

WHY PERSEVERE WHEN PERSECUTED

Acts 4:1-21

Today, I want us to look at our purpose as followers of Jesus, what can happen when we try to fulfill that purpose, and why we can persevere in pursuing that purpose. I believe many of you know what our purpose is, right? Can you guess? It's found in Matthew 28:19-20. Let's read together.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

That's our marching orders from the Lord Jesus, the Great Commission. It's a command, not a suggestion, not a request, a command. No one is exempt. When you became a Christian, you were commissioned by the Lord Jesus to share the good news with others. How are we doing in this area?

Now, I know there are many things that can hinder us from fulfilling this purpose. There are those who say it's only for those who are gifted like the late Billy Graham. Some say they lack training. Some don't do it because they're shy. Some say they don't want to be rejected and some say they don't want to be persecuted. The last one probably is #1. We don't share because we're afraid we're going to lose our friends and worse, we're going to gain enemies. People might do us harm physically. It is a valid concern because it happens. It happened to me.

It was in the early 1990's and I was living in Australia then. I was just 10 years old. Just kidding. Actually, I was working there in my late 20's. I happened to help another missionary in church, whose name is John, in giving out gospel tracts to people on the street. I remember we did it every Thursday night. It was the busiest night in Australia because the stores closed late like 10 pm. On other days,

all stores closed as early as 5 pm. In fact, no stores were open on Sundays. Some of you are saying “That’s weird.” But I read it’s different now.

Anyway, we were standing on this street, and people were passing us by, and we were handing out gospel tracts. Then, I saw coming down the road was this guy, a tall, lanky guy, in leather jacket, with spiked hair and yellow teeth.

I always saw him with his friends on Thursday night and when they passed us by, they would look at John and me and laugh. But on this particular night, this lanky guy, who seemed to be their leader, suddenly stopped in front of me, took the tract and then crumpled it in his hand. I was surprised, of course.

Then, he moved closer to me, nudged me a little bit and with his face just inches from mine, in a raspy voice said to me sternly, “How many people have taken this tract you’re giving out?” I said quite softly, “Your breath stinks, punk”. Just kidding. What I said was, “Quite a few.” Then, he mumbled something I don’t remember anymore and threatened me and left. My friend John then tried to encourage me and reminded me that I would always expect things like that to happen.

Yes, we can expect persecution to happen. It happened in the past and it will continue to happen. This morning we’re continuing our series I’m calling “**The Acts of a Christian**”. We looked at Barnabas the Encourager, Philip the Evangelist, Paul the Prayer Warrior which Henrik shared with you last week, and today we’re looking at not one but two characters. These are Peter and John. Please follow along as I read these verses. Quite long but stay with me as we can glean important principles from here. I’ve entitled this message, “**Why Persevere When Persecuted**”.

READ ACTS 4:1-21.

So, we see that Peter and John were persecuted by the religious leaders. The question is, why are Christians persecuted? Why are they the most hated, reviled,

and harassed group of people on this planet? Why have there been more than 70 million Christians martyred since 33 AD according to the Voice of the Martyrs?

We find the answer in 2 Timothy 3:12, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

What the apostle Paul is saying is that once you become a Christian, you can expect persecution to come. Now that you’re identified with Christ, those who don’t know him and even hate him will hate you as well. You now become the target of the enemy, Satan, and he will use people to bring you down.

And so, the Christian life is not an easy life. I try to point this out to people I lead to Christ. I tell them that the Christian life is like a bed of roses but with all the thorns and thistles. There will be good days and there will be bad days too. And right at the start, a bad day can happen because persecution can come from one’s own family.

What do you do when persecution comes? Do you just give up and say it’s not worth it? Mind you, there are Christians who have actually given up their faith in the face of persecution. They did not endure. They gave up the fight. Were they really Christians? Only God knows. It’s not for us to judge. But we’re talking here about us. We’re concerned about what our stand would be when persecuted.

So, when persecution comes, what do you do? You persevere! You stand firm! You endure! You don’t throw in the towel. You don’t give up the faith! Like Pacquiao, you keep on fighting. Like Yulo, you keep on fighting and tumbling. He’s a guy who tumbled and fell but got 2 golds. And like the Commanders you keep on persevering. Even when all seems lost. Anyway, going back to our subject, even though Satan says he has won because people have turned against you or put you in prison or took away your certain freedoms, God knows who the real winner is and he will vindicate you in the end. Amen?

Now, why should you persevere? This afternoon, I want to share with you three reasons why you should persevere when persecuted, why you should stand firm against the enemy's attacks.

First,

1. Because the message you bring saves lives. (v.4)

In the first three verses of Acts 4 we see that the priests, the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees were agitated because of the preaching of Peter and John. These people who opposed the two disciples formed the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the highest court of justice and the supreme council in ancient Jerusalem. It was the same court that tried and condemned the Lord Jesus to death. Now, they are poised to put the two disciples to trial as well. Why were they agitated? Because they were teaching that there was a resurrection of the dead. You see, the Sanhedrin was composed mostly of Sadducees and someone who is a Sadducee doesn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. He doesn't believe also in the afterlife, in angels, in heaven or hell. To him, when you die, that's it, you don't exist anymore. That's why it is said that a Sadducee is sad, you see?

