountains region.

There are ongoing and regular incidents of beatings, imprisonment, torture and/or murder in India, Cameroon, Eritrea and other nations in Africa, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, and throughout the Middle East.

And, a world-wide persecution of believers will be one of the characteristics of the Great Tribulation, at the very end of the end times.

So, persecution will never end until Jesus returns and establishes the Kingdom of God on Earth.

But, the goal of persecution ... silencing believers ... can and is being overcome daily around the world.

We're now going to look at the last day of Stephen's life, the first martyr of the Church age.

To overcome persecution...

I. Determine to be Jesus' Witness Regardless of the Consequences (Acts 6:8-7:1)

READ Acts 6:8-7:1

We don't know why "**The Synagogue of the Freedmen**" was so named. It may have been comprised of those who themselves or whose parents/grandparents had been set free from being prisoners of war or from slavery.

We are told that they "were from three divergent areas – **Cyrene and Alexandria**, two of the leading cities in North Africa, **Asia** (the western portion of modern-day Turkey), and **Cilicia**." (BKC)

"**Stephen**" is the same one we saw last week who was appointed one of the seven deacons.

Here's what we learn from Stephen about being a determined witness for Jesus Christ regardless of the circumstances:

A. Be filled with the Holy Spirit (6:5, 8-10)

In v. 5b Stephen is the first of the seven deacons mentioned, with the added explanation, **"a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."**

In v. 8 he is described as **"a man full of God's grace and power"** who **"did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people."**

And in v. 10, when Jews from the Synagogue of the Freedmen began to argue with him, **"they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by Whom he spoke."**

He is **controlled by the Holy Spirit** and not the heat of the argument or personal pride to win the argument.

The **reason** Stephen is **full of the Holy Spirit** is because He is not full of himself. He has emptied himself of self-will and asked God to fill him with the Holy Spirit. He chooses to be full of God and not full of himself.

C. S. Lewis said, *"God gives His gifts where He finds the vessels empty enough to receive them."*

One pastor wrote, *"When I began emptying myself of me – my selfish desires and habits – the Holy Spirit was free to live out His life through me. I no longer stifled His work by wanting to do things my way."*
(Charles Stanley, Spirit Filled Living)

Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit.

B. Saturate yourself with God's Word (6:9-10)

Stephen is so **full of wisdom** as a result of being thoroughly saturated in the Scriptures that the Jews cannot stand up against him.

We'll see more of how he was saturated with Scripture in chapter 7.

APPLICATION

1 Peter 3:15b **"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."**

Are you ready to tell someone why you believe in Jesus? Can you tell why you know you have eternal life? Can you explain why your sins are forgiven?

Stephen was saturated with God's Word.

C. Trust the Holy Spirit to speak through you (6:11-7:53)

Luke 12:11-12 **"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, 12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."**

In Acts 6:11 - 7:53, Stephen is swept up into a plot that caught him by surprise. We see the persecutors persuade some men to lie about Stephen, then

they stir up the people, elders and teachers of the law, and

take him before the Sanhedrin (high court of Israel) and the false testimony is given.

When he's called upon to answer the charges, he does not cower before these men who could have him jailed, beaten or killed.

But, beginning in 6:15, Stephen stands, full of the Spirit, trusting the Spirit to speak through him:

- v. 15: God shines through him,
- 7:2-50: He expresses his reverence for the God of Israel,
- 7:17-43: He states his belief in Moses as God's leader,

- 7:44-50: He explains the history of the Temple and the Sanhedrin's misunderstanding of it,

READ 7:51-53: He confronts the Sanhedrin's disobedience to God and the Law, and their murder of the Messiah.

Acts 7:54: **"When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him."**

They wanted him silenced ... BUT ... they had tried to silence Peter and John with threats and it didn't work. Later they tried to silence all the apostles with a severe beating.

Those threats hadn't worked and now the Sanhedrin is dealing with the same issue again, but this time with Stephen.

APPLICATION

By trusting the Holy Spirit to speak through us, we can also speak in situations that feel very threatening:

- You can witness on the job during your breaks and lunch hour. When you're on the clock, your boss is paying you to do a job. So, it's a poor witness to be taking time to share Christ when you're being paid to work. I realize some of you may have more flexibility here, but this is the general rule.

- Students are free to witness at school.

- Teachers are free to respond to student's questions re: spiritual things.

