Never Persecuted in Vain

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Preacher: Mike Scrivani

[0:00] Music. Acts chapter 8 verses 1 through 8.

! And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentations over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.
Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.
For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.
[1:14] Okay, if you were at church on Sunday, which I think most of you were, you might have remembered I shared briefly about the testimony, the story of Jim Elliott and the four other missionaries who were martyred by the Aka Indians who they had been trying to reach.

And that as a result of their deaths, the Indians, the Aka Indians, eventually many of them end up coming to faith in Christ. Well, there was more that happened as a result of these men's deaths. And so I wanted to share with you a little bit more about one of their own testimonies, and then the wife of Jim Elliott, some things that she had to say about how far-reaching of an impact their lives had and their martyrdom had on many.
So the first I want to share with you is a quote from Nate Saint. And he was one of those who was martyred that day with Jim Elliott. And he wrote this in one of his journals. As we weigh the fight and seek the will of God, does it seem right that we should hazard our lives for just a few savages?
As we ask ourselves this question, we realize that it is not the call of the needy thousands. Rather, it is the simple intimation of the prophetic word that there shall be some from every tribe in his presence in the last day.
[2:36] And in our hearts we feel that it is pleasing to him that we should interest ourselves in making an opening into the Aka prison for Christ. So even though this tribe may be few in comparison to the many other thousands, it was his conviction and the rest of their conviction that one from every tribe and tongue and nation would be there at the end of time, worshiping Christ in all of eternity.

And so they were determined that at least one of these Aka Indians would be there, would be saved. Elizabeth Elliott, the wife of Jim Elliott, commented about the far-reaching impact that this tragedy had across the world.
Let me read. This is a lengthy quote from her. She said, To the world at large, this was a sad waste of five young lives. But God has his plan and purpose in all things.
There were those whose lives were changed by what happened at Palm Beach. And I think that's the nickname they gave for the location where they were martyred. In Brazil, a group of Indians at a mission station deep in the Mato Grosso, upon hearing the news, dropped to their knees and cried out to God for forgiveness for their own lack of concern for fellow Indians who did not know Jesus Christ.
From Rome, an American official wrote to one of the widows, and he wrote, I knew your husband. He was to me the ideal of what a Christian should be. An Air Force major stationed in England with many hours of jet flying immediately began making plans to join the Missionary Aviation Fellowship.
[4:06] A missionary in Africa wrote, Our work will never be the same. We knew two of the men. Their lives have left their mark on ours. Off the coast of Italy, she says, an American naval officer was involved in an accident at sea.

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As he floated alone on a raft, he recalled Jim Elliott's words, which he had read in a news report. And the words were these, When it comes time to die, make sure that all you have to do is die. He prayed that he might be saved, knowing that he had more to do than die. In Des Moines, Iowa, an 18-year-old boy prayed for a week in his room, then announced to his parents, I'm turning my life over completely to the Lord.
I want to try to take the place of one of those five men. So you see that the impact was far-reaching beyond just even the people, the Yaka Indians, who they ended up reaching.
Again, many with the gospel. Blood that is shed by Christians for the sake of the gospel is never shed in vain.
[5:13] Though it may seem that way to some, God has a purpose in it, and the impact of a martyr's life is far more reaching and more productive than they would even probably have ever thought possible.

Like those five men, Stephen's life appeared to be cut short right when he was entering his prime years of ministry. He seems like someone who God would want to keep alive.
He knew the Old Testament well. He was a good preacher. He was somebody who the church valued. They put him in a leadership position. And he was somebody that you would think God had a lot left in store for.
And so we can read this and come to this question, which was, why wouldn't God deliver him from this situation when he did that for others, as we've seen?
Why would God not rescue Stephen from the death that he encountered? And we'll get to that in a minute. On top of all this as well, Stephen's ministry seemed to be a failure.
[6:19] Right? He was labeled as a heretic by those who were seeking to trigger him. And then his death spread, or resulted with a widespread persecution of the church that ended up scattering them outside of Jerusalem.

