**Opposition as Opportunity**

Acts 21-22

***No one likes to suffer.*** **Jesus** agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, pleading with the Father for another way - a way that would avoid the cup of ultimate suffering. Similarly, **Paul** did not seek out persecution and suffering - but neither did he shrink back from it. Paul - like Jesus - set his face toward Jerusalem and accepted the will of God, whatever it might be. Just a few verses earlier, Paul said:

“I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” Acts 21:13

***Paul was thoroughly warned*** of the dangers awaiting him in Jerusalem. But he was also ***thoroughly convinced*** it was God’s will for him to return there. His mission was to glorify God by proclaiming salvation in Jesus Christ. He had already faced great opposition and persecution, and he knew more awaited him in the future. But the joy set before him was the exaltation of the name of Jesus. He knew that his life was not the most important value. Safety was not ultimate - Jesus was ultimate, for Paul. ***“To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”***

Can we say the same? Are we more committed to exalting Jesus than we are to our own safety and comfort? I’m not saying we should seek out suffering and persecution. But neither should we shrink back from saying and doing what the Lord calls us to say and do.

Acts 21 and 22 show us three principles of persecution. First:

1. Expect **Opposition** as a follower of Jesus

“This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the one who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.” Acts 21:11

This was ***a prophecy*** from a confirmed prophet in the early church named Agabus. He claimed it as a word from the Holy Spirit and later in the chapter his word was proven true. Paul was quickly bound and delivered over to the Roman authorities, who actually rescued him from being beaten up by the Jewish mob.

***Paul knew this was coming.*** He knew that suffering would be part of his experience as an apostle and ambassador of the gospel. When Ananias was sent to heal Paul in Damascus he was told:

1. Expect **Opposition** as a follower of Jesus

“I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Acts 9:16

Paul knew from the Spirit-led words of fellow believers. And he knew from the Holy Spirit’s guidance in his own heart.

1. Expect **Opposition** as a follower of Jesus

“The Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and affliction await me.” Acts 20:23

That was Paul’s experience as soon as he set out on his missionary journeys. Almost immediately opposition and persecution awaited him. Later in his ministry he recounted the suffering he had endured:

1. Expect **Opposition** as a follower of Jesus

“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked…” 2 Cor. 11:24-25

Five times Paul was flogged with 39 lashes from a nasty cat of nine tails. If you have seen the passion of the Christ you know what this kind of skin-tearing, blood-spilling, agonizing punishment looks like. 40 lashes was considered a death sentence, so 39 lashes was intentionally coming just short of a beating that would kill a person. The floggings, the beatings, the stoning - were just the most obvious of Paul’s sufferings. He goes on.

“In danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” 2 Cor. 11:26-27

Paul knew this was coming. He expected opposition as a follower of Jesus. ***He knew Jesus had suffered*** fierce opposition and endured unimaginable suffering. And he also knew Jesus told his disciples to expect the same treatment. ***“If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.”*** In fact, Jesus told his followers that such suffering for His name and His kingdom would be among the blessings they would experience!

1. Expect **Opposition** as a follower of Jesus

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Matt. 5:10

The final blessing in the famous beatitudes which poetically open the sermon on the mount, is the blessing of persecution.

“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.” Matt. 5:11-12

***Prophets of God almost always faced opposition*** and persecution. Many were beaten, thrown in prison and killed. Jesus knew that is how He would be received. And he told his followers to expect the same treatment He was given. “In this world you WILL have trouble.” That word “trouble” means tribulation - suffering, persecution.

Just because it’s the 21st Century doesn’t mean Christians today will not be persecuted. All over the world Christians are persecuted - many are in prison, many are killed for their faith. And even here the culture wars are heating up and it won’t be long before there is a high price to pay for standing up for the truth. Don’t be surprised. Expect opposition. It’s a war. It is a spiritual battle for the souls of men. War means bloodshed. It means suffering and pain and sacrifice.

But for the Christian, there is ***a blessing in this suffering*** - a way to REJOICE even in the midst of terrible pain. Paul expresses this in Philippians 3:

**Connect with Jesus by remembering His suffering**

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and ***the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings***, becoming like him in his death.” Philippians 3:10, NIV

There is ***a fellowship with Jesus that is closest, most intimate, in pain*** - and specifically in the pain and suffering of persecution. Paul is a clear and vivid example of this. The book of Acts presents Paul’s trials and suffering as a direct parallel to the trials and suffering of Jesus. Paul is the prototypical Christian - the example for all of us to follow. Just as Jesus suffered, so Paul suffered. Just as Jesus testified, so Paul testified. Just as Jesus endured with patient perseverance, so Paul endured.

Whatever you are suffering right now - Jesus knows about it. He can relate to it. He knows that suffering and so much more. Remember His suffering. Remember His pain. You will find that **Jesus meets you in that pain** and loss even more powerfully than He does in your happiness and comfort. C.S. Lewis says, “God whispers in our pleasures but he shouts in our pain.”