- In the U.S. we have legally protected freedom of speech.

When you feel threatened, trust the Holy Spirit to strengthen you and speak through You.

To overcome persecution...

II. Rest in God's Favor (Acts 7:54-60)

READ Acts 7:54-60

A. God strengthens Stephen with a special gift (v. 54-56)

- A vision

- Overwhelming honor: Jesus was standing Usually Jesus is sitting at God's right hand, symbolizing His completed work over sin and the devil.

Now He is standing. I believe Jesus is standing because He said that if we stand for Him on this Earth, He will stand for us in Heaven.

And, He is standing to welcome Stephen into His presence.

B. Stephen is overwhelmed with the Holy Spirit

Sometimes the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of Jesus.

Notice how much like Jesus Stephen is in his dying moments, as they are hurling rocks against his body:

Luke 23:46: "Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.'"

Acts 7:59: "While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'"

Luke 23:34: "Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'"

Acts 7:60: "Then he (Stephen) fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'"

If I was being stoned, I can see myself trying to cover up to protect myself, running away to save my

life, or, possibly picking up the rocks and throwing them back ... trying to take a few of them with me!

But Stephen isn't full of himself, he is full of the Holy Spirit, and God enables him to die a death like Jesus, fully trusting God with His plan for His life.

Brothers and sisters, God loves you, and He will give you whatever you need in the moment of persecution ... whether it's rejection, verbal abuse, threats, jail, torture or death. He will not abandon you!

To overcome persecution...

III. Continue to Proclaim God's Word (Acts 8:1-4)

READ Acts 8:1-4

A great persecution broke out against the Church in Jerusalem, the Church scattered, and they spoke about Jesus everywhere they went.

By silencing Stephen's voice, they scattered and motivated thousands more voices and the Gospel spread everywhere they fled!

It is interesting to note that early Church leader and writer, Tertullian, observed that persecution of the Church actually had the opposite effect of what persecutors desired.

Persecution actually resulted in more people coming to Christ. Tertullian is famous for saying, "*The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.*"

They overcame the goal of persecution by continuing to speak for Jesus.

To overcome persecution...

IV. Pray for the Persecuted Church

Just a few weeks ago, we learned of the grotesque torture and murder of three Christian leaders in Turkey. Two were Turkish citizens who had turned from Islam to Christ, one a

missionary from Germany. Two of these men left behind a wife and children, one his fiancé.

They were murdered by five young Muslim men who said they did it for Allah.

"In an act that hit front pages in the largest newspapers in Turkey, Susanne Tilman, wife of the slain German missionary, expressed her forgiveness in a television interview. She did not want revenge, she told reporters. 'Oh God, forgive them for they know not what they do,' she said, wholeheartedly agreeing with the words of Christ on Calvary (Luke 23:34).

"In a country where blood-for-blood revenge is as normal as breathing, many, many reports have come to the attention of the church of how this comment of Susanne Tilman has changed lives. One columnist wrote of her comment, 'She said in one sentence what 1,000 missionaries in 1,000 years could never do.'"

Turkish pastor Fikret Bocek said, "Please pray for the Church in Turkey. Don't pray against persecution, pray for perseverance."

A member of the church in Turkey said, "We pray - and urge you to pray - that someday at least one of those five boys will come to faith because of the testimony in death of Tilman Geske and ... of Necati Aydin and Ugur Yuksel, the first martyrs for Christ out of the Turkish Church."

The purpose of persecution is to silence believers. Persecution is overcome when we continue to witness to Jesus Christ, no matter the cost.

CONCLUSION

1. Be filled with the Holy Spirit and rely upon His wisdom and power.

2. Saturate yourself in God's Word.

Be ready to explain what Jesus has done in your life, and to tell someone else how they can receive Christ.

3. Trust the Holy Spirit to speak through you.

4. Continue to share about Jesus

"Father, we pray for our sisters and brothers in Turkey. Please strengthen them to continue to live for Jesus and share His message. Please bring the young men who killed the missionaries to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. And, Father, please comfort the widows and children, and the fiancé of those who were martyred. Please be their strength and comfort in a supernatural way. And, I choose to be a witness for Jesus, no matter the cost. Please fill me with the Holy Spirit so that He will speak through me. And, please speak to me through Your Word so that I will be ready to answer anyone who asks me why I believe in You. In Jesus' Name, Amen."