

If you had a guess to the top three missions sending countries in the world, what would be your guesses? I'm sure most of you would affirm that the United States would surely be one of the top three, but what about the others? What if I told you that the race was closer than you might think? Today, one of the largest exporters of the gospel is also the only Asian country with over 20% of its population identifying as Christian. Any guesses?

Robert J. Thomas was a Welsh protestant missionary to China in the 1800s. Shortly after landing in China, he was reassigned to a different post which happened to be one of the closest ports to the Korean peninsula. In God's providence Robert would meet a Korean refugee and he became obsessed with Korea and the Korean people. After learning the Korean language, he agreed to become an interpreter for the French Navy as they set upon rescuing some French missionaries in Korea.

When they arrived at the Korean river port, they were attacked and Robert abandoned ship with his arms full of Bibles. He made it to the river shore and began scattering the last of his Bibles. Before he died, Robert prayed for the soldier pointing his sword at him, and gave him a Bible. He was stabbed to death and burned on the river bank. This young Korean soldier took the Bible home and after reading and studying it, he is said to have been converted and became a devout believer and an elder at Anju Episcopal Church. Many in the crowds on the riverbank picked up the Bibles that Robert had scattered and became believers as well.

Korea would slowly be converted, and now over 100 years later, South Korea is the largest Asian Christian population in the world. Flocks of faithful brothers and sisters would follow Robert and spill their blood on Korean soil, but Korea has now become a powerhouse for gospel proclamation to the ends of the earth.

Some might look at Robert J. Thomas' death and say what a waste. I'm sure there were some in the French Navy who pitied Robert as they saw him die on that shore for some 'books,' and some silly message. But those of us who have been washed by the Holy Spirit, and have been given this same gospel message, know that Robert isn't to be pitied, and that book and message he died giving away wasn't for nothing. For in the words of Paul, the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." (Rom 1:16)

Most of you have never heard the name or story of Robert J. Thomas, and that's ok. He could care less if you know his name. He didn't go to the shores of Korea for you to know his name. He went to those shores to proclaim the name of Jesus. This small and insignificant death in the scope of history was the means by which the people of Korea would come to know the Savior of the world.

This morning, we are finishing the account of Stephen and his death. He too died an insignificant death in the scope of history. But Stephen's death and the King he proclaimed would become the means by which the gospel would begin to spread from the small area of Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

As we examine the last minutes of Stephen's life and his death we are going to see, by God's grace, the peace in death and the purpose of persecution. We are going to examine this with two simple questions. First, in verses 59-61a we will ask the question, "How could Stephen have peace in death?" And then in verses 61b-64 we will ask the question, "What is the purpose of persecution?"

I know some of you are asking the question, "what does this story about the first Christian martyr have to do with me?" Though most of us will never find ourselves in the same situation as Stephen, all of us will eventually feel the pressure of believing what you believe.

I know of one dear sister in this church that has already lost friends because of her new faith in Jesus. It could also look like you losing your job for holding certain Biblical convictions. Yet in this passage, we see that Stephen's convictions and steadfast faith in Jesus led to his death.

So a question we can look to this passage to answer for us is this: If Jesus was able to satisfy Stephen, even unto death, this same Jesus can satisfy us in our persecutions and trials as well.

Let's start by backing up a little bit to verse 51 so that we get a little bit of context from the end of Stephen's speech and I'll read through verse 64, and we're going to see that Stephen had peace in death because first, he saw Jesus as his true joy.

Luke's accounting of this event is truly good reporting. If you weren't with us last week and are just reading this section of Acts, you would honestly think that the "they" in verse 54 was referring to an angry mob of common people. But the "they" that Luke is referring to here are the men of the Sanhedrin. These were the religious leaders of the day. The holy men that were staunch protectors of the law.

Yet Luke's recounting of these men's reaction to Stephen's speech is one that you would expect at a Brawl of the Wild game when some fans have had too much to drink and their tongues have become a little too loose. A visceral anger had overtaken these religious leaders to the point that they were literally grinding their teeth at him. Just imagine that sight. Stephen has now become a lamb in the middle of a circle of lions.

