

“Why are Believers Persecuted?”

Acts 9:1-19

If someone is reading Acts for the first time (and new believers always are), you begin Ch. 9 where it says,

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

You probably will say to yourself, ‘Saul? Is he still around hurting followers of Jesus?’ Very much so. “Meanwhile Saul was still breathing out threats against the Lord’s disciples.” That word ‘meanwhile’ is a powerful reminder to all of us that even though we may not be experiencing it, reading about it or hearing about persecution, it is going on all over the world all the time.

“Open Doors”, a ministry that monitors and measures persecution through its ‘World Watch List’ reports that on average, every day, 13 Christians are killed for their faith, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked, 12 Christians are unjustly arrested, detained or imprisoned, and 5 Christians are abducted for faith-related reasons. In the 21st century, it is still not possible to practice religion or belief safely. Open Doors notes that for the first time in the list’s 29-year tenure, every country in the top 50 is ranked as experiencing very high or extreme levels of persecution, scoring more than 60 points out of 100. North Korea ranks number one.

And in Canada, even in our own community, there is a growing animosity towards religion and Jesus’ followers specifically. God and Jesus clearly tell us in the Bible this will happen and it will increase as Jesus’ returns draws closer. And this isn’t new to any of us even though, we don’t like hearing it. We prefer comfort and ease and while ‘meanwhile’ we know its happening somewhere else, we hope it doesn’t come here.

But why is there persecution? There are many reasons in the Bible but I believe we can understand the main ones right from this passage in Acts 9 looking at Saul. And if we understand why God allows and uses persecution, I believe we’ll be better equipped to handle it when it happens, pray for those to whom it is happening around the world and be more graciously sensitive to the gospel’s attackers so we can maybe reach them for God’s glory.

The ‘meanwhile’ brings us back to reality because a lot of good things have happened in Ch.8. Many people were getting saved. The gospel was reaching new people groups, even going back to Ethiopia with the Queen’s eunuch, her Finance Minister. But the enemy is not happy when the gospel succeeds so we are reminded of Satan’s hatred of the gospel through Saul’s murderous threats towards Jesus’ followers. And I say Satan’s hatred through Saul because we have to realize that

Persecutors are Spiritually Blind, Believing They are Actually Doing God’s Work (9:1-2)

Who best to understand Saul the unsaved persecutor than Paul the saved apostle? Listen to 2 Cor. 4:4,

2 Cor. 4:4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Paul knew full well what he was like before he was saved. He didn't understand he was blinded by Satan disguising himself as light; hiding behind legalistic religion. Listen to how Paul described himself as to what he was like in 1 Tim. 1:13,

1 Tim. 1:13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.

He didn't know he was against God. He thought he was a believer defending the truth about God. Listen to Phil. 3:3-7,

Phil. 3:3 For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee;⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

He was breathing out murderous threats against followers of Jesus. He got permission from the High Priest himself to scour the whole land of Israel – even further - here travelling north to synagogues in Damascus which is in Syria. This guy has lost it! We could probably almost call him obsessed with those who claimed Jesus was the Messiah who had risen from the dead.

Gal. 1:13 For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.¹⁴ I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Anyone he found who followed Jesus he was going to bind them and bring them back to Jerusalem. And he even had legal permission. Which is scary when the government allows or at least doesn't do anything about the mistreatment of disciples of Jesus.

That's one reason why there is persecution. Religious zealots blinded by Satan, convinced their religion is the only way or anti-religious people who feel that Jesus' followers are the cause of their woes. There are other reasons persecution happens. If we believe in a sovereign God we understand He can use this for His own purposes.

³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

God's plan to bring Jesus back and reign from Jerusalem will not fail. Jesus said His church cannot be destroyed even though some try. Jesus' plan to get the church to the ends of the earth actually happened through Saul. Jesus told them in 1:8 to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. In Acts 7 we're still in Jerusalem. So God uses persecution because,

Sometimes, Jesus' Followers Need to be Prodded to Obey
God
(9:3; 8:1-8; 1:8)

Paul himself is going to get a very not-so-subtle prod to be part of the church, but God had already used him to get the church moving where God wanted them to go. Because they weren't doing it. Go back to the end of Ch. 7.

And Saul was there, giving approval to his [Stephen's] death.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

Where were the disciples? In Jerusalem. Where did they go when they were scattered? Judea and Samaria. What happened in Samaria? Philip preached Christ there. And crowds heard the message and many were healed and believed resulting in great joy in that city.

We are creatures of comfort. We don't want to have to move our families somewhere else even if God wants us to. We don't even want to leave our homes at night or give up a Saturday morning or even come a little earlier to get involved in our community or church occasionally to grow and strengthen the church. God will get us to move if we won't do it ourselves. When we accepted Christ He too gave us His Spirit who will empower us to be His witnesses where we live, work, play and shop. Our refusal to do as God has asked us is an invitation to experience the prodding of God. Sometimes God will change our circumstances dramatically or subtly or even possibly with persecution, but God has invested too much in you and me to just let us stay uninvolved and waste our life. When we sense God's Spirit nudging us to obey Him, then let's do what He says so we'll be blessed as we serve others. What happens if we don't? Heb. 3:12 tells us,

¹² See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. ¹⁵ As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."

