**The Joy of Being Counted Worthy** July 8, 2018

Acts 5:40-42

*Voltaire wrote: “I wish I had never been born.”*

*Lord Byron lived a life of pleasure. He wrote: “The worm, the canker, and grief are mine alone.”*

*Jay Gould, the American millionaire, when dying, said: “I suppose I am the most miserable man on earth.”*

*Lord Beaconsfield who lived a privileged life, wrote: “Youth is a mistake; manhood a struggle; old age a regret.”*

*Alexander the Great after conquering the known world in his day, wept in his tent because, he said, “There are no more worlds to conquer.”*

http://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/where-is-joy-found

1 Thessalonians 5:16 says, “Be joyful always.”

**Coffee/Question:**

What gives you joy?

Our text for today is very short – three verses.

**verse 40a**

Whose speech? Gamaliel’s.

Them? The Sanhedrin

Persuaded? To not kill the apostles.

**verse 40b**

What is flogging?

The word literally means “to skin;” like one would skin an animal.

The instrument used to flog a person (a flagrum) was comprised of a handle to which three to four leather thongs were attached.

Along each thong was embedded jagged pieces of bone.

At the end of each thong was attached a metal ball.

You can imagine what would happen when those thongs were forcefully brought down on a bare back.

**verse 40c**

The Sanhedrin released the apostles because… they believed that the punishment of flogging had been severe enough to convince the apostles to do as they’d been told.

**verse 41a**

This was not the response the Sanhedrin had hoped for.

Why did the apostles rejoice?

Look at **verse 41b.**

What does it mean to be ***‘counted worthy?’***

Barnes Commentary says: *Counted worthy [means to be] esteemed to be deserving…*  https://www.godvine.com/bible/acts/5-41

Deserving of what?

***…of suffering disgrace for the Name.***

The apostles viewed it as a privilege, an honor to have suffered because of their allegiance to Jesus.

Did the severe punishment do as the Sanhedrin had hoped?

Did it convince the apostles to stop speaking of Jesus?

**verse 42**

The apostles continued teaching and proclaiming Jesus in the temple and from house to house, even though, in doing so, they risked an even harsher punishment coming upon them from the Sanhedrin.

I’m going to give you half of today’s **big idea:** It is normal for the followers of Jesus to face opposition and to suffer on Jesus’ behalf.

I want to assure you this is not a detail hidden in the fine print on page 1200 of our “commitment to Jesus” contract.

Jesus repeatedly… and openly… told his followers… to take up their cross and follow him.

Because John 15:18-16:4 a longer passage I’m just going to list Jesus’ key phrases and points; but I encourage you to read it at home this week:

…the world will hate you because it hates me

…you do not belong to the world

…I have chosen you out of the world

…the world will persecute you because it persecuted me

…the people of this world do not know me, nor the Father who sent me

…I am hated because my teaching and miracles expose a person’s sin

…the Spirit of truth whom I will send to you will testify about me, and you too

must testify about me

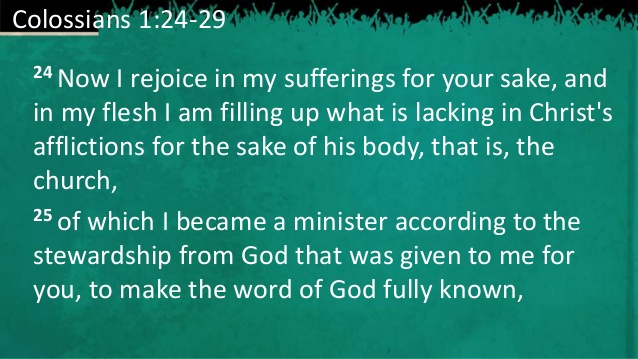
…do not be surprised when you are ostracized, even killed, because of me

According to Jesus, it is normal for a follower of his to face hardship and to suffer because of him.

W.A. Criswell says, “*Suffering has a place in the purpose and mind and plan of God.”* wacriswell.com/sermons/1977/counted-worthy-to-suffer/

We need to ask - what place?

Paul writing to the church at Colossae said this:



What did Paul mean in this statement?

Was he somehow suggesting that the sacrifice of Jesus was not enough?

Jesus’ last words from the cross were, “It is finished.”

Those words tell us in no uncertain terms - Jesus paid in full …humanity’s spiritual debt.

We know without a doubt that what Paul suffered was not a suffering that somehow completed a lack in Jesus.

W. A. Criswell explains: *“[Jesus in his death] did not exhaust the sufferings that are to be dedicated to the purposes of God in the earth. There are sufferings also for his people. As a story needs a teller, the gospel needs a preacher…and Paul [had to] suffer if the gospel [was] to be preached…*

wacriswell.com/sermons/1977/counted-worthy-to-suffer/

It seemed everywhere he went, Paul faced hostile listeners.

And when those listeners, resisted his message, as some did, and acted to harm him, Paul did not fight back.

In Lystra a hostile crowd stoned Paul and dragged him outside of the city, thinking he was dead. Acts 14:19.