But Stephen is given a vision and gazes "into heaven and sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." Verse 64 says that he's full of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit, that Stephen says in verse 51, they are resisting and rejecting.

We don't do a ton of screen time in our home, but when we do there is a consistent pattern of not being able to draw our children's attention from the screen. I could literally tell them that I will take away their favorite toy for the rest of their lives and my kids will keep their eyes glued to the screen. I'm sure I'm not the only parent or babysitter in this room who has experienced this amazing phenomenon.

Stephen is literally looking at an angry and furious mob in front of him, yet the vision of Jesus superseded any fear he might've had. Nothing could avert or remove his eyes from the resurrected Jesus on his throne. He is transfixed on Jesus.

We live in a world that vies for our attention at every turn. I remember living in Hollywood, California, and the number of billboards and advertisements that I passed on my way to the hospital never ceased to amaze me. All of them had some kind of scandalous or provocative image on it. We might not live in

Los Angeles, CA, but we have plenty of distractions ourselves. We might not be surrounded by prowling lions like Stephen, but make no mistake we are surrounded by spiritual darkness everywhere.

Are our eyes so firmly fixed on Jesus, that no amount persecution or threat can remove our eyes from Jesus? Do we know the Savior of our lives in a way that we will not be distracted by every whim or breeze? This has been extremely convicting for me. In what ways am I purposefully redirecting my gaze from Jesus. Praise God for giving us Stephen, who shows us not only what it means to gaze at Jesus but who also confesses Jesus.

Look at verses 55-57 with me, as we see Stephen's confession.

Now it's really easy to read both of these verses quickly, but I want to stop and highlight two things that Stephen says that are very purposeful. First, if you look at verse 55, it's clear that Jesus is the center of this vision, but look at what Stephen calls Jesus in verse 56. He says, "behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man..."

Not too long ago, Tyler preached on Luke 22 when Jesus is before the Sanhedrin, mind you that this is the same Sanhedrin that Stephen is standing in front of in our text.

Luke 22:66-71 says this: "And they led him away to their council, and they said, ⁶⁷ 'If you are the Christ, tell us.' But he said to them, 'If I tell you, you will not believe, ⁶⁸ and if I ask you, you will not answer. ⁶⁹ But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.'" ⁷⁰ So they all said, "Are you the Son of God, then?" And he said to them, "You say that I am." ⁷¹ Then they said, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips."

You see, Jesus equated his Messianic title, "the Son of Man," also with "the Son of God," and they crucify him for it. They take Jesus from this meeting at the Sanhedrin to Pilate and Herod and then they kill him.

Fast forward to our text this morning and we see that not only has Stephen accused the Jews of killing the Messiah, Stephen has now confirmed what Jesus pronounced in Luke 22. The last time the words "Son of Man" were heard in this room was from the very mouth they were about to crucify. Stephen is showing that Jesus' words were always true. This brings us to the second important phrase of note.

Look closely at verse 56. Did you notice that Stephen proclaims that Jesus is standing? This is opposite of what we just read in Luke 22, where Jesus describes himself as sitting. But this is just ripe with hope and comfort. You have Jesus standing to receive and comfort the about to be, first martyr of the Christian faith.

What peace must have rushed over Stephen in this moment. Stephen would still be killed in just a few moments; this wouldn't change the outcome. Why is this important? I think the world would say, "if your Jesus was as powerful as you say he is, why couldn't he just save Stephen right then and there?"

This isn't a bad question. I'd say that this is actually a quality question for the world to ask, maybe some of you are even asking yourselves this question. But what if I proposed a different question? What if I asked, "do I value Jesus or my comfort or safety more?"

You see, as Stephen stood there, moments from death, he got what he had been longing for since Jesus' ascension. He got all of Jesus. He might not have understood why his about to be death was part of the plan, but what he did understand was that his Jesus was worth it. Whatever the plan was, whatever may come, Stephen had peace because Jesus was worth all of it.