So from an outsider's perspective, you could look at Stephen and his life, and the results that happened right afterward, and you could come away thinking that he was a failure.
But that would be coming from someone who doesn't understand God's sovereignty and the way in which the Holy Spirit works. John MacArthur says of this, Satan's attempt to stamp out the church's fire merely scattered the embers and started new fires around the world.
Tertullian also said the blood of martyrs became the seed of the church, which we will see happen here. So again, for context, up to this point, Jerusalem has been the epicenter of the church in the book of Acts.
And here marks the beginning of its moving from the primary setting of the book to taking more of a background in the gospel, or in Acts, as the gospel is taken by Christians from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria, and we see the beginnings of it going to the ends of the world.
[7:47] The murder of Stephen by the Jewish leaders marked their final rejection of the gospel, and God's design for the gospel to move out into new territory. So here we see in verses 1 through 3 that the church is ravaged by persecution.

The church is ravaged by persecution. And again there it says, And Saul approved of his execution, speaking of Stephen. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem.
So here, for the first time, the church encounters the same persecution that before had been primarily directed at its leaders.
So now we see for the first time in the New Testament that believers, church members, are experiencing outright persecution from its enemies.
And we see here also that the champion of the persecutors was a man named Saul of Tarsus. And we also know him. He became Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.
[8:53] Later, Paul would become one of the greatest champions of the church. But here we see that he began as one of its fiercest enemies.

From Paul's writings in Scripture, we can piece together a sort of autobiography of who he was to get a better sense of the type of man that he was before he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus where he was converted.
In Acts 22, verses 3 through 4, Paul is back in Jerusalem. And he is speaking to his fellow Jews. And he says to them, I am a Jew born in Tarsus in Sicilia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel, according to the strict manner of our fathers.

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Being zealous for God, as all of you are this day, I persecuted the way, speaking of the Christian faith, to the death, building and delivering to prison both men and women.
So here we have Paul saying, giving his autobiography, right, that I was a Hellenistic Jew, being born in the Roman city of Tarsus. He was instructed by the most well-known and most highly regarded rabbi of his time, who was Gamaliel.
[10:12] Not only did he have the greatest teacher, but Paul himself was his greatest student. He was a brilliant man. Incredibly brilliant man. And very zealous for God.

The problem, though, is that his zealousness was for the wrong thing. He had zeal, but it wasn't for the right thing. And so that should remind us, as well as, you know, the members of Al-Qaeda and ISIS, they have an incredible amount of zeal for their beliefs, don't they?
But that doesn't mean because you simply believe something to be true that it is true or that it is right, which is certainly the case with those men. And certainly was the case with Paul before he was converted.
In Galatians 1, 13 through 14, he gives us more information about who he was before he met Christ on the road to Damascus. There he says, For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and I tried to destroy it.
And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people. So extremely zealous was I for the tradition of my fathers. So again, Paul had the best teacher and he was the best student.
[11:29] This man was on the fast track toward having a tremendous career as a Pharisee. And he viewed his persecution of Christians as an opportunity for him to personally advance himself.

And then again, in Philippians 3, 5 through 6, we have him say of himself that he was circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law of Pharisee, as to zeal of persecuting of the church, as to righteousness under the law, he says, I was blameless.
So if you were looking for someone to lead a persecution against the church, Paul would fit that bill better than anybody else.
And he was very effective at what he was trying to do. Ironically, in the same way, or ironically, I should say, in the way that God works, Saul, who consented to Stephen's death, would later suffer for more, more for the cause of Christ than Stephen ever did.
Right? Stephen faces persecution here, really for the first time, physical persecution, and it ends in his death. On the other hand, the Lord said this about Paul in Acts 9, 16, I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake.
[12:56] Paul faced death many times and experienced all kinds of intense forms of persecutions of all sorts as he served the Lord.

But I don't want you to get the wrong impression here. I think you could take a statement like that and come to the wrong conclusion that Jesus was trying to get revenge on Paul, right? As if he's saying, hey, you hate me so much, listen, I'm going to force you to do what you hate to do.
I'm going to force you to become the very type of thing that you hate. Paul didn't see it that way. I want to conclude his statement there in Galatians 1, 13 and 14 with verse 15, where he says, but when he who had set me apart before I was born and who called me by his grace, so Paul understood that Christ calling him was by grace and certainly that he didn't deserve that calling.
Again, Philippians 3, 7-8 concluding that portion of Scripture that we read just previously. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.
For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ. The Lord could have put an end to his persecution, certainly.
[14:19] He could have obliterated Paul before he began ravaging his church. He could have prevented his birth. But in all this, God had a plan and through the example of Paul reveals to us what it means to love your enemy.