One of my hardest seasons of **ministry was in Kentucky** - in a divided, unhealthy, struggling church. After two years of struggle we tried to leave - we looked at opportunities elsewhere. But we felt very clearly that the Lord wanted us to stay. So I accepted the call to move from Associate Pastor to Senior Pastor there, and we stayed another three years - helping that hurting church heal and begin to rediscover a missional identity.

It was ***a hard, frustrating, difficult season of ministry.*** But in the midst of it we drew closer to the Lord. I had an amazing group of fellow pastors who supported me and encouraged me. I had sweet times of prayer and fellowship with the Lord - in which He assured me that all of the frustration was for a purpose.

***I didn’t see the purpose until we got here***, several years later. God was gently but intentionally preparing me to help Oakwood heal, unify and recover its missional identity. I’m not saying we need to get all broken and conflicted and divided to experience fellowship with Jesus - don’t hear that! But I am saying that whatever pain you are going through, you can meet Jesus in it if you remember His suffering for you. Connect with Him. Run to Him. Cling to Him. That’s our first principle of persecution. Number 2:

1. Accept **Suffering** to help you grow

“They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple… They were seeking to kill him.” Acts 21:30-31

Here we see the ***parallels with the end of Jesus’ life***. Paul was falsely accused of defiling the temple. In fact, Paul had just finished a seven day rite of purification and had paid for four other men to complete their purification as well. He was not dishonoring Jewish Law, he was upholding it! But the crowd believed the opposite and seized him like a riotous mob - beginning to beat him without a trial, without any opportunity for him to explain or make a defense.

1. Accept **Suffering** to help you grow

“When they saw the tribune and the soldiers they stopped beating Paul.” Acts 21:32

Thankfully the local Roman authorities were very sensitive to mob violence and they quickly stepped in to see what was going on. Look at this parallel with Jesus in v. 35:

1. Accept **Suffering** to help you grow
   * Reflect the character of Jesus in patient **Endurance**

“He was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd.” Acts 21:35

***Jesus was unable to walk*** and carry his cross the whole way because of his beatings and physical weakness, so he had to have help. Paul, it seems, could have walked, but to protect him from the increasingly violent crowd, the Romans had to carry him.

**Paul reflected the character of Jesus** in so many ways - his zealous commitment to the mission he was given; his bold proclamation of the gospel; and here we see his patient endurance of great suffering, without a word. This is why Paul could say, “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.”

***How are you trying to reflect the character of Christ in your suffering?*** What does patient endurance look like for you right now? Remember the cross. Remember the suffering of the Lord Jesus. Whatever pain we experience is a tiny glimpse of His agony. Whatever persecution and opposition we face, it is miniscule compared to the violence he endured.

The Bible is clear and consistent that **suffering is good for us**. Here is what Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome:

**Reflect the character of Jesus in patient Endurance**

“We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” Rom. 5:3-4

We can ***not only ENDURE*** our sufferings, ***we can REJOICE in them*** because they help us grow. Every athlete knows this principle - no pain no gain. “Pain is weakness leaving the body.” If you can’t push through pain to make progress, you will never succeed in sports. I am not a huge fan of pain, which is why I was only ever an average athlete. Some of you pushed harder and went further in sports.

I was almost good enough to play soccer in college, but what decided it for me was the choice to do vacation with my family at the end of summer for two weeks or report early to school to run and train with the soccer team. I was like, ***“Meh. Let’s do vacation.”*** And so ended my soccer career.

“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character.” ***Suffering is the fire that refines us*** - it purges the sin and weak faith from us. When we come through the furnace of loss we emerge stronger. But it is a painful process to be in the furnace. Only the Master knows when it’s hot enough and when it’s been long enough. It’s rough being clay - or being gold in need of great refining. There’s so much the clay and the gold don’t know and can’t control. But there we are. He is the potter we are the clay. He is the goldsmith, we are the very impure gold in need of constant and thorough refining.

Listen to how James, the brother of Jesus, says it in James 1:

**Reflect the character of Jesus in patient Endurance**

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1:2-4

As we grow in perseverance, we become **PERFECT and COMPLETE** - lacking in nothing. Suffering purifies and perfects us - though it is a painful process. Do you see the privilege and blessing of persecution? It connects us to Jesus as we experience some of what He experienced. And it helps us grow. It enables us to better reflect His patience and endurance.

From the earliest days of the church, just as much as the way Christians lived ***the way that many of them DIED*** spurred on the spread of Christianity. As Christians refused to recant of their faith in Jesus, as they refused to worship Caesar or other Roman gods, and as they were beaten and thrown to wild animals in coliseums or burned while tied to stakes - the patient endurance, ***the joyful acceptance of their suffering PROVED Christianity true*** more than any argument every could.

https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/perpetua.html

One of the famous early martyrs for Jesus was a woman - a young mother - named **Perpetua**, who was killed in an arena in 203 A.D. She was so impressive to the African Bishop, Augustine, that he preached four sermons about her. It was the story of her determination - her conviction - her refusal to recant her belief, even when threatened with death, even when thrown literally to the wild animals.