To circle back to Stephen's confession of the Christ, it's clear that Stephen couldn't help but proclaim what he knew to be true. He wasn't under any illusions that what he saw in his vision, and then would soon confess to the crowd would lead to his eventual stoning. Yet...he still confessed.

We have a dear sister in this church that can't help but recommend food or household products to us. We never have to encounter a problem in our home or think about trying the best new gluten free product because this dear sister has already done the research, tried it, and is now trying to sell us on it. This naturally comes out of a loving heart that can't contain the joy she desires for us.

So too is Stephen's delight in Jesus manifested in his proclamation of Jesus on his throne. His confession is immediate, because his delight is overwhelming. Just as he couldn't tear his eyes away from Jesus, he can't help but confess the truth and his joy.

This is juxtaposed with the immediate reactions of the men around him. Look at verses 57-58 with me.

We talk a lot about salvation and conversion at Sovereign Hope. If you're new or visiting us for the first time and these words are new to you, that's ok, stick with us, for this is why the Scriptures are so helpful. For, in verse 56, you see Stephen's heart, a heart that has been converted. Stone to flesh. Paul describes a converted heart in Titus 3 as a washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, that is poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ.

Stephen's actions are one of a heart that has been washed by the Holy Spirit. Yet, the men described in 57-58 are described as men that stop their ears, yell loudly and take Stephen outside the city like a lynching mob. Their hearts were as hard as the stones they were throwing at Stephen.

Stephen's converted heart's natural response was one of confession and delight. The mobs' unconverted hearts' natural response was one of defiance and murder.

As I continued to study this text and meditated on it more and more, a question that kept coming to me was, "How can I know that I would die with sheer delight like Stephen?" You see, Stephen's life is really summed up in a couple of verses in Acts.

95% of Stephen's spotlight in Acts is his speech. You get some of his life as he is selected as a deacon of the church, and then you have these couple of verses that describe his death. But it only takes a couple of verses to realize that Stephen's moments that are recorded before his death, and then his eventual death, are just the natural climax of a life of faithfulness and obedience.

Stephen is described as a man full of faith, power, and grace. He is said on several occasions to be full of the Holy Spirit. When we return to the book of Acts later in the Fall, we are going to get to the main character, besides God himself, in the book of Acts, Paul. Many people look at Paul and think they could never emulate him. It's true that Paul was specially gifted to be the Paul, the great apostle. But more often than not, Luke gives us little portraits of men and women in the book of Acts that are ordinary men and women, who demonstrate a life of faithfulness and obedience.

Stephen was an ordinary believer that God chose to use as the church's first martyr. Therefore, we need not worry about how we will die, we should be concerned first and foremost with how we live. And the Bible tells us to love God with all our soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we do that, day after day, week after week, God will use it. Let us live a life of faithfulness and obedience and let God choose how he uses it and ends it.

The Scriptures also tell us that Stephen was full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit, which should be the marks of every believer, not just Stephen. For look with me quickly at Romans 8:9-11.

Paul writes, ⁹You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."

Therefore, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, and you have been given a new heart in Jesus, then you are full of the Holy Spirit.

Is this how people describe you? When they think of you, do they see a man or a woman who is full of faith, and power, and of the Holy Spirit? When our kids describe us, do they see mommies and daddies that are full of the faith, full of grace, and full of the Holy Spirit? Or are we satisfied with being labeled as beautiful or successful?

To be clear, I'm not saying that we should desire or seek to be martyred for the faith, but I am exhorting all of us to live lives of faithfulness, grace, and full of the Holy Spirit. Lives that delight in Jesus both in life and in death.

The last way that Stephen is able to have joy in his death: he saw Jesus as his only hope. Let's read verses 59-60.

In this section, Stephen prays to Jesus twice. Let's look at the first one a little closer. Stephen cries out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." If this sounds familiar, you're not mistaken. In Luke 23, before Jesus dies, he cries out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" In his some of Stephen's final words, he invokes the very words of the one he is crying out to. How beautiful is this?