The Lord took one of the greatest enemies of his church and He had mercy on him, forgiving him and saving him and setting him free from all those things that he once considered to be gain.
Paul suffered for Christ, but he viewed his suffering for Christ as reason for further rejoicing. If you are capable of knowing all that God knows, you do everything exactly as He's chosen to do it.

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I'll say that again. If you were capable of knowing all that God knows, you'd do everything exactly as He's chosen to do it.
Right? Even Paul said, He set me apart before I was born, knowing that Paul would one day, Saul would one day be a ravager of his church, but knowing ultimately how he would use Paul's life for his greater good.
[15:30] Timothy Keller says this, and it's very filmic, similar to the statement I just made about if you knew all that God knew, you'd do exactly what God has chosen to do.

He says, if we knew what God knows, we would ask exactly for what He gives us. And that's true. If we had God's knowledge, if we were able to understand all the things that God does, we'd do everything exactly the way that God has chosen to do it, even the suffering that we endure for the gospel.
The result of the persecution was that the believers were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria except for the apostles. They remained in their post.
They continued to shepherd the flock that remained in Jerusalem. The next thing we see here in verses 4 through 8 is that persecution leads to productivity for the church.
Persecution leads to productivity for the church. These Christians had faced tremendous persecution and Saul was going from city to city seeking them out, dragging them out of their houses and arresting them.
[16:41] Their families would have been broken up and they may, for many of them, they may have never seen their spouse or their children ever again. So we've got to understand that at this point in time in his life, Saul was a terrible person.

Doing terrible things to Christians. And so you'd think here, maybe, that if you were in their place, again, if you were taking an outsider's perspective and you were looking at what was going on, you'd think for these Christians that had faced this persecution, who were being sought out by this man who was bloodthirsty for their lives, right, and killing them and breaking up their families, that you would hide.
That you'd run and hide, that you would cower in fear. But instead, we see that that's not at all what these crazy Christians do. Instead, it says there that they went out preaching the word.
Went about, that's a Greek word, it's one word, and it's used frequently in Acts in regards to missionary endeavors. So, they were not running and hiding, they were going out and they were on mission to reach people with the gospel.
They were preaching. In the Greek, that's euangelizo, which refers to preaching the gospel. So, here we see that all the scattered believers were evangelizing.
[18:11] They weren't running and hiding, they were going to people and they were sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with them. And so, again, this verse shows us that some Christians are specifically or specially gifted as evangelists, but again, we see here that all Christians are called to be evangelists.

Every single one of them who was scattered went out and they were preaching the word. Satan's persecution promoted the very thing that it was designed to destroy.
It fired up the believers to go and take the gospel to new areas where it hadn't been before. So, Christianity may seem to be on the decline in the United States of America.
At least, it seems to be plateauing. You guys know all the statistics about churches that have plateaued or churches that are having to close their door and certainly there is a great concern here in the United States of America that the church is not growing and having the kind of impact that it ought to be having or at least that it used to have but, in actuality, the church, Christianity, is growing in the world.
It is still the fastest growing religion in the world and the areas where it is growing the fastest are areas where Christians face intense persecution.
[19:38] In what two continents, I'm asking you, in what two continents is Christianity growing the fastest? Okay, Asia is the second. We all think it's the first.

You guys, okay, Georgia knows. Africa. Africa is number one and Asia is number two. I want to read to you an article that I came across when I was preparing the study today.
Let me find it for us real quick here. This is from Facts and Trends website by Aaron Earls. And this is what he wrote.

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Europe birthed Protestantism. North America helped spread it around the world but the future of Protestant Christianity appears to be in Africa and Asia.
Today, 41% of all Protestants live in Africa. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, by 2050, the year 2050, that number is expected to swell to 53%.
[20:44] Out of 560 million Protestants, more than 228 million call Africa home in 2017. That's more than two and a half times as many as Europe and almost four times as many as North America.

