

“Wildfire”

Acts 8:1-3

Pastor Jarrett Stephens | October 24, 2021

This is a special weekend here at Champion Forest...this is our Missions Weekend. John Wills, our Global Missions Pastor will be up here at the conclusion of this service to close in announcements, and he will fill you in on details regarding our missions fair and banquet coming up this evening.

He and his team: Leslie Armour, Joey Mouton and Owen Barr have worked so hard to make this event and this evening happen. I want to encourage you to buy a ticket (that covers the dinner) and if you don't want to eat, you can just come and be a part of the event. I can promise you, you won't regret it!

Missions Day is an opportunity for us each year to highlight all we are doing around the world as it relates to missions...you get to see where your giving is going...hear about upcoming mission trips and we celebrate together the life-change that has occurred because of YOUR giving and YOUR going.

Now, as we continue in our *FORWARD* series, the text we are looking at today fits perfectly with our Missions Weekend.

You know, sermons can take on many different directions or forms. And typically the direction of the sermon is derived from the content and mood of the text. For example, some sermons are more:

- Educational in nature– As the text is preached you are learning history or theology, or maybe you are learning about someone or something that has happened in the Bible.
- Motivational in nature – What's being preached is a warning and a promise of blessing if obeyed and a promise of consequences if disobeyed.
- Inspirational in nature – The text you are reading...it just lifts you up and builds your faith in God.

And then in some sermons like today are a bit more informational in nature...it's more about awareness. You are being enlightened about a particular subject the text addresses.

The subject the text deals with today is: Persecution. And again, with it being Missions Weekend and having our special guest with us, whom I will introduce in just a moment...well, it couldn't be a better day to talk about and inform you about the Persecuted Church:

- what it is...
- and how we can engage in helping our brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world who are serving, living on mission and paying an extreme price for it.

I'm calling the message today: **Wildfire**

That's the picture I want you to have in your mind as we think about the persecuted church around the world. The thought from those who don't understand our faith, hate our faith or want to destroy our faith is this:

Eliminate the messenger and the message will go away. You extinguish the message by extinguishing the messenger. If you can harm, hurt or even better kill the messenger, then the message that messenger brings will cease or go away – that's the thought!

However, what history teaches starting with this text we are looking at today is that this simply isn't true...it doesn't work this way!

What is true is this...I'll put it in the form of a statement and it will be on the screen for you:

Persecution doesn't prevent the gospel from going forward, it propels the gospel forward.

As we get to Acts 8, let me remind you of the context. Stephen, who we looked at in detail last week (if you have missed any messages, go online and catch up)...he was a godly man. And he was preaching the message of Christ that a group of people did not like!

And so, just as we have talked about, if the messenger won't shut up, we will shut him up...we will stop the message by stopping the messenger! Talk about persecution...they stone him!

And look at **Acts 8:1a** – **“And Saul approved of his execution...”**

We'll talk about this man, Saul in detail in a couple of weeks. If you have been in church for any amount of time, you know Saul as Paul. This is a man that we will see radically transformed and changed by God when we get to Acts chapter nine...and he NEEDED to be changed by God!

Saul – i.e. Paul was a Pharisee. And in his mind this group of Christians following Jesus and echoing this man, Jesus's teaching wherever they went was not only creating confusion in the mind of those who were sincerely trying to follow God, they were blaspheming God! And he wanted to put a stop to it...not just wanted to...was passionate about it and tried!

This is why...look at **Acts 7:58** – **“Then they cast him (Stephen) out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.”**

Acts 8:1a – **“And Saul approved of his execution...”**

Acts 8:3 – **“But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”**

Just fast-forward to **Acts 9:1-2** – **“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at**

Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

What’s amazing is, it’s THIS man that God is going to RADICALLY change...he changes Saul’s heart...changes his name...changes everything about this man and the great persecutor of the early church will become the greatest church planter and missionary to ever live! For goodness sake, the man wrote 13 of the 27 books found in our New Testament! God changed him alright!

But, before that...he was a violent, persecutor of the church...and this is HIS testimony!

Gal. 1:13 – “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.”

Phil. 3:6a– “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church...”

You look back at Acts 8:3 and we see that Saul was “ravaging” the church! It’s a word that means to “destroy”. Some of your Bibles translate that he was “wreaking havoc” on the church. He was working to damage it...to ruin it. The word picture is one of the mangling of a wild beast – that’s what Saul was to the church.

And it’s THIS man that God changes! There’s a great lesson for us in this and that is: There is NO ONE outside or too far away from the love of God!

And that’s an important motivation for missions:

- This is WHY we go!
- This is WHY we preach!
- This is WHY we tell the good news of the gospel wherever we go and to whoever will listen!

EVERYONE is a candidate for God’s salvation! And the mission God gave us compels us to go to the ends of the earth STARTING in our home and neighborhood and school...and we take this message of hope and love and salvation in Jesus to anyone and everyone that will hear!

If God can change Saul, he can change anyone! And that person that you think is just too far away from God...that person that you think would never bow his heart and bow his knee to Jesus, I’m telling you, he or she is a prime candidate for salvation!

It’s our responsibility to share the message of salvation and God’s responsibility to save! THIS is the heart behind missions. We go with a belief that God can save anybody and will save somebody.