Even more beautiful are the very words he uses. Notice that he doesn't say, "please would you receive my Spirit. Or let my final sacrifice and death be enough for you to receive my spirit." He says Jesus, receive my spirit. It's a declaration!

Over the last several years, some of us have befriended some of the Afghan refugees in Missoula. As we've gotten to know them better and learned more and more about Islam, something has really stood out to me. The life of a Muslim is guided by the life of the great prophet Muhammad. They believe if they follow strict practices and live a life that is guided by the principles set out by Muhammad that they have a chance at getting into paradise. There are no guarantees into paradise, just a never-ending weight scale that you hope you have tipped enough to get you in. Even Muhammad himself, the great prophet, was not a shoe-in. EVEN HIM.

If Stephen was a Muslim, it would make sense for him to beg or ask Jesus to let him in. But that is not what Stephen says. He says with certainty, "Jesus, receive my spirit." When we have placed our trust in Jesus, and when he has given us a new heart, there is no question to our salvation. Paul says that the Holy Spirit is the seal of our salvation.

Therefore, we can cry out with Stephen on that final day because he is our only hope, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. If you're sitting here this morning and you've been trying to work for your salvation. Or if you've always thought that the Christian life is one of self-betterment, I'm here to tell you that you've been sold a lie. For there is nothing we can do to "earn" our salvation. No amount of good works, short-term mission trips, or church attendance can save you. Only Jesus can.

So call out to Him in faith! If you're scared of the road that this will lead you on, or if you're scared what your friends or family will say, come talk to me. Talk to the people sitting around you. Don't leave here today with questions. We might not have all the answers, but we can point you to the God who does.

Stephen doesn't just stop there though. He prays a second time and calls out as he is being peppered with stones, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Again, if this sounds familiar, you're not wrong. As Jesus is being placed on the cross, he yells out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Even as the author of life is being put to the death, Jesus prays that those around him would be saved. And we see the fruit of this prayer as one of the thieves being crucified with him, repents and believes.

Stephen too prays for those around him to be forgiven through faith and repentance. He knows that Jesus is the only hope for those that are sentencing him to death. Therefore, he cries out to him in prayer to save and forgive these men. He invokes the words of his Jesus again.

It's said that if you were to cut John Bunyan, the author of Pilgrim's Progress, that Scripture would bleed out of him. I think the first person to own that compliment would be Stephen though. In the midst of fear and death, he breathes, sweats, and bleeds Jesus. May that be said of us one day.

And though it's not immediate, fruit of Stephen's prayer would quickly follow. Verse 58/1a says, "And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul...and Saul approved of his execution." Luke is giving us a sneak peek into the next section of Acts and the great conversion of Saul to Paul.

For starting in chapter 8 of Acts we see the miraculous conversion of Saul and the fruit of Stephen's prayer. Everyone knows Paul the apostle, and rightfully so, but what about the man who prayed a dying prayer, to a resurrected Savior, that set in motion the gospel going forth to the ends of the earth?

I'm sure the apostles thought they would get decades of faithful service out of Stephen after selecting him as one of the deacons of the early church. This was probably not in their plan when they laid hands on him to commission him, but I don't believe that Stephen, nor the apostles, would change anything about what played out in God's sovereignty.

This small insignificant death of a lowly deacon, that was part of a new faction of Jews following a supposedly dead messiah, was the domino that would start the spread of the gospel out of Jerusalem. Brothers and sisters, may we not see small acts of faithfulness and obedience in service of the King as petty and useless. God uses it all. It's all for his glory and our good. Let us rest in this truth.

One last thing to point out before we move on from Stephen's death, is Luke's insertion of Stephen taking his last breath. He says, Stephen fell asleep. It's an interesting choice of words, but is not uncommon in the New Testament. Jesus, when speaking of Lazarus' death, says that he has fallen asleep. This is also used several times by Paul in his letters to describe believers that have died. So why describe it this way?

As we move through the book of Acts, after our break in the Song of Solomon, I want you to notice how many times the resurrection of Jesus and the eventual resurrection of believers is mentioned. We often talk about Jesus' death on the cross, and rightfully so. But the resurrection was a big deal to the early church, again, and rightfully so.