The best way we avoid hardening of our hearts is to encourage someone each day. That requires thinking about other people and how to encourage them. That will require a little bit of our time; no, God's time that He has precious given us whose days are numbered by Him. That will require saying no to ourselves and yes to God's purpose for us.

At this point the first time reader of Acts is stunned to read that Jesus Himself stops Saul in his tracks. He blinds him with the light of the glory of God, which by the way Saul says happened at noon when he gave his testimony in Acts 22:6. The soldiers with him saw the light and heard a sound but didn't see Jesus nor comprehend what He said. But He addresses Saul directly saying,

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

When we are being persecuted or harassed for our faith in Jesus, we need to understand it's not really about us. It's Jesus they hate.

Jesus is the One Really Being Persecuted **(9:4-6)**

Jesus makes that very clear; ‘*Why are you persecuting me?*’ Paul attacked believers because he believed they blasphemed God claiming Jesus was the Messiah and that He was alive. This is what irks people because if Jesus was sinless, died on the cross and is alive, then He is the prophesied Messiah who will rule the world one day. Therefore, as fallen sinners we are all accountable to Jesus. Jesus forewarned the eleven the night before He died that they would suffer for identifying with Him, but understand its really Jesus they hate:

John 15:18 “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. ²¹ They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. ²² If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin. ²³ He who hates me hates my Father as well. ²⁴ If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. ²⁵ But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: ‘They hated me without reason.’

²⁶ “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. ²⁷ And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning. 16:1 “All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. ² They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. ³ They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. ⁴ I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. I did not tell you this at first because I was with you.

This isn’t always easy because we are their target. But it pains Jesus – as we see here – when we’re harassed and persecuted because He identifies Himself completely with us. Jesus told us this would happen but He also said we will be rewarded for this. Luke 6:22-23 says

²² Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

²³ “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

At this point Saul is blinded for 3 days and his not eating and drinking probably meant he was fasting, repenting of all that he had said and done against God and Jesus. To realize that everything he stood for and believed in was a lie and that Jesus was indeed who he claimed to be, was terribly humbling. Here’s another reason why God allows persecution. He allows persecution

So God Can Show His Remarkable Grace and Power to Save **Anyone** (9:7-19)

Just like He’ll do with Cornelius and Peter in Ch. 10, both Saul and Ananias are given specific revelation in a vision about the other. Ananias is shocked to hear from Jesus directly about Saul’s conversion. He tells him where he can meet Saul and he is the one who will bring sight to him. Ananias’ hesitation is understandable but Jesus assures him that Saul is indeed saved and will carry Jesus’ name before Gentiles and learn what it means to suffer for Him. Ananias obeys Jesus, meets Saul. By faith calls him brother and places his hands on him where scales fall off his eyes, the Spirit

comes upon him and then he baptizes Saul. When the Spirit's coming is delayed in Acts it is because it is a special occasion that requires witnesses of what God has done.

Ananias had to understand like all of us have to understand to look at persecutors through the eyes of Jesus. That God can and just might show His

Grace and mercy to the persecutor (vv.7-9)

We are commanded to pray for those who hate us. Why? Because the same grace and mercy God made available to us, He can make available to other Sauls. Again, listen to Paul's testimony in 1 Tim. 1:12-14,

¹² I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. ¹³ Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

He was shown mercy, because he didn't get what he deserved, separation from God for eternity. Instead he was shown grace and received what he didn't deserve faith and love in Jesus. Everyone's testimony says the same thing. Whether we were hardened persecutors, ignorant atheists or religious traditionalists; we were spared judgment and graciously given eternal life. We then pray for them so that God will show the same mercy and grace He showed us

And God expects us to show

Grace and acceptance to them from us (vv.10-19)

Reluctantly Ananias accepts Saul, calling him brother and baptizes him. No doubt Ananias had to convince other believers in Damascus that Saul was truly saved. They all knew he was coming. They heard his reputation. They were afraid of him but God saved him and now they need to accept him.

But I don't think God wants us to wait until they are saved. I think He wants us to extend His grace to them before they are saved so they might see the difference Jesus makes in our lives. Perfect love, John says in 1 John 4, casts out fear. When we choose to love God's enemies the way God does, we won't be afraid of them. We'll pray for God to do a miracle in their heart. He did with Saul, he can do it with others.

So when we're wondering why does God allow persecution, we now have a better handle on it. We still have sin in the world and many people hate the idea of an all-powerful God being in control and a Saviour whom we all have to bow the knee to. We understand they have blinded by Satan who hides under the cover of self-righteousness and religious zeal. Jesus is the one being persecuted not us.

But there's a message for us also. Do what God says and trust God has a plan in what He's doing even through persecution. Maybe we're not where we need to be and doing what we need to do. Life is not about you or I. It's about doing the will of God for His glory. And if we're living for our own glory then expect your life to have some upheaval because God will not give His glory to another – including us.

Our persecutors need God too. Pray for their salvation. Pray for the 50 countries that are the worst places to live in for Christians. Pray God will protect His people and save some of their persecutors. Believe God can

do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

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