Anyway, these Sadducees were greatly offended by the fact that the disciples were teaching a resurrection from the dead. And they wanted to put them on trial. They didn't want the disciples to talk to others about Jesus anymore.

But what I want you to see is the effect of the disciples' teaching. In verse 4, it says, *"But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand."* Luke the writer of Acts talks only about men. If you consider women, the number is probably thousands more. So, the Sanhedrin knew they were in trouble. Thousands of people were getting converted and that means their power is slipping away from them. You see, the Sadducees were also a political party. If more people believe in the resurrection, then the

balance of power would tilt towards the Pharisees who believed in the resurrection. At the time, only a few Pharisees were in the Sanhedrin.

Politics aside, the salvation of souls is paramount and important. The Bible says in 1 Tim. 2:3-4, "...God our Savior...wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." And in 2 Pet. 3:9, "...he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish..."

Folks, God has given us the privilege of becoming a part of his salvation plan. He saved us to save others in the sense we can lead others to Jesus by telling them about Jesus. As Paul says, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." (2 Cor. 5:20)

What does an ambassador do? He or she carries a message from the one they represent. Folks, we represent God and the message we carry from him to others is the most important message anyone in this planet can hear. This message is life-giving. This message spells the difference between eternal life and eternal condemnation.

Think about it. If you discovered a cure for cancer, would you keep it to yourself? Wouldn't you go around sharing this discovery with others to save their lives? God loves the world so much and he wants to save everybody. And he wants to use you to pursue this goal.

And if you think about it some more, if you're a Christian, somebody shared this message of salvation with you. You're going to heaven because of someone who maybe risked their reputation, and overcame their fear in order to share the message of God.

When persecution comes, let's persevere because the message we carry saves lives. Another reason you should persevere is

2. Because the Holy Spirit empowers you.

In verses 5 – 7, we see that Peter and John were now being tried in Jerusalem. They were going to face the same people in the same court where their Lord was tried and sentenced to die by crucifixion just a few weeks before. If you were in their shoes, how would you feel? Wouldn't that send chills down your spine? Am I going to be crucified too? Am I going to be tortured, too? Mind you, this is the very first time any of the disciples are being persecuted and tried. They had no prior experience.

But in verses 8-10, after they were asked in verse 7 “By what power or what name did you do this?”, we read, “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.” And he spoke some more letting his audience know that Jesus saves.

Note it says in the beginning of this passage, “filled with the Holy Spirit”. What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit? It means he was supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit to say those words. It is as if it was the Holy Spirit speaking through him. I'm sure Peter remembered the words of Jesus when he was still on earth and teaching them. “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.” (Luke 12:12) In fact, before Jesus went up to heaven, he promised his disciples, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

That's the reason why he could be courageous in standing before this mean and heartless crowd. In fact, these ruthless rulers and authorities recognized Peter and John's boldness as verse 13 tells us, "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus." They were surprised, maybe shocked at this bravery that Peter displayed. They didn't expect it. Peter turned the tables on them because suddenly they were tight-lipped as verse 14 says, "But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say."

Folks, that's the power of the Holy Spirit. The devil retreats like a whimpering dog in the face of a power that's greater than him. The Bible says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31)

Something like that happened to me years ago. I wasn't really being persecuted but I met an uncle who I believe was being used by the devil to hinder my mission. I was in Frankfurt, Germany and met with my uncle who was living there at the time. We were having dinner and then he brought up the subject of religion. I didn't know that he was deep into a New Age religion called Eckankar. He talked to me about their beliefs, about reincarnation, Karma, enlightened spiritual masters, and a lot of eastern religion stuff. All the while, I was trying to counter these with my own arguments from the Bible. We continued our discussion even after we left the restaurant. On the street, he then talked about Jesus. He believed that Jesus was just a great teacher, in fact, a reincarnation of Elijah, even quoting from Matthew.

He went on and on trying to make the point that Jesus wasn't God. At this point, I felt like my defenses were starting to break down. I was becoming confused. I was just emerging from my former agnosticism and I was so vulnerable.

Silently, I prayed, “Lord, please protect my mind. Lord, help me to introduce Jesus to him”. Right after that prayer, I felt like a helmet covered my head because although my uncle kept on speaking, his words were not penetrating my mind. It was as if I couldn’t hear him. Then, the Lord impressed on me the experience of Thomas with Jesus. And I said, “Uncle George, you’ve been quoting verses from the Bible to prove your point that Jesus is not God. But do you know that one of his apostles, Thomas, addressed him as ‘My Lord and my God’”? And then I quoted from the Bible.

At that point, he suddenly turned silent. Mind you, he is a very articulate speaker. I saw how he stuttered and was at a loss for words. Until he just said goodbye and walked away.