Do you know what Paul did when he re-gained consciousness?

He went back into the city – to finish what he had come to do – speak of Jesus.

When beaten and thrown into jail in Philippi, Acts 16:25 says, *“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God…”*

They didn’t rejoice in their troubles.

They rejoiced in their Savior who is unstoppable.

Paul later wrote to the church in Philippi, and told them to do what he had done,

Philippians 3:1 – *Rejoice in the Lord always.*

No hardship, no opposition, no adversary, no threat – could separate them from the love of God shown in Jesus Christ.

Here’s the other half of today’s **big idea:**

It is normal for the followers of Jesus to face opposition and to suffer on Jesus’ behalf. But to be able to rejoice in God in the face of suffering is a radical, faith-filled, Spirit-enabled response.

Listen again to the statement made by W. A. Criswell: *“[Jesus in his death] did not exhaust the sufferings that are to be dedicated to the purposes of God in the earth.* ***There are sufferings also for his people.***

As Paul responded to his sufferings with a radical, faith-filled, Spirit-enabled response, these things happened.

* The love and mercy of God was put on display (as it had been displayed in Jesus in his live and in his sufferings)
* The darkness that resides in a human heart was uncovered (showing a person’s need of Jesus to be their Savior)
* The gospel powerfully touched people’s lives, as it shone into darkened minds and saved dead souls

It is normal to face opposition and suffering for Jesus’ sake.

It is a Spirit-enabled, faith-filled response to rejoice in those sufferings.

In the ongoing work of Jesus that continues to this day, the suffering of Jesus’ people, because of their love for him, do not contribute to the salvation he alone purchased, but …

…they do demonstrate the love and mercy of God;

…they do show the worth of Jesus and the power of the gospel;

…they do qualify his people, that is, they do position them to speak with authority and conviction and with love, on behalf of their Savior, Jesus, who came to rescue humanity and restore this broken world.

This is also how and when, follower of Jesus, you and I experience the presence and power of God in our lives.

In Philippians 3:1, Paul wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord.”

Ten verses later he wrote, “*I want to know Christ…*

There is a connection between rejoicing in the Lord in the face of suffering and knowing Christ.

When one puts their faith in Jesus, believing in him and receiving him, a profound identification takes place between the believer and Jesus.

But there is more to this identification.

Paul wrote, Philippians 3:10:*I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead…*

As the death of Jesus becomes our death, so his resurrected life gives to us eternal life that even our physical death can’t extinguish.

But there was still more to what Paul said in Philippians 3:10:*I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death.*

Remember our big idea – suffering with and for Jesus is normal; and rejoicing in God in the face of suffering is a radical, faith-filled, Spirit-enabled response.

Rejoicing / knowing Christ / experiencing the mighty power of the resurrection / participating in Jesus’ suffering – all of these are connected.

These are not stand-alone activities. Nor are they optional.

Dieudonne Tamfu *writes: The courage to die for Christ begins long before the moment of martyrdom. That courage is born when you* ***embrace Jesus’ call*** *to take up your cross and follow him daily.*

*It is a courage that grows as you* ***wield God’s word****.*

*It is a courage refreshed by* ***the Holy Spirit, who daily empowers you*** *to die to self, to pray for those who persecute you.*

*This is the courage that changes the world.*

Revelation 5 describes a scene that took place in heaven – a scene that is very important to our understanding of this theme of suffering.

In his vision, the apostle John saw a sealed book held in the hand of the One who sat on the throne.

He heard a question asked by a mighty angel: *“Who can take this book; break its seals and read it?”*

There was no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth who could.

John wept at this news, until one of the four elders said to him: *Look! The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the book!*

When John looked at the One the elder pointed to, the Lion of Judah, this is what he saw: …*a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne.*

When the Lamb opened the book, all of heaven sang this song: *“Worthy is the lamb, who was slain, and who with his blood purchased men and women for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.*”

Jesus’ sufferings made him worthy; they qualified him; they gave him the authority to undo what sin and death ruined.

You and I are recipients of God’s grace because of the sufferings of Jesus.

This scene described in Revelation 5 reminds us that grace of God is not cheap.

It is true that it does not cost us anything.

But the cost to Jesus to redeem men and women for God, is beyond our comprehension – the innocent One was made sin.

This is why Jesus is so precious to us.

We remember him!

Peter, who was flogged, on that particular day described in Acts 5, wrote this in first letter, 4:12-13: *“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.**But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”*

This was the perspective Peter and the rest of the apostles had.

The Holy Spirit who had come to live in them, brought to their remembrance what Jesus had taught them.

Hebrews 12:2-3: *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.*

*For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

How did Jesus endure the cross; how did he scorn its shame?

He fixed his eyes on the joy that would follow.

He looked beyond the cross, to the accomplishment that the cross would achieve.

There are different kinds of suffering.