She was nursing a baby. Her Dad came to her in the jail cell and pleaded with her to offer the sacrifice to the Emperor. Just offer the sacrifice and he will let you go! You can save your life! You can raise your baby. You can still be with your family. But she said: “I cannot be anything other than what I am. I am a Christian.”

Then she went on:

**Reflect the character of Jesus in patient Endurance**

"It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills, for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power." Perpetua, 203 A.D.

Perpetua accepted that suffering, persecution, even death - were ***God’s will for her***. Nothing was happening to her outside of God’s will or beyond His power. She trusted completely in the Lord. And through her patient endurance, she reflected the glory of Jesus in a way that has travelled through 18 centuries, all the way to us this morning.

***How can you reflect the character of Jesus right now?*** How is God calling you to wait patiently, to trust and surrender to Him? Can you say with Perpetua, “It will all happen as God wills… we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power.”

The people around you are watching. Your children, grandchildren, your extended family, your friends, co-workers and neighbors are watching. What is reflecting from your life right now? Accept suffering as a good thing from God to help you grow and to uniquely enable you to reflect the glory of Jesus to a watching world.

One more principle.

1. Seek Opportunities to **Testify**

“I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I may… complete the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.” Acts 20:24, NIV

This was **Paul’s personal mission** - to testify to the gospel. And it is your mission and mine as well. We may not travel as far or plant as many churches - but every follower of Christ has ***this same mission*** - to share the gospel with as many people as we can, at every opportunity. And persecution, opposition and suffering give us opportunities to testify and give God opportunities to amplify our testimony. That is certainly what happened to Paul.

It must have been so ***frustrating to the devil***. Beat Paul up - he keeps preaching. Lock him up - he preaches in the jail and a whole family gets saved. Stone him to death. He pops up and just keeps going - and now people think he’s invincible. Arrest him with a furious mob. What does he do? He stands up and starts preaching the gospel!

1. Seek Opportunities to **Testify**

“I am a Jew… brought up in this city… according to the strict manner of the law… zealous for God.” Acts 22:3

Speaking in Hebrew, Paul shares his testimony. He says, “I know you’re zealous for the law and for the temple - so am I! This is my heritage! I’m one of you!” In fact, Paul could truthfully say he was more zealous than most, since he hunted down Christians to imprison or kill them. But then…

1. Seek Opportunities to **Testify**

“As I drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me.” Acts 22:6

Boom. Paul was knocked from his horse and a voice from heaven spoke directly to him. It was Jesus of Nazareth, unveiled in blinding glory. The Jesus he was persecuting. The One whose followers he was hunting down, beating up and killing. Yet Jesus did not kill me, Paul said. No, he gave me specific instructions and sent people to take care of me - including a man who healed me of my blindness.

**Share your story to introduce His story**

“The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.” Acts 22:14-15

Paul had the special privilege to see and hear from Jesus directly. He had a uniquely powerful testimony. His life was dramatically transformed by this encounter with the Lord. And Paul used this testimony over and over. ***His story became a perfect setup for the story of Jesus.***

Brothers and sisters, the same thing is true for us! YOUR STORY - however the Lord worked to show you the truth of who He is and all He did for you - that is your most powerful tool as a witness for Jesus. Use ***YOUR testimony as a setup for HIS Story.***

**Share your story to introduce His story**

“And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” Acts 22:16

Paul described himself as ***the foremost of all sinners***. He felt his violence against the church - his beating and killing of Christians like Stephen, the first deacon - was unforgivable. It was unimaginable to Him that God would forgive a wicked, violent, murderess man like him. Yet it was true. That was the gospel reality.

And Paul said, “If God can forgive me, He can forgive anyone. There is hope for YOU too.”

That was the message that led **Bonnie Witherall** and her husband, Gary, to go to Sidon in Lebanon in 2001 to open a free medical clinic and share the gospel with Muslims there. For two years they distributed food and medical treatments while building relationships with locals. Bonnie would often travel with Muslim women as they made various deliveries, especially in the more poor and dangerous areas.

They were warned that it was a dangerous assignment - Muslims in that part of the Middle East were threatening American Christians. But 31 year old Bonnie said to be beaten or attacked for her faith “would be an honor.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/21/international/american-missionary-is-shot-dead-in-lebanon.html>

In fact, she wrote this in her journal:

**Share your story to introduce His story**

“God, I want to surrender all my plans to you today. I want to give you the complete, utter control of my life. I want to lift you high above all else.” Bonnie Witherall, 2002

Bonnie expected opposition. She knew that by preaching the gospel she was threatening the teachings of Islam. But she considered it an honor to be associated with the name of Jesus. She accepted danger, risk and suffering as gifts from God to help her grow - to grow her faith, her surrender, her service. She sought to reflect the

Goodness and mercy of Jesus through her patient endurance and faithful service.

And she took every opportunity to share the gospel. She used her story to introduce God’s story. Now her husband, Gary, continues to use their story to call Christians to total surrender to the Lord. (Book title - *Total Abandon*, 2005)

Let’s pray for that kind of endurance and ability to reflect the glory of Jesus!