

by him, we are his servants, running errands and doing chores. We are not just his allies. We are his agents and ambassadors. We are not merely his dependents, we are also his disciples to whom he gives tough assignments. We are not just God's guest; we are his host. We are more than his creation; we are his channels. We are not merely members of Christ's body; we are means to his ends. We are holders of both a sonship and a servanthip. We have a charge to keep, a race to run, and a course to finish.

In many maiming and mean situations God often makes his goal while our goal is missed. Moses misses the promised land but God plants his "peculiar people" there. David's dream to build God a house is denied, but God gets it done through his son. Paul did not make his journey into Spain, but the Gospel did.

Finally, when the areas in which we work are unpromising and the possibilities unknown, we can be refreshed in remembering that the best is yet to come. God has prepared for us some better things. When at a wedding in Cana Jesus turned water to wine, the governor of the feast remarked to the bridegroom essentially this: "You have saved the best for the last" (John 2:10).

This is a fitting parable and prophecy of what our Lord has done for his laborers. Golden streets, pearly gates, jasper walls, and trees bearing twelve manners of fruit with leaves which are good for the healing of the nations are symbols and metaphors used by the Seer of Patmos (John) to say that the best is yet to come.

New Testament evangelism is inseparable from New Testament eschatology. Evangelism stipulates the imperative (go make disciples). Eschatology supplies the incentive (I will give thee a crown of life). The New Testament church bore the "bitter now and now" by beholding the "sweet by and by." They did not stagger at the promise: "In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). They felt intensely the inscrutable desirable destiny for the Christian pilgrim that Paul expresses: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (I Cor. 2:9).

## GOD AT WORK IN TIMES OF PERSECUTION (ACTS 7:54-8:8)

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Most of us have witnessed God at work in normal circumstances in a given country. Some have experienced adverse situations and even severe persecution. In these portions of Scripture we will try to analyze how God worked in the early church in times of persecution, and also how God is working in this modern day in times of stress and persecution of the Christian church.

Persecution is a storm that is permitted to scatter the seed of the Word, disperse the sower and reaper over many fields. It is God's way of extending his kingdom; bringing good out of evil and making the wrath of men to praise him. "All things work together for good. . . ." "There is that scattereth and yet increaseth," we are told. So it was when the Huguenots were driven from France, the Protestants from Spain, the Puritans from England, and the North Koreans to South Korea.

Persecution brings about growth. Through persecution Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were able to bring a heathen and adulterous nation to recognize the fact that there is one true God. Because of persecution upon Elijah's ministry, the people of Israel realized who their true and living God was.

As we study the book of Acts, these facts stand out:

- first impressions produced in Jerusalem
- first pentecostal message
- first opposition
- first true communism
- first discipline
- first persecution
- first church organization
- first Christian martyr

Usually we are fearful when we hear of great persecution of a church or a group of Christians. But the church's greatest danger has never been created by persecution or opposition. When she has been opposed and persecuted she has been made pure and strong. Wherever the church is patronized and admired by the world she becomes weak. How shall we safeguard against this? We must obey God. If the church is obeying God she can never be weakened by patronage, and she can never be paralyzed by compromise. She must forevermore stand alone bearing her testimony, opening her portals to receive the wounded in order that they may be healed. A great church stands ready to take the wanderers back again, and lead them to health and blessedness; never permitting the standard of her ideals to be lowered or her message of righteousness to be silenced.

Persecution of Christians and the church has been one of the greatest factors in the propagation and evangelization of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we read the book of Acts we find that the persecution of Stephen was so intense that they literally gnashed him with their teeth. The reasons for persecuting him were probably many, but these three seem to be very evident: (1) they claimed that since the Apostles were untrained they were causing confusion by performing miracles; (2) the Sadducees particularly objected to the fact that they were proclaiming the resurrection; (3) all of this was associated with Jesus for it represented a real blow to their authority.

