



Sermon Series Notes

“When God Turns Evil Into Good” (Acts 8:1-4)

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Intro: Read the text; I am not nearly as proud to be an American today as I have been all my life. Our country is rapidly moving toward the kind of culture where committed Christians who stand for and proclaim truth will be persecuted greatly.

WASHINGTON — In a long-sought victory for the gay rights movement, the Supreme Court [ruled by a 5-to-4 vote on Friday](#) that the Constitution guarantees a right to same-sex marriage. Justice Anthony M. Kennedy, writing for the majority in the historic decision, said gay and lesbian couples had a fundamental right to marry. “No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice and family,” he wrote. “In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were.” The decision, which was the culmination of decades of litigation and activism, [set off celebrations across the country](#) and the first same-sex marriages in several states. It came against the backdrop of fast-moving changes in public opinion, with polls indicating that most Americans now approve of the unions. The court’s four more liberal justices joined Justice Kennedy’s majority opinion. Each member of the court’s conservative wing filed a separate dissent, in tones ranging from resigned dismay to bitter scorn. In dissent, Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr., said the Constitution had nothing to say on the subject of same-sex marriage. “If you are among the many Americans — of whatever sexual orientation — who favor expanding same-sex marriage, by all means celebrate today’s decision. Celebrate the achievement of a desired goal. Celebrate the opportunity for a new expression of commitment to a partner. Celebrate the availability of new benefits. But do not celebrate the Constitution. It had nothing to do with it.” As Justice Kennedy finished announcing his opinion from the bench on Friday, several lawyers seated in the bar section of the court’s gallery wiped away tears, while others grinned and exchanged embraces. Outside the Supreme Court, the police allowed hundreds of people waving rainbow flags and holding signs to advance onto the court plaza as those present for the decision streamed down the steps. “Love has won,” the crowd chanted as courtroom witnesses threw up their arms in victory. In remarks in the Rose Garden, [President Obama welcomed the decision](#), saying it “affirms what millions of Americans already believe in their hearts.” “Today,” he said, “we can say, in no uncertain terms, that we have made our union a little more perfect.”

Chief Justice Roberts said the majority opinion was “an act of will, not legal judgment.” “The court invalidates the marriage laws of more than half the states and orders the transformation of a social institution that has formed the basis of human society for millennia, for the Kalahari Bushmen and the Han Chinese, the Carthaginians and the Aztecs,” he wrote. “Just who do we think we are?” He also said: “people of faith can take no comfort in the treatment they receive from the majority today.”

I mentioned recently that Rick Scott signed a bill this month that allows gay & lesbian couples to adopt children, which puts our own ministry, Door of Hope, in a very tough situation.

Someone said, if God does not judge America, he will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Stephen proclaimed truth openly and fearlessly, and it got him killed. We may not be at that point in America, but we are headed toward times that will mean increased persecution for anyone who wants to live a godly life, and who continues to stand for the truth of the Word of God.

Leviticus 18:22 Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.

The NKJV translates it “an abomination.” It means a disgusting thing.

See Romans 1:21-27

II Timothy 3:12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Jesus told us to pray for those who persecute us. This is sometimes very hard for me. I’m a fighter, always have been. There was a girl I was seeing pretty regularly in high school named Debbie. We were not officially attached, nevertheless I considered her my girl. I hear from my friends that Jody Jones had asked her out on a date, & that she accepted. I was livid. I told some of my friends that I was going to kick his butt. Word got to Debbie, and Debbie, concerned for Jody’s well-being, warned him. So here I am at Ruth’s Drive In on a Friday night, next thing I know Jody comes pulling up with Debbie in the car. He comes over to me and says, “I hear you’re gonna kick my butt, so go for it.” I hesitated briefly, then took off my jacket, and we walked back to the parking lot and had it out. I was wearing braces at that time in my life. Jody punched my left front tooth, and if not for my braces I’m certain the punch would have knocked my tooth out. It’s still today further back than my right front tooth. Jody won the fight. But here’s the good news: I got the girl! I won the prize, even though I lost the fight. That’s certainly that way it is in the Christian life. Even when we lose, we win.

Rom.8:36-37 As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

As a result of Stephen’s death, Saul of Tarsus would eventually be converted. In his testimony, he tells about what was really going on in his heart and mind during the dark days that he was leading such a vicious attack on the church; Acts 26: 14 (Before King Agrippa) We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

Saul never forget Stephen’s face as he stood before the Sanhedrin (the face of an angel), nor Stephen’s courage, & the wisdom by which he spoke. But perhaps more than anything, Saul never forgot how Stephen died, and the Holy Spirit used it to “goad” (convict) him of his need to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior (See Acts 7:59-60). Stephen’s response to his persecutors was a powerful witness for God.

Stephen stood for truth, and when persecuted for his stand, he did not retaliate, but humbled himself, and even prayed for his persecutors.

As much as I do not like any kind of persecution against Christians, I nevertheless realize several biblical advantages of persecution.

A proper response to persecution is a witness to our persecutors.

Persecution proves the genuineness of our faith

I Peter 1:6-7

If we are never tested by tough times, how does anyone know that our faith is real? How do we know that it is real?