Folks, I was left standing there, a silent witness to the power of the Holy Spirit.

You should persevere when persecuted because you carry a message that saves lives, because the Holy Spirit empowers you to share, and thirdly,

3. Because God can do the miraculous.

So, the Sanhedrin didn’t know what to do because they didn’t know what hit them. And they were hit hard! So, they retreated to discuss and talk and in the end, what was their decision? In verses 16-21, “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. ‘Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it.’... After further threats they let them go.”

They released Peter and John, just like that. No whippings or lashes or anything. They let them go. In fact, these religious leaders were confused. “They could not decide how to punish them.”, as the second part of verse 21 says. That was a miracle from God!

Folks, God specializes in miracles, amen? He can do the impossible. Even if your situation seems bleak and hopeless, he can break through the cloud of fear in

your life and shows you a bright tomorrow. If you are being persecuted, there's hope for deliverance.

Now, I just want us to be careful here. As we know, not all of those persecuted were delivered from death. There were many Christians during the time of the apostles who were thrown to the lions. Many were stoned to death like Stephen, the first Christian martyr. It is commonly believed that all the apostles were martyred, some with injuries similar to what Jesus experienced on the cross, except for John who died of natural causes. Then, some of the early Fathers like Polycarp were burned at the stake. Altho' according to reliable accounts, the fire failed to consume Polycarp's body so he was stabbed instead. And throughout the centuries up to our time, we've read and heard of Christians who did not escape death.

That's why this third point of this message says, "God can do the miraculous" and not "God will do the miraculous". For sure, God can, he is the Almighty, he is powerful, he is in control, but he will not always do what we expect him to do. He is sovereign and he does what is best according to his infinite wisdom. Just like healing. He can but he will not always will.

But through it all, we know that God is faithful. There's a reason for everything he does. All we need to is to submit to his will and purpose in our lives. And because we know that he can do the miraculous for those who are following him, we can always come to him in prayer to be delivered when persecution comes. In the end, we can say, "Lord, not my will, but yours be done." Amen?

Can I share with you one more story before I end this sermon? This happened in Russia during our outreach when I was studying at YWAM. So, we're going on a missionary journey, sort of. First, Australia, then, Hawaii, then Russia. So, during the last days of our outreach in a small city in Russia called Krasnodar, in fact, three days before we were to come back to the US, I contacted my friend

Sasha, an officer in the Russian Air Force. I asked whether it was okay to distribute Bibles in the air force base where he was stationed.

The next day, he told us that our request was approved by his superiors and four of us went – our Russian interpreter, one Swiss, one American, and myself. We realized how much they have opened up to the Western world after years of Communism. So, we went with our Bibles. But it was actually Sasha who went inside the buildings and gave out the Bibles.

When we were finished, Sasha, wanting to be a most gracious host, eagerly took us to one building where we entered a room. It was a room where they did flight simulations. In the center of the room was a sawed-off MIG 15, you know, the Russian fighter plane that you see in the movies. All around the room were monitors and switches and lights. Excitedly, we took turns going up and getting inside the cockpit of the fighter plane. When it was my turn, I felt like I was inside a real plane. I turned on the switch and the screen in front of me lit up and then showed the sky with clouds and mountains like it was a movie and I felt like the plane was pulling up then turning right and left and diving. It was a simulation of a real flight. I didn't see any American planes though and I doubt whether I would fire upon them. That was the best video game I ever played. Better than Xbox.

I was in the middle of this glorious feeling when suddenly, Sasha called out with a sense of urgency in his voice. "Rolly, come down. Come down." So I went down and asked, "What's the problem?" And he said, "My boss is coming this way. This is actually off-limits to unauthorized people. I made a mistake."

Then, he told us to go inside a little room. He told us to wait while he tried to distract his boss. Then, he left the flight simulation room.

The little room we were in seemed to be like the sleeping quarters of his boss. There was a single bed, a desk, a clock, a lamp and a number of books on the bookshelf. We were so quiet inside and very afraid. All you could hear was the

ticking of the clock. We prayed nervously. I wondered whether God would rescue us by an earthquake like what he did for Paul and Silas. I was thinking, if his boss found us out, what would he do, what would they do to us? Would they imprison us? Would they accuse us of spying? Would they execute us? Would the outside world even know about it? My heart was beating fast. And like Stephen, I practiced saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Then, we heard footsteps and the door opened. We saw armalites aimed at us. They fired. But the bullets bounced off our bodies. Just kidding, it was Sasha and in a soft voice, he directed us to one side of the control room where we entered a narrow passageway that led to a steel door. Sasha unlocked it and opened it for us. He said that he was able to stall his boss but he was coming to the room any moment.

As we stepped out to the open field, we heaved a big sigh of relief and praised God endlessly. I never thought I would live to tell you this tale. Will I go back to Russia if the Lord called me to? I will. But God has to call Bel too. We will go because I believe I will bring a message that saves lives, I recognize that the Holy Spirit can empower me, and I know God can do the miraculous.