

“How Can We Endure Persecution?”

Acts 9:19-31

Whenever a commercial comes on TV about a drug that's supposed to help you with an ailment, I'm sure you've noticed that the last half of the commercial is all about the slight possibility of reactions or side affects to the drug. Even though the chances of having that side affect or negative reaction are small, they are required to say that they could happen so that the one who takes the drug is aware of this (and prevents lawsuits I'm sure!).

When you and I share the gospel – the good news that Jesus Christ paid for your sins on the cross with His substitutionary death and that confessing our sins and accepting Jesus as Lord gives us eternal life – do we tell people about the possible side affects? Do we tell them that by accepting Jesus as your Saviour, you're family and friends may react negatively toward you? That the culture we live in may be unfriendly towards them? That there's a slight possibility they could lose their job over their faith, lose their spouse because they want nothing to do with your 'religion' or even lose their life because a radical person has been blinded by Satan that he's obeying God by killing them?

And I wouldn't call this 'the fine print' of the gospel because Jesus never hid from His disciples that they too could suffer abuse, divide their families or even lose their life because of Him. The apostle Paul wrote in 2 Tim. 3:1 that there will be 'terrible times in the last days'. And I think if we're not in the very last days, we're not far off.

The world is becoming a more hostile and divided place especially towards followers of Jesus. We need to know how we can endure persecution because its not 'if' it comes but when.

Last week we saw Jesus Himself confront Saul the persecutor and bring him to faith on the road to Damascus. God can do that sometimes and we learned why people hate Jesus so much but also how we are to even love God's enemies because He has the power to save them. As Saul the persecutor converts to Paul the apostle, we see here that he joins the ranks of those who are now the persecuted; the very ones he was breathing out threats against and seeking to arrest. How did the early church respond to Saul's conversion? How did the religious Jews who were emboldened by Saul's earlier leadership to get rid of Christians, now react to his conversion?

As we look at how Paul endured the persecution he experienced, I think we can learn what we need now when we're harassed for our faith and insulted because of Jesus. And we need to endure because Jesus promises us future rewards for enduring the sufferings of life.

After Ananias received a dream from God to go to Saul, he obeys God, places his hands on Saul, calls him brother and Saul's sight is restored. He is baptized, the Spirit descends on him clearly indicating his conversion. We pick it up in v.19,

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

²³ After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, ²⁴ but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. ²⁵ But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

Luke gives a very general synopsis of Paul's earliest years as a disciple, as we'll see when we connect Acts 9 and Gal. 1 and 2 Cor. 11 in a few minutes. But the key to Paul's enduring persecution here is crucial for our spiritual growth let alone our enduring suffering and trials:

We Need to Stay Connected with other Disciples **(9:19-25)**

Without Ananias' initial acceptance and influence, Paul would have had a difficult time being accepted as a believer. He stayed in Damascus getting to know other believers. And because of his standing as a Pharisee, he was given invitations to share from God's Word if he showed up in a synagogue. Of course what he had to share was a little bit startling for many to hear: 'That Jesus is the Son of God.'

We need to build relationships with each other so that we can

Encourage one another to proclaim truth (vv.19-21)

No doubt some of these synagogues were becoming churches as many would place their faith in Jesus. They encouraged Paul to share his story and to use his Old Testament knowledge, now that he saw it pointed to Jesus showing how Jesus is the Son of God. 'Son of' implies identical too. So for Paul to say Jesus was the Son of God was very radical. He was claiming Jesus was just like/identical to/fully God. And he needed the encouragement and affirmation of a body of fellow believers being with him where he shared the gospel and, while not stated but certainly we could safely say, prayed for. It's great to hear people say they are praying for you. It's even greater to hear each other praying for you. It's humbling and yet encouraging.

The people were 'amazed' at what he said because he used to hate the followers of Jesus who declared Jesus was alive and was the Messiah. Now he believes this stuff! Their amazement would have surely involved questioning these other followers of Jesus about Paul and asking 'Is this for real? Is he now one of us?' And the disciples who were with him – the local church – affirmed his conversion. Surely this encouraged Paul to share the truth more.

Heb. 3:13 says 'Encourage one another daily so that none of us will be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.' 'Daily' literally means each day. One translation says 'day after day'. I changed the memory verse this week to be Heb. 3:13 because I want to challenge you to actually do this. To call, message, email or text at least one person each day to let them know or ask them how it's going and what can I pray for you today or just connect with?

Why do we need one another?

We need each other to grow spiritually (v.22)

²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

Why was Paul growing? Because he had the support of a group of believers who encouraged him to communicate the truth in the places of influence he had. With his Pharisaical authority, he had an open invitation to speak in synagogues – at least for a little while.

Our spheres of influence include our homes, places of work, neighbourhoods, relationships, teams or meeting groups. How would you feel on your way to work knowing that someone/group was praying for you to have a godly influence where you work? And then if God gives you an opportunity to show or share Christ there, who are you most likely to share that with? Or on your way to a meeting or family gathering with unbelievers? That person who encouraged you ‘today’ who said they were praying for you or offered a verse of Scripture or affirming word. None of us grows spiritually without the encouragement of other believers. We grow in community.

And then, as we read vv.23-25, when difficulties or even persecution happens,

They help us in trouble (vv.23-25)

Luke says ‘after many days had gone by’ there was a plot to kill Paul. When we try to piece Paul’s early days together using his epistles, most likely Luke’s “many days” are actually about 3 years. Here’s what he says in Gal. 1:15

¹⁵ But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days.