During the conflict with the Koreans, Communist soldiers moved into a peaceful farm village of South Korea. Some time before this, a faithful missionary brought the Gospel to this village. Those who were converted soon were witnessing to friends. It wasn't long until most of the folks in this village had turned to Jesus Christ in simple faith. One day the Communist soldiers made all of the people of this particular village gather at the village church. They told them that they were to renounce their faith in Christ or face certain death. The soldiers jerked a picture of Christ off the wall and ordered each person to come down in front and spit upon the picture of Christ. The first man to walk down the aisle was a deacon. He looked at the picture for a few seconds, then quickly spat, and walked to one side. The man who followed him did the same thing. The third and fourth men imitated the first two men's actions. The fifth person to walk forward was a young teen-age girl. She looked at the picture of Christ and then bent down and wiped the spit off with her skirt. She hugged the picture of Christ to her heart and said, "Shoot me, I am ready to die." The soldier couldn't shoot. He ordered everyone to get out. Shortly afterwards four shots were fired. The people overheard the Communist soldiers say, "You are not fit to live. If you had a chance to renounce Communism, you would do the same thing." Because of the strong faith of one young girl, the rest of the village was saved. "Whoever shall save his life shall lose it . . ." When severe persecution comes, people are gnashed at with teeth, cried out at, they who are doing the persecuting stop their ears and refuse to listen to reason. All sense of direction is gone and men act inhumanly.

In verse four we find that the Christians were scattered abroad. At the time of Stephen's death there was a crisis in the history of the church. Now Jerusalem ceases to be the center of interest. It almost fades from the pages of history until recent years. Because of persecution, the church now moves out upon the pathway of her victorious business, independent of Jerusalem. This is the supreme revelation of the book of Acts. Whenever the church is governed from Jerusalem or Rome, or any place other than Heaven, it is hindered and hampered and prevented from fulfilling the Great Commission.

Recently a Christian historian told me that in 1945 North Korea had approximately eighteen per cent of her population Christian, and South Korea only claimed three per cent to be Christian. Five years later, when the Korean War broke out several million people evacuated from the North to the South as refugees. Many of these were Christians who could

not survive under Communism and were forced to move to the South. They brought with them their vigorous Christian faith and caused the church in the South to grow and spread like wildfire. Persecution during adverse circumstances caused the evangelization of South Korea. Those who came from the North went everywhere preaching the Word and establishing a place of worship and witness. Today in South Korea, the church growth is four times faster than the population growth.

One of my dear pastor friends was forced to leave his parents and two children in North Korea. He came south with his wife and two babies. He has personally won thousands of souls to Christ. God works mightily during times of persecution.

Great joy was in the city, we are told in Acts, chapter eight, verse eight. Through tremendous persecution and hardship and suffering and even the bitter experience of losing all their earthly goods, yet there was great joy!

Korea, and particularly the Christians, have suffered much persecution. Still, in God's infinite grace, Christianity has made a greater impact upon our national life than in any other country in Asia. Severe persecution came to Korea when she was occupied for a number of years by a neighboring country. Many of the churches were closed and missionaries told to leave. Christians were jailed and some gave their lives for their faith. A small Methodist church, located thirteen miles from my home in the village of Jae-am, was opened up without explanation one Sunday morning. The Christians came joyfully to the church. Then the doors were locked from the outside, gasoline was poured around the church and it was set on fire. A squad of police surrounded the building, ready to shoot any who might try to escape through a window. Twenty-nine people died inside the burning church. They died singing the hymn that Korean Christians still love to sing,

"Nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee  
E'en though it be a cross  
Nearer to thee."

After the second World War, a group of Christians erected a monument and engraved the names of those twenty-nine people who gave their lives for Christ in the church that Sunday. A few years ago, a group of pastors came from the country that had occupied Korea. They visited this village and saw the monument and heard the story behind it. They returned to their home country and raised \$25,000. They used this money to erect a church in the place where the old one had burned down. On September 27, 1970, at 3:00 p.m. the beautiful church was dedicated. It was my privilege to attend this dedication service. The church was packed out. The group of pastors who had raised the money were there too. As we sang the final hymn, automatically men got up from their seats and embraced one another. They were proving that the past had been forgiven and forgotten. Only Jesus Christ could reunite two enemy peoples like this. Since then many of the people in that village and the surrounding area have turned to Christ in faith. Do not be discouraged. Let us go on. We are more than conquerors through Christ. Amen.