When most of us think about our deaths, we think it'll happen in some sort of peaceful way, 20-30 years after our retirement. Yet, we just read the account of Stephen's death. It's widely believed that besides John, all of the other apostles were martyred for their faith. A Stephen-like death was the expected norm, not the exception.

Yet Luke, in recording Stephen's death shows the peace in which Stephen died. He cries out to Jesus and then he falls asleep. He falls asleep because the bones that were crushed that day by a lynching mob will not stay buried and crushed. One day, his body will be awakened and renewed on that last day.

Timothy Rogers, writing on Stephen's death says it this way, "For Stephen's death! For my Lord has been there before, and has perfumed and sanctified the grave. O Grave, you look with a dreadful aspect to flesh and blood, but not so to faith; and I bid you welcome, as the way to Glory."

Dear brothers and sisters, let us heed these last moments from Stephen. For we, who have placed our faith in Jesus, in his substitutionary death on the cross, who have been wiped clean by his blood, we need not fear death. We can have peace. For death has lost its sting. Instead, when the time comes, may we bid death welcome, for it is the way to Glory. Let us have peace in death, as we are united with Jesus, our king.

After Stephen's death, the heat gets turned up. One of my favorite chapters in the Hobbit is entitled, "Out of the Frying Pan, and into the Fire." I think that's a perfect summation for this section of Acts. Since the healing of the lame man in front of the temple, the heat on the early church has been growing. They've been imprisoned, threatened, beaten, and now they are being killed.

If you remember Daniel's sermon a couple weeks ago on Acts 5, Gamaliel gave a warning to the Sanhedrin. He told them to be careful with these apostles, for if this movement was from man, it would fail; if it was from God, they would not be able to squash it, and even be found opposing God.

We now come to a transition point in the book of Acts. What will happen to the early church under severe persecution. Would the church fail, or would it thrive? And if it thrives, a natural question and our second main point, that comes from this text is: what is the purpose of persecution?

Let's read verse 1b and we will see the first purpose of persecution: it reveals our hearts.

"And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

If you recall from the very first sermon in the book of Acts, Tyler pointed out that verse 1:8 was not only a roadmap to the book of Acts, but is also the thesis of the book. The last thing Jesus says to the apostles before ascending into heaven is this: ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Scripture is so cool. If you’re new to the Bible or if the book of Acts is brand new to you, what a treat I hope this is to you. Even if you’ve been reading the Bible now for 60+ years, I hope that this continues to be a delight for you. We have the pleasure of reading God’s Word in hindsight, and now get these ‘aha’ moment. If you were a believer in Jerusalem during this time, a lot of this wouldn’t make sense. You would be scared, frightened, and confused.

Your Messiah had come, then he died, then he came back to life, then he left again into heaven. He promised that we would receive the Holy Spirit, which happened in Acts 2 (check), and now we are supposed to be going in power to be witnesses of all Jesus has said and taught. Why are we now being thrown into jail, threatened, and stoned? Isn’t this counter intuitive?

Up until this point in Jewish history, everything has centered around Jerusalem, the temple, and the Holy Land. Yet, Stephen, in his speech, emphasized that it’s never been about a place, a temple, or a piece of land. God has sustained his people outside of the promised land and in captivity. The Spirit of God doesn’t dwell in a man-made temple, he now lives in bodies of believers.

The good news of God’s salvation was never meant to just stay in Jerusalem, and with the Jewish people. God has made it clear from the very beginning in Genesis, through the prophets, and through Jesus, that the gospel was never meant to be for one nation. Israel was the nation that God meant to use to bless ALL other nations.

Psalm 67 says this, ¹ May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, ² that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations. ³ Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!

God’s saving power was meant to be known on all the earth, among all the nations. All the peoples are to praise God. Therefore, this scattering due to persecution was all part of God’s plan. It wasn’t an accident or a mistake. It was fulfilling everything that Jesus said.

Now as we move into verses 2-3, we are going to see that Luke presents to us a great case study into the hearts of men.