‘Returned to Damascus’ meaning he left Damascus for Arabia for probably 3 years and then came back. Paul mentions in 2 Cor. 12 that he met Jesus who spoke many things to him that he could not repeat – possibly the thorn in the flesh being a reminder that he never share what he learned. So on his return he again preached the gospel but this angered the governor of Damascus (2 Cor. 11:32-33) and the believers lowered Paul in a basket on the outside of the city walls. Paul needed believers to help him when he was discouraged, persecuted and in trouble.

We are often guilty of not telling each other when we need their help. ‘Oh I didn’t want to bother you ...’ or ‘I know you’re busy and have a lot on your plate already I didn’t want to trouble you with my problem.’ And yet, which of us when we find out our friend didn’t tell us about their need doesn’t feel a little offended? So, let’s not offend others by not asking for help when we need it.

But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

The word for ‘followers’ is disciples. This makes sense if its 3 years later giving Paul time to have a following, like the apostles had, who followed Jesus. Paul knew firsthand how crucial having strong relationships with other believers was to his spiritual maturity.

At this point, as Gal. 1:18 affirms, Paul finally goes to Jerusalem to connect with believers and most likely the apostles. Since news doesn’t travel very fast in a pre-Facebook, pre newspaper world, the knowledge of Paul’s salvation may not have been widely known or just a wild rumour that very few would have believed. So he’s going to need help. Enter a familiar name from Acts 4, Barnabas.

God has His people whom He needs to build His church where and when it needs building. So, another way we endure persecution is when each one of us ...

Does Our Part in Building Jesus' Church **(9:26-31)**

Barnabas was his nickname, his real name was Joseph, a Levite from the island of Cyprus who sold some land to help the needs of the Jerusalem church. He was called a son of consolation. That Greek word is the same word Jesus uses to call the Holy Spirit in John 14:16 the 'advocate' or 'comforter'. By the way, Jesus said "I will send you another Advocate /comforter. That word for another means 'identical to'. The Spirit takes Jesus place and dwells inside us. Barnabas serves Paul by being an extension of Jesus. He comes along side Paul, speaks up for Paul and affirms Paul to the apostles. Because they know Barnabas they believe him and accept Paul as a fellow disciple.

God calls all of us to

Be a Barnabas to those needing encouragement (vv.26-27)

He took hold of Paul, he literally stood beside him and with him during this difficult time in his life. This is why its so important to befriend new people who come to the church. Some-one who affirms they belong here. Who they can come to for questions or eventually share their own needs and concerns. We're all called to encourage one another 'daily', not just those who have 'the gift'. Sometimes we use that as an excuse not to serve; 'I don't have that gift' or 'I don't know what my gifts are'. No one knows what their gifts are until they start serving somewhere. God doesn't reveal to us in some kind of dream that we all of a sudden have a gift. And our spiritual gifts are things we grow into and develop along the way. We can't know we have a certain gift until we serve in that area.

And we all have spiritual gifts for the common good of the body (1 Cor. 12). And we need all the parts of the body to function properly to help Jesus' church grow. Was Barnabas' support of Paul without risk? No, it took a lot of courage and faith to trust God that Paul was who he was and that the apostles would accept him as part of the body and a fellow worker. And what results because of Barnabas' faith in God and Paul?

Paul shares the truth boldly by the Spirit's power (vv.28-29)

With the encouragement from Paul and now the apostles Paul felt free and confident in God to serve God with the gifts he had. Again, see how huge encouragement is? They allowed him to move about freely sharing the gospel, using his gifts, building the body of Christ. And just because he faced opposition doesn't mean he wasn't doing God's will. Anyone who wants to live a godly life (Paul says in 2 Tim. 3:12) will be persecuted.

If we don't have trials and problems we're not going to need anyone's help or encouragement. Again, the disciples work together and take Paul to Caesarea and from there he sails home to Tarsus, where we learn from Gal. 2 he spent anywhere from 10-14 years ministering there before Barnabas finds him again (Acts 11:30) and brings him back to the church in Judea.

And then we read one of Luke's summary reports in v.31:

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

How did that happen?

The church worked together and experience God's shalom when they glorified God (vv.30-31)

Did you notice when Paul came that the apostles didn't say, 'We've got Jerusalem covered. This is our territory. You go somewhere else because we're the apostles.' No, they made room for him. He went about freely in Jerusalem. They were there to work together to glorify God so that He would build His church. God used Paul's short time in Jerusalem to arouse the opponents of the gospel to persecute Paul so he could 1) grow and mature in his walk; 2) expand the ministry into the north (Tarsus); and 3) bring him to connect with the apostles later on so they can see the benefit of sending a more mature Paul with a seasoned mentor (Barnabas) to go out and plant churches in Gentile territory. They enjoyed shalom (everyone was benefitted and experiencing God's satisfying presence), they were strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit (through God's people doing God's will) and they grew in numbers as they feared God.

The fear of God is a healthy thing. Listen to these words about Jesus in Isaiah 11,

²The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD— ³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

Jesus fears God and delights in the fear of God. If the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God, then knowing God is equated to fearing God. We delight in knowing God because we see how loving He is and we don't want to disappoint Him. We respect Him and are in awe of Him which strengthens our hope in Him. As His adopted children we want to do His will and also that He be gracious and merciful to us when we don't. We delight in the security He gives us knowing He's for us not against us even when we blow it at times.

Paul's beginning as a believer was rough. Many believers doubted his conversion at first. When he preached the gospel many of His former Pharisaic contemporaries turned against him and twice in the first few years he had to flee for his life. How did he get through it? He was connected to a family of believers who wanted to grow in the Lord themselves and risked encouraging Paul. Being part of a church family and seeking to use your gifts involves risk. But when we trust God and do our part, seeking to glorify Him we all experience His shalom together and we will be strengthened by the Holy Spirit and grow in numbers too.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us
at olivett@rideau.net