Can you believe that? Asia has the second highest Protestant population with almost 100 million. In 1910, the ten nations with the largest population of Protestants were all in Europe or former British colonies such as the United States, Canada, and Australia.
Only three of those nations, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, remained on the list in 2015. African nations like Nigeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia jumped onto the list along with Brazil and the Asian countries of China, India, and Indonesia.
Of the ten nations with the fastest Protestant growth rate from 1910 to 2015, seven are African including the top five which are Rwanda, Burundi, Cota d'Ivory, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Chad, and then Vietnam is number six.
More recently, however, Asian countries have experienced significant growth. Among the ten nations with the fastest Protestant growth rate from 2005 to 2015, five are Asian and four are African.
[22:14] So again, reading that one stat that by 2050, Africa potentially, get this, could be sending missionaries to the United States of America.

Whereas for so long it was the other way around. And there's kind of this joke, you know, growing up in youth group and in seminary, this, Lord, I'll go wherever you want me to go, just don't send me to Africa.
And so I can imagine in 2050, the African saying, Lord, I'll go wherever you want me to go, just don't send me to the United States of America.
God has a sense of humor. In verse five, the Holy Spirit focuses on one man as the example of a faithful evangelist and that is Philip.
Philip is the first missionary named in Scripture and he becomes the key figure here for the rest of this chapter. This is not the Apostle Philip who would have stayed in Jerusalem, but one of the seven, if you remember, who was chosen to serve the needs of the Hellenistic widows of which Stephen was one.
[23:24] His faithfulness to that task led the Lord to use him to have an even wider impact in a greater ministry. Although Paul later instructed Timothy to do the work of an evangelist in 2 Timothy 4.5, Philip is the only man in Scripture who is actually given the title of evangelist and that is in Acts 21 verse 8.

That is a fitting honor in light of his pioneering work in spreading the gospel. Beginning his evangelistic work, it says there that Philip went down from the high plateau of Jerusalem to the city of Samaria, which was located some 40 miles north of Jerusalem.
It was the ancient capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, which if you recall was founded by Omri in 1 Kings chapter 16 and he then moved the capital there from Terza.
After nearly a century and a half of idolatry and rebellion against God, the city fell to the Assyrians under Shalmaneser the 5th in 722 B.C.
Samaria's downfall marked the end of the northern kingdom. Many of its people were resettled in other lands by the Assyrians who also located their own people from other nations back into this region.
[24:45] And the result was that there was a mixing of Jews and Gentiles and those people, their children, became known as the Samaritans. 2 Kings chapter 17 verse 33 records their religious syncretism.

It says there that they feared the Lord and served their own gods according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had carried away into exile. So it sounds like there were people where, you know, kind of like it is in our world today.
You know, believe whatever you want to believe, worship whatever you want to worship, you know, it's all good, all paths, all roads lead to heaven, do your own thing. Friction soon developed between

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the Samaritans and the Israelites.
When some Samaritans offered to help rebuild the temple, they were rejected despite their claims to be worshippers of the true God back in Ezra chapter 4. Hostility between Jews and Samaritans grew during the intertestamental period and was also evident during New Testament times.
If you remember, the Lord had defied covenantal, or conventional, excuse me, opinion by announcing his Messiahship to who? A Samaritan woman.
[25:57] Back then, in those times, even for the Jewish people, it was a taboo to even literally step foot in the land of Samaria. They would do whatever they could to avoid that country and to avoid those people, but there we see Jesus speaking to the woman at the well, speaking to a woman in Samaria.

He himself is in Samaria and he is declaring to her the gospel and that he is the Messiah. So Philip here was doing things that authenticated him as a true messenger of God and the people, some of them, were receiving the gospel and believing, these Samaritans.
Verse 7 gives us an example of what some of those miracles were that Philip performed. It says there that in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them and they were shouting with a loud voice and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed.
Luke notes that those possessed by unclean spirits or demons were freed from their bondage. Jesus had frequently encountered and healed demon-possessed individuals and as Satan mustered all his force in a futile effort to oppose him, Jesus was still healing demon-possessed people through the associates of his who were the apostles and Philip, this man who was a believer in Christ and an evangelist as we've seen.
Such demon-indwelt people exist in our day. Do you believe that? We still see possessions today, but in the United States of America I think it takes a different form than it does in places like Africa, in places like India where children are still being offered up when they're born, they're being dedicated to idols and if you've heard stories of missionaries who have come from those places they can tell you better than I can about some of the things that they've seen as far as possession.
[28:00] I remember in seminary in my missions class our teacher at the time Robin Hathaway he's worked with the IMB in fact I think he was in charge of all of Brazil for a while he had pictures of all different kinds of things and he would show us pictures as we would go through in class and he would show us pictures of witch doctors and some of them they didn't even look human the things that they had done to their face the things that they had covered their body in they didn't even look like they were human beings anymore they looked like something out of a horror movie so yes possessions still take place as C.S. Lewis notes Satan and his demons adapt themselves to whatever world view prevails in a given society they are equally at home with western materialists and third world magicians many are controlled by demons who give no outward sign of it that is especially true of those involved in promoting false religion so if there is those who don't believe in demon possession in the