On one side, you have devout men that buried Stephen and lamented over him. Luke doesn’t specify who these men are, but we can deduce is that these men risked a lot to honor and bury him. They not only touch a dead body of a man stoned for blasphemy (which is a no-no under the Old Law), but they are inherently associating themselves with Stephen.

This is juxtaposed with the description of Saul ravaging the church. Paul later records in a speech in Acts 22 that he not only sent people to prison, but he killed them. Brian Vickers points out that, “It is important not to conceive of Paul as faithful according to the old covenant. Before his conversion, Paul was *not a faithful Jew*. One cannot be faithful while rejecting the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham.”

I highlight this in order to point out that Saul up to this point would be considered a faithful Jew, albeit a radical faithful Jew. He would've been considered doing the job of rooting out blasphemy and protecting the name of God. But in actuality, persecution was revealing the true nature of Saul's heart. Saul was still blind to the truth. He was persecuting and killing those who had their eyes opened to Jesus being the fulfilment of all of God's promises.

Persecution, however, in the case of the devout men, revealed eyes that had been opened, and hearts that had been changed. Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th century preacher once said, "The same sun which melts wax hardens clay. And the same Gospel which melts some persons to repentance hardens others in their sins."

Saul was the Jew of Jews. He was a man of God. But this Jewish man of God looked far from the example of truly godly and devout men who had hearts of flesh. Saul was a dead corpse with some lipstick on him. He walked the walk and talked the talk, but in the end, he was dead inside and his actions looked just like the Roman Empire his people despised the most.

The Romans took what wasn't theirs and squashed anything that didn't conform. Ironically, Saul and the Jewish leaders were doing the same to the early church because it didn't conform to their vision of what God's promise to his people should look like.

If you're sitting here this morning and you've never been able to shake the same sin that has been plaguing you for years or decades. If you're wondering why your every decision leads to sin and destruction. If you're sitting here and think there's no way God could forgive me for what I've done, then take heart dear friend. For the gospel is the power to save all. Not just the kind of bad ones, Jesus saves all who would come to him.

Saul, who later becomes Paul as we'll see in a couple months, writing to Timothy, describes his conversion like this, "¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life."

Persecution, murder, and blasphemy led to revealing the true nature of Paul's heart. He was dead. Dead in his sin and trespasses, as I once was, and many of you once were. But God, in his great mercy has chosen to redeem those who would put their trust not in their works, but in his Son's finished work on the cross. So come to him dear friends, come to the one who sees all, knows all, and redeems all.

This leads us to the last purpose for persecution: it reveals God's plan and power. Let's read verse 4 together.

In verse 1, we saw that the church began to scatter to the regions of Judea and Samaria, and verse 4 begins to tell us what they did once they were scattered: they preached the word. We knew what they were fleeing from. Jews like Saul were taking Christians out of their homes, killing some and throwing others into prison. It would've been a natural response to go hide in some caves or to lay low until the

heat turned down. Yet verse 4 tells us they preached the word. Persecution has led to the spread of the gospel.

When the COVID pandemic hit China, the Chinese government used this as leverage to kick all foreign missionaries out of the country. Many, who had labored in China for decades, haven't been able to return to this day. But we are already seeing the fruit of these restrictions. Many of these missionaries that haven't been able to return have now put down roots in the other Asian and Southeast Asian countries.

The underground church in China had been poured into for so long, they are now thriving on their own, with little help from outside missionaries. And now, the missionaries that were kicked out are evangelizing and strengthening churches in the surrounding area.

You see, the intense persecution and restrictions has led to an unintended consequence the enemy did not foresee, both in China and in the region. The gospel is going forth. New people groups are being reached. Churches and believers are being strengthened. What man meant for evil, God meant for good. He will build his church and the gates of hell cannot stand against it.

As I continued to reflect on this passage and the question of what is the purpose of persecution, I simply came away amazed each time. God, in his infinite wisdom and sovereignty chose to and continues to choose persecution as his vessel of spreading the gospel through the world.