1. There is suffering caused by Satan – ie. of Job – 1:6-20; of a woman crippled for eighteen years – Luke 13; the thorn in Paul’s flesh – 2 Corinthians 12:7
2. There is suffering caused by the choices a person makes.
3. There is suffering that comes from living in a fallen world.
4. There is suffering that comes when one makes a self-sacrifice for the sake and benefit of others.

For today we are not unpacking “suffering” in any of these four mentioned categories.

For the disciples who and what was greater – the Sanhedrin and their threats or their Savior Jesus?

We know the answer.

They knew because Jesus had risen from the dead, there was no one greater than him; no one who could stop him.

Opposition, hardship, persecution and suffering does impact the church of Jesus. These things refine the church, but they never eradicate it, because greater is the One who is in us.

You and I on a daily basis must fill our mind with the truth of who Jesus is.

He is not one of many.

He uniquely is God.

We need to fix our heart on the promises and the teachings he has given to us.

This is where we will find wisdom and the courage to live the truth with boldness.

2 Corinthians 3:12: *Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.*

It is our hope in Jesus that creates in us great boldness.

Have you ever wondered what would stop you from speaking about Jesus?

Would being arrested silence you?

Would being physically harmed silence you?

At this point in time, we are not faced with persecution like that which faced the apostles.

We can share our faith.

The world is broken and life as we now live it, is not what God intended when he created us. But God didn’t turn his back on us.

Jesus came into the earth to rescue us.

But his work of salvation is

And the pushback against Jesus only confirms how desperately we need him.

The unbelief of the Sanhedrin was not due to a lack of evidence.

Their unbelief was primarily due to a hardened heart and a darkened mind.

And the response of the apostles confounded them.

People who are flogged do not rejoice in God.

The fact that the apostles rejoiced was a response of faith and confidence in Jesus.

Rescuers are normally welcomed and celebrated.

Picture of WWII soldiers liberating Holland.

So how do we explain, understand, make sense of this pushback against Jesus, the world’s greatest Rescuer, and animosity towards those who make him known?

God tells us the truth about who we are; and he says there is a lawlessness that

resides in every person’s heart.

This explains why no one likes being told what to do; especially by God.

The exclusivity of Jesus is troubling to humanity.

We like our choices.

We like to have options.

And to be told there is only one way, one truth, one life -

Jesus’ assessment of the human condition and what was required of him to rescue us, causes offense, because it portrays humanity in a way that humanity doesn’t like.

Jesus don’t give us the kind of options we’d prefer.

Every one who comes to Jesus, in some capacity, has experienced this inner struggle, of being drawn to him, but also repelled by him.

It would seem humanity in general, prefers gods in its own image; gods that can be controlled in some way; gods who are predictable.

There is something about Jesus that touches

Here’s what the Holy Spirit said through Peter.

**1 Peter 4:12-14**

*Dear friends do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*

… persecution is normal; don’t be surprised by it

*But* ***rejoice****in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

Why rejoice?

…to suffer for Jesus, is to be reminded that he is pushing back the darkness and that his work of rescue is ongoing

Why rejoice?

…because the experience of persecution is shared by Jesus

Do you remember what Jesus said to the apostle Paul when he appeared to him?

“Why do you persecute me?”

Paul wasn’t persecuting Jesus; he was persecuting Jesus’ followers.

But as Paul did so, we learn from Jesus, that to strike his followers is to strike him.

When a follower of Jesus suffers for the name of Jesus, Jesus suffers alongside of them.

*If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*

…the followers rejoices, not in the suffering, but in the blessing that it brings -

the presence of God resting on them.

No one naturally finds joy in suffering.

When the apostles rejoiced, it was a response of faith on their part in the One who is greater than those who were meting out the persecution.

The fact that the apostles rejoiced, was the evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence in their lives.

This response of faith is a mystery that confounds those who persecute.

Do you remember Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego?

Do you remember their response to King Nebuchadnezzar?

**Daniel 3:16-18**

*“King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”*

Do you remember how King Nebuchadnezzar responded to these 3 men?

**Daniel 3:19-23**

*Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace.*

*So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.*

The gospel of Jesus cannot be silenced – though many before and since the time of Acts have tried.

Before God’s good news is good news, it is bad news.

It tells a person the truth of who God is – he is more than a sugar daddy; more than a personal concierge; more than a senile grandfather; greater than anyone or anything; deserving of our worship and our loyalty.

It also tells a person the truth of who they are and the truth of their status before God.

The Sanhedrin persecuted the apostles because they could not refute them.

The same thing happened with Stephen in Acts 6:8-14.

Persecution will always refine the church – but it will never eliminate it.

There is this surprising corollary – persecution makes the people of God stronger. Rather than hardship, restricting, it actually speeds up the spreading of the gospel.

What temptation is placed before the follower of Jesus when persecuted?

The temptation to tone down what they say about Jesus or to massage the news of Jesus to make it less offensive, and less dangerous.

Have you ever wondered what would stop you from speaking about Jesus?

A threat?

An arrest?

Physical harm?

At this point we are not faced with persecution that physically harms us.

So what holds us back from speaking about Jesus?

A disapproving look? Fear?