The world needs to see some tested believers who are not afraid to stand for truth, yet respond to persecution, not with threats and retaliation, but love and forgiveness, and the gospel; Saints who rejoice in the Lord no matter what the state of the economy or the world, whose hope is not in this life or this present world, men and women of God who can say with Habakkuk, Habbakuk 3: 17 Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

Persecution can be used by God to advance the gospel

The Jerusalem church would have been difficult for most believers to willingly leave, for several reasons. This is the city where the Jewish temple was (and Herod's Temple at that). It's where you could get your financial needs met (See Acts 2:45; 4:34-35). It's where miracles were happening (See Acts 2:43). It was the church of the apostles; the best teaching, the top leaders; Peter, James & John would become known as the "pillars of the church" (Gal.2:9). It's in the city where Jesus will return in His second coming (See Acts 1:11; Zech.14:4). For many, it was their hometown. It was where their families were, moms & dads, grandmothers & grandfathers, brothers and sisters, aunts & uncles. Some had moved to Jerusalem after years of dreaming about it. How hard it would have been for them to turn around and leave the place they had dreamed of living for years. Even in our day, despite all the turmoil & terrorist activity in the Middle East, Jews are coming back to the land of Israel, especially Jerusalem.

Philip would be scattered to Samaria. Good Jews did not willingly go a place like Samaria. Samaritans were Jews who had intermarried with Assyrians while in captivity, and as a result were despised by Jews who had not. As Philip shares the gospel, a revival breaks out. Had it not been for the persecution, when would the gospel have gone to Samaria, and who would have taken it there?

The last time I taught through this section I titled the message "Persecution Evangelism." This outreach beyond Jerusalem was not the result of a missions conference, or a church brainstorm meeting on how to begin to accomplish "The Great Commission" (Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8). The disciples had no clue that one of the things God would use to fulfill Jesus' Acts 1:8 prophecy would be persecution.

As Saul of Tarsus pounded the church with persecution, it was like beating a fire and causing sparks to fly out and start more fires beyond the one he was beating.

Phil.1: 12 Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

Gal.4: 13 As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. (Note: Sometimes, the illness is not ours, but that of a friend, relative, coworker, etc., and it becomes an open door to share the hope of eternal life).

What is God's ultimate purpose in the world? See I Tim.2:1-3, 8-10; II Peter 3:9.

Evil is behind any persecution against God's people. But have you noticed what God in His infinite wisdom does? He turns evil into good.

God loves turning evil into good

Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

What God allows in our lives to accomplish His will can be painful, & very perplexing.

II Cor.4:8-10 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; **perplexed**, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

Perplexed: Completely baffled; very puzzled

Just think how perplexing the cross was to Jesus' disciples. But the cross was God's wisdom to bring salvation to the world!

I Cor.2:7-8...we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

Jesus said to Pilate, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."

Satan said to the Lord about Job, Job 1:10 Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?

Evil has no power over us unless we give the devil space in our lives (a foothold), or unless God allows Satan to breach any part of the protective hedge He has around us. Whenever he does so, He intends to turn evil into good.

See Acts 9:15-16; Do you know by what means Saul of Tarsus (Paul) would stand before kings and proclaim the name of Jesus & the gospel? See Acts 23:10-11, summarize vv.12-22, then read vv.23-24. You see, there was no other way to get Paul before kings to share the gospel without him being arrested. See Acts 28:30-31. Oh the wisdom of God!

I think of the story of Joseph, hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, persecuted for his righteousness. But his suffering ended up being the means by which Israel was saved. Joseph ultimately understood that what he had gone through was God's way of bringing salvation to his own people.

Gen.45: 7-8 But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.

Paul's thorn in the flesh was a messenger sent by Satan, but God turned the evil into good, using it to keep Paul from becoming conceited, and thereby diminish the power of God upon his life.

God used Daniel's willingness to be cast into a den of lions to bring a powerful witness for God to the world. God used Shadrach, Meshech, & Abednego's willingness to be cast into a fiery furnace to bring a powerful witness for God to the world. And God will use our perplexing, often painful circumstances to accomplish His will in and through our lives.

Job's faith teaches us to continue to trust God even when we don't understand, and when hell is mysteriously allowed to rob, steal, kill and destroy. Job 13:15 Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.

CONCLUSION

From Reader's Digest (August '03) – Hosting a party in his back yard, a millionaire announces to the crowd that he will give anything he owns to the person who swims the length of his pool. There's just one catch: The pool is filled with sharks.

Splash!!! Into the pool goes a man, swimming furiously. Fins are breaking the water line and jaws are snapping. Just when it looks like he's fish food, the guy climbs out.

"I'm a man of my word," says the millionaire, "and you are the bravest man I've ever met. So what can I give you?"

Glaring into the crowd, the swimmer says, "Let's start with the name of the jerk that pushed me in!"

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a remarkably wide-selling book titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It sold more than a half a million copies before going to paperback and was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for a whole year. The whole point of his book is to say God is all loving but not all powerful, that God is good, but not sovereign. So, when bad things happen to good people, it is because events are out of God's control. Kushner advises his readers to "learn to love [God] and forgive him despite his limitations."

The truth is God will sometimes push us out of our comfort zones and allow us to suffer in order to fulfill His will in and through our lives.

God allows us to suffer for the sake of others, even the very ones who are causing our suffering – our persecutors. Our response to those who persecute us is crucial to their potential salvation. They need to see that our faith is real, and that it cannot be crushed by opposition, pain, or hard times.

May God continue to turn evil into good, for His glory, & for the sake of the gospel.