I mentioned the paradoxes of Scripture earlier, and Brian Vickers, commenting on this section of Acts says it beautifully, "Paul [highlights] the unexpected nature of God's way of carrying out his plan for the world. From choosing an idol worshiper in Ur for the fulfillment of his ultimate promises and an Egyptian-educated man in Pharaoh's court to save Israel from slavery, to raising up imperfect judges who keep the nation afloat during a horrible era of apostasy and suffering and a boy who kills a giant with a slingshot and becomes king—not to mention coming as a carpenter from Nazareth who tells people the greatest thing they can become is a servant and who dies, cursed, on a cross—no one but God would write this script."

This is God's story, not ours. This is God's church, not ours. Therefore, let us trust in the God who calls the shots, and is building his church in ways that are beyond our wildest imaginations.

When we are in the midst of suffering, pain, or even persecution, it's so hard to see past the fog of war. We're confused and lost, and we feel like God isn't there. I'm sure that many of the believers in the early church felt this way after Stephen's death. Yet it was all part of God's sovereign plan. Jesus said that the gospel would go forth from Jerusalem then to Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the earth.

It's now become clear that the means by which God has chosen to do this, his plan in all of this is through persecution. We may not always understand in the moment why God is choosing to do things in our lives and in the world, but God's plan is not dependent on our understanding.

So kids and teenagers, I want you to listen to this. There's going to come times in your life when your parents tell you something and you don't understand why it's happening. You're going to be confused and unable to maybe imagine life without someone in your life, and that's ok. The Bible is full of stories of men and women who don't understand what's going on, or why something is happening to them.

But this is not when you throw your faith away. This is when you drive your stake deeper and you cling to God and his Word. It's in these uncertain times that we cling to our certain God. We can only see 1 foot in front of our faces, but we trust the God who created the world and everything in it.

A Chinese pastor who trains other underground and unregistered church planters once said this, "Sometimes we feel like God is pretty close to these things; sometimes we feel like God is pretty far, but we know that everything is under his control, and he is behind everything. Whatever happens is God's way to prepare his church. He is always preparing his church."

So church, when we don't understand what's going on in our lives or in the life of our church sometimes, let us trust in the God who does. He was preparing the early church to begin to take the gospel out of Jerusalem, he was preparing the Chinese church to thrive and grow under immense persecution, and he is preparing us. May we be a church remains certain and faithful to our God in times of uncertainty.

For God has made it clear that his ways and his church will not be thwarted. He is building his church. There are sheep that have not heard his name yet, but they will come when they are called and hear the voice of their shepherd. So let us be faithful to preach the gospel, wherever he has placed us, as we obey our King and shepherd.

Which brings me to our last point of application for this section in Acts. Though we may never reach this kind of persecution seen here in Acts or what is experienced in China or Afghanistan, that doesn't mean it shouldn't shape the way we pray for the persecuted church throughout the world. Would we love for there to be religious freedoms in every single county in the world, and for our missionaries to not have to fight visas and entrance into countries?

Yes of course that would be ideal, but we also live in a country today that has religious freedoms and the church is declining, or more accurately, it is refining. Religious freedom does not equal conversions and church growth. America is proof of this.

What we see around the world are examples of Christians who have left mother, and father, and brother and sister for the sake of Jesus. We see those that have counted the cost of following the Savior of the world. We see a church that no matter how hard it is tried to be snuffed out, it pops back up stronger. We see believers who truly believe that any sacrifice made on behalf of the one who has snatched them from the fires of hell is worth every second of temporal suffering. For they have been bought by the one who will give them eternal life with him.

So dear church, let us pray for our brothers and sisters around the world differently today. May we pray for them to endure the sufferings of this present age, for they are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed. (Rom. 8:18) Let us pray that they do not lose heart, for this light momentary affliction is preparing an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. (2Cor.4:17)

Let us pray with Paul, who was a persecuted missionary, that the word of the Lord may speed and ahead and run and be honored, and that they may be delivered from wicked and evil men. (2 Thess 3:1-2) But most of all, may we pray that they would know and believe that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38-39)