Saul was persecuting the church. His goal? To snuff it out...stop the message at whatever cost! But, no matter how hard he worked...no matter how hard anyone works...you can’t stop this message and mission from advancing. Again:

Persecution doesn't prevent the gospel from going forward, it propels the gospel forward.

Look at **Acts 8:1**– “**And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.**”

Question: What do you suppose the believers did as they “scattered” throughout these regions?

You don't have to wonder very long because look at **Acts 8:4** – “**Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.**”

What was the result? The message spreads like WILDFIRE!

- The gospel advances...
- The mission continues...
- The Church grows...

Now, there are two points I want us to ponder just for a moment as it relates to persecution. The first point is this:

1. Persecution should not surprise us

Jesus warned those who follow him that persecution would be a reality for them. We here in the West – especially those of us that were privileged to grow up in the United States where there is an emphasis on “Freedom of religion”...it's built into our founding documents have experienced very little persecution comparatively speaking.

Yes, it's getting worse...and yes, some maybe in the work place or school have experienced persecution. I'm not denying that it exists here AND just a warning, I believe it will ONLY increase here in the days ahead.

For our brothers and sisters around the world though...persecution is much more common and the point that I am simply making is that this should NOT surprise us. Jesus said this would be the case!

Matt. 5:10-12 – “**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**”

It's been said that if you live the first seven Beatitudes out, you will experience the last two...both of which speak to persecution.

John 15:20a – “**Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...**”

John 16:2 – “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.”

Matt. 10:16-18 – “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before the governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.

2 Tim. 3:12 – “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted

1 John 3:13 – “Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.”

Persecution is NOT the exception for the believer, it’s the rule! Jesus told us to expect and so we shouldn’t be surprised by it. It has happened throughout history and it’s happening now!

And this leads me to the second point about persecution that I want us to think about...to ponder:

2. Persecution is still taking place

Just read the news! How this is NOT more in the headlines, I do not know, but 17 Christian missionaries in Haiti have been kidnapped and those holding them have threatened death if their demands are not met!

We talked about this a few weeks ago in a message called “The Heat Is On.” Persecution is a CURRENT reality for many around the world.

Here are the most current statistics from a ministry that supports the Persecuted Church called *Open Doors*. This is for their reporting period 2020-2021 – as current as it gets:

- Over 340 million Christians living in places where they experience high levels of persecution and discrimination (world-watch list)...
- 4,761 Christians killed for their faith...
- 4,488 churches and other Christian buildings attacked...
- 4,277 believers detained without trial, arrested, sentenced or imprisoned...

This is just in the last year...and just the ones that are reported and that we know about! Persecution is a reality. It was then and it is today.

Theologian D.A. Carson notes that more people have been martyred for following Jesus in the last 100 years than from all of history starting with Stephen up to the year 1900.

Persecution is still taking place! I could go on and on sharing stories and statistics, but probably the best way to “prove” this point I’m making about persecution still taking place is to let you hear from someone that has experienced it firsthand.

Pastor Andrew Brunson was a missionary to Turkey for 23 years...25 years total. He was a familiar face in the news when he was arrested and imprisoned on bogus charges back in 2016. For two years he was in a Turkish prison in some pretty horrendous conditions.

He wrote about his experience in his book entitled: *God's Hostage: A True Story of Persecution, Imprisonment, and Perseverance*

We are so grateful Andrew and his wife Norine is here with us. Champion Forest, would you please give a warm welcome to our friend – missionary and pastor – Andrew Brunson.

INTERVIEW

We've talked about what persecution is, that we shouldn't be surprised by it and the fact that it still exists. In closing, what should we do about it? What's our response to it?

I entitled the message *Wildfire*. You google what conditions need to be present for a wildfire to take place and what you will find...three conditions must always be present: fuel, oxygen and a heat source.

We've seen when persecution comes that it only makes the message spread like wildfire. I want us to continue to ensure that it does. How will this happen?

The Fuel: PRAYER

We need to pray for the persecuted church. These are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We need to pray for the persecuted church. And many right now – can you imagine? Being away from the family that you love? Being alone in a cell or with dangerous people in a cell?

We need to pray and this leads me to the second condition that must be present for wildfire to spread.

The Oxygen: SYMPATHY

I've learned that I will never pray for what I'm not burdened for...so my encouragement is to pray for a burden. And the way to get this burden is to educate yourself.

Go to websites like:

- www.opendoorsusa.org
- www.persecution.com

On these sites you can get incredible information about the persecuted church. You can learn how you can pray specifically for them. You can write letters to governments on behalf of those imprisoned or suffering. Whatever you do, you've got to sympathize and empathize with our brothers and sisters. This will be oxygen to the fire.

The third condition that must be present for wildfire to spread:

Heat-source: PARTNERSHIP

This involves giving...it involves going...it involves getting in the game and doing our part, whatever part that may be.

Persecution doesn't prevent the gospel from going forward, it propels the gospel forward.

Let's do everything we can through prayer, sympathy and partnership to make sure that even when the messenger is being threatened and in some cases extinguished, that the message keeps going and spreads like wildfire to the glory of God.

Will you pray with me?