United States of America you know I'd say just look around look at all of the shootings that we have in schools look at the violence that we have look at the hatred that we have for right things for our police officers the world as we know it you know here is turning upside down people are calling wrong right and right wrong and who's influencing all of that I think it's Satan and I think it's demons and so while they may not be you know like the garrison demoniac ripping off their clothes and breaking chains and sleeping in cemeteries some of them are doing some things that they might as well be and I think all of us can share stories of people we've known or people who are who are family members of people that you know and you've heard some of the things that they've done to their bodies you've heard of some of the things that they've done to other people you go inside prisons and you see some of the things or you hear about some of the things that these men have done and the way that they act and you know do demon possessions occur here in the United States of America sure now should we go out seeking to to perform exorcisms no I don't think that that's what we're called to do I think that a part of being a secessionist is that you know we pray certainly we do what we can we we seek for God to deliver those people but you know I'm not gonna grab a vial of holy water and go to the person that you say is demon possessed and sprinkle them and you know put a crucifix on their forehead and it's not gonna burn into their forehead you know what I'm saying in fact I've been asked before to go to a guy in our church's sister who he was convinced was demon possessed and I he was a little he was a really nice guy but you know he listened to a little bit too much TBN if you know what I mean and we've talked

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about that but
I told him you know I'll I'll go and I let him know where I was and what I believed and you know I said maybe she's not demon possessed I know that she was on all different kinds of medications and when we when we went into her house she certainly had the look she had been influenced by something and you know we talked to her I shared the gospel with her her head didn't turn around she wasn't crawling up the walls but there was a moment where we just made eye contact while he was talking and I just felt like don't break eye contact with her and at the end I I I invited her you know do you want to you've heard the gospel you know what what do you think and she's like well I appreciate you coming and taking the time to speak with me but I'm going to have to think about it and so I said okay and let her know that she was invited to come to church and after that
I think she offered to make a sandwiches but I had somewhere to go so so I left and so anyhow was she possessed I don't I don't believe that she was but she certainly had some some some issues that she was dealing with and she let us pray for so some of these things that you see in movies you know oh yeah if evangelism when you're sharing the gospel you get green lights yellow lights and red lights and the red lights are the ones who they want nothing to do so it was a yellow light that turned red I didn't see her again but I will say about possession since we're there in scripture is you know Hollywood there are there is an intense interest by people for that kind of material you know as much as our world our culture wants to say there is no
[33:29] God we don't believe in any of that stuff they come out for those movies and they are intrigued by dark forces and I think Satan rejoices in it because one they're coming and two they portray him as being incredibly powerful they portray him as being on par in strength with God and so I'm sure that he delights in it so don't watch any of that garbage okay and just stick to reading your Bible and know that greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world!
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closing prayer Lord God thank you for who you are and Lord that your ways are far beyond our ways that you are you are so much more intelligent than we are and God there are times where we see persecution in the world and we are tempted to ask why but Lord your word tells us that again that who are we or who could be your counselor who could tell you what to do or what not to do Lord for from you and through you and to you are all things and so God we thank you for the way that you do work that nothing that you do happens in vain that none of the martyrs who have given their life for the gospel have given their lives in vain but Lord you use that to further advance your gospel Lord we see it happen here back in Acts chapter 8 we see it still happening in our world and Lord we rejoice that the church is growing in places like Asia and Africa and God we pray that the church would grow here in the United States of America Lord we there have to give themselves to you completely that they have to stop being conformed to this world flirting with the world's ways and giving you what's left of their time but that they would serve you with all of their heart Lord we pray that we would do that and we pray that as result of that Lord that we would continue to go that the gospel would continue to be proclaimed knowing that we have been identified with your son, Jesus Christ, and that as a result of whatever suffering we endure, the gospel will go forward in greater, more powerful ways than we ever thought possible.
Lord, we love you and we thank you. And it's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.

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