

TUESDAY 28 June 2022 "Persecuted & Scattered" (Acts 7:57-8:3)

Good morning my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

Everyday around the world, events happen which are shocking and leave lasting impressions on those who witness them. Thanks to the internet and global TV communications, many of these shocking events are made available to the world even within minutes of their happening. Fortunately, there are usually filters applied protecting us from seeing some of the most gruesome brutality. PTSD is now a fairly common psychological condition which those who suffer great trauma can experience for a long time.

In our ongoing journey of tracking the events recorded for us in the book of Acts, in the months following Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, there was frequent brutality in Jerusalem and yesterday I left you in the crowd witnessing one of the worst events. *Stephen, a kind and generous man, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, and busy everyday caring for the practical needs of widows and others, found himself arrested and confronted by the religious leaders of the day.* His response to their accusations stirred up a violent reaction and the record says: **"they dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."** (Acts 7:58)

As the crowd rushed together pushing Stephen to the ground, they picked up stones and rocks. Sometimes mobs get out of control and that was happening here! But even in this, there was some formality, believe it or not! **"Witnesses"** is the word used to describe some people who came forward to proclaim their clear accusations against Stephen. Taking off their coats, was their way of identifying themselves as an accuser and also so they could more accurately throw their rocks. Placing their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul was their way of gaining official approval, from this man Saul, for the vicious act they were about to do. *By Saul standing there receiving their coats he was both giving his approval and taking personal responsibility for this execution of Stephen!*

This process is still practiced in some parts of the world in our day where public punishment or even execution is done with crowds as eyewitnesses. *This is our first encounter with this man named Saul.* We don't exactly know his age here, but we do know, from his own writings, that he was a young Pharisee, rapidly rising in the ranks of influential leaders. Years later this Saul wrote about himself: **"If anyone thinks they have reason to put confidence in their accomplishments, I have more: I was circumcised on the 8th day, of the people of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless."** (Phil. 3:4-6)

"I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it!" (Gal. 1:13,14)

Many scholars believe Saul's full name was Saul Paulus of Tarsus. He had moved to Jerusalem to study under the best Rabbi's and teachers of his day, including Gamaliel whom we saw stand up and call the Sanhedrin to reason when they had arrested the apostles. Remember? You'll find that in Acts 5:34. We don't know whether Saul requested this authority, or he was commissioned to oversee this execution, but as we look at the mob with stones in their hands, *this young man Saul is about to be propelled into prominence by this horrific act.*

Dr. Luke records this remarkable scene: ***"While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was there giving his approval of Stephens' death."*** (Acts 7:59,60)

There are many ways to die, and wicked people continually invent new ways, but being pummeled by stones and rocks may be one of the most barbaric ways to die. I've often wondered if the phrase **"fell asleep"** is used by Dr. Luke to describe a kindness which God extended to Stephen as those rocks cracked his skull, smashed his face and tore his body apart? Did God actually put Stephen into a coma so that he did not feel the excruciating blows of the rocks in those last moments before he died? We don't know that of course, but we do know that with his last breaths, *Stephen was proclaiming his full confidence in his relationship with Jesus Christ, and Stephen did as Jesus had done from His execution place, the cross, asking forgiveness for those who were executing Him!*

The verses which follow are not difficult for us to imagine, having watched the atrocities of recent years in places like Syria and Ukraine and Afghanistan and Yemen. Acts 8 describes a sudden groundswell of opposition and persecution of those in this Jesus movement in Jerusalem: ***"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."*** (Acts 8:1-3)

Now you might be wondering why there is no mention of Roman soldiers intervening, protecting these followers of Jesus from this violent outbreak against them? You'll recall the soldiers were responsible to keep order in Jerusalem, and in recent weeks this great spiritual awakening had resulted in thousands of people often gathering to hear the apostles teach them, and hold large baptism services. *Crowds, then as now, can be frightening because so easily a peaceful crowd can be turned into a violent mob.*

This persecution of Saul was dispersing the crowds, even to the point that many Jesus followers fled Jerusalem going to stay with friends in other cities, so in some ways I think the soldiers actually welcomed and may even have helped Saul's vicious attacks on the Jesus followers!

Did you notice Luke twice used the word '**church**' to describe the Jesus movement in Jerusalem? That's important my friends, for this movement is organized and recognized as not simply lots of people but is a legitimate movement with the apostles and deacons as recognized leaders and very real, tangible life change happening in lots of people, and finally a significant positive impact on the city of Jerusalem. *When Luke uses the word "**church**" it's the same word Jesus used, "ekklesia" and it means people, specifically people of God out of the darkness of sin, who become believers in and followers of Jesus.* If you consider yourself to be a believer in and follower of Jesus, this is where it all began for us!

But I wonder also friends, if you are troubled, that God would allow such horrific things to happen in Jerusalem in these days? The apostles imprisoned and then flogged! Stephen arrested and then brutally executed, being stoned to death! And now this city-wide persecution by Saul actually dragging people out of their homes and arresting them? *Perhaps you are wondering WHY God isn't doing something to protect His people and stop this brutality?* The answer my friends is one word, do you see it in verse 1 and again verse 4? It's the word "**SCATTERED**".

God had first sent His Holy Spirit to birth this great movement during Pentecost, when pilgrims had come from all over the Roman empire. Many of them had long since gone home with news of what they had experienced. And now God was doing it even more strategically... **scattering**, leading the Jesus followers out from Jerusalem to cities and towns throughout Israel. As they went, of course, everyone wanted to know the story of what was happening in Jerusalem! In the absence of radio or TV or internet or social media, *God used the old-fashioned way of spreading the news... people on the move telling their friends and everyone who was hungry to hear the news of Jerusalem and all God had been doing there!* Tomorrow we'll look more closely at what exciting things happened as the news spread. For today, I ask you to consider what God might be doing in our day, where you and I live, as He allows opposition and persecution, perhaps for the purpose of spreading the great news of lives being changed by His power! Is that part of your story my friends?

Here's a great song to help us celebrate how God works, for His glory, through even difficult situations...

Today's Scripture is Acts 7:57-8:3.