

- ***READ Acts 8:1-8*** The stoning of Stephen was surely a devastating day in the early days of the church's existence, but it was only the beginning of what would be a strong wave of persecution against the Lord's people. Leading this charge of persecution was Saul of Tarsus, who the text tells us was in full agreement with Stephen's death. His efforts in opposing the church were so intense (dragging off men and women to prison) that many of the disciples are said to have scattered from Jerusalem into the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria. Only the Apostles themselves remained in Jerusalem.
- We might be tempted on first glance to see this as only a dark day in the history of the church, and we that could certainly be concluded considering the terror that was being wreaked on the church. However, let's look at the result of the disciples being scattered from Jerusalem because of the persecution. **"So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word."** While those opposed to Christianity and the Gospel might have succeeded in thinning it out within Jerusalem, they actually helped in the overall scheme of things by forcing the Gospel into the surrounding areas. Specifically, we read of the preacher Philip who had great success in the city of Samaria as many became obedient to the Gospel to the point that thought there might have been some sadness in Jerusalem...there was much joy in Samaria.
- I wanted us to begin in this text this morning because it reveals to us a very important truth. That truth centers around the fact that there are benefits that can be realized when we find ourselves being opposed because of our faiths. We might find it easier to excel in our faiths when there is no real danger or repercussions because of our faiths, but what about when the heat gets turned up on us because of our faith in Jesus? Are we given a free pass to shrink in our faiths? Of course the answer is no, but what can be seen within those times of opposition that can help us to continue to be excellent in our faiths? This morning, we are going to look at four benefits that come out of those times when we are opposed and challenged in our faiths that aid and motivate us in our efforts to be excellent for the Lord in everything that we do.

4 Benefits To Having Our Faith Challenged

I. Being challenged in our faith provides an opportunity for our spiritual strength to be tested.

A. Peter stands as a stark example of someone who was able to see the true strength of his faith when he found himself challenged.

1. We all know Peter for being that Apostle who was ready to step up and speak out at a moment's notice. He was a man of high confidence, and he rejected Jesus's prediction that, **"Tonight all of you will fall away because of me, for it is written: I will strike the Shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."** (Matthew 26:31)
2. Peter and Jesus then exchange a back and forth. "Peter told him, **"Even if everyone falls away because of you, I will never fall away."** "Truly I tell you," Jesus said to him, **"tonight, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times."** "Even if I have to die with you," Peter told him, **"I will never deny you," and all the disciples said the same thing."** (Matthew 26:33-35)
3. Yet, it was the words of Jesus that ended up being seen as true within Peter's life. Not long after Jesus made this prediction do we see Him being betrayed and Peter following along behind Him at a distance. In **Matthew 26:69-75**, Peter finds himself sitting in a courtyard warming himself by a fire when he is questioned three times as to whether or not he was one of the men who had been with Jesus. Instead of standing up strongly like he said he would, Peter three times denied the Lord. He didn't just simply do so, but he did so with cursing and swearing. The Scripture then reads, **"Immediately a rooster crowed, and Peter remembered the words Jesus had spoken, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly."** It was the challenge to his faith that revealed Peter's true lack of strength.

B. The times when we are challenged allow us to truly see whether our faith is as strong as we think that it is.

1. Maybe we have found ourselves in the same shoes as Peter in the past. We have been of the opinion that we are pretty strong in our faiths, and yet that strength has never been proven in a situation where it could be tested. We might not think of any situation where our faith is challenged as being a good thing for us, but that very well might be what we need.
2. We might need to find ourselves in a situation where our faith is truly challenged or tested in order for us to see that we aren't exactly all that we think we are cracked up to be. I can think back to a time in college when I had a sit down study with a few individuals who were challenging my beliefs on a number of issues. I thought at the time that I had a strong grasp on these issues from a Biblical perspective, but I quickly realized that I didn't know near as much as I thought I did or that I should have known.
3. That evening was a wake-up call for me because I was challenged in my faith and left exposed as not being as strong as I ought to be. Though it was an embarrassing and frustrating moment in my life, I am able to look back on that moment now and realize that it was a good thing that I endured those challenges because they revealed the true state of my faith and that I needed to grow in my knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures. I was truly benefitted by having my faith and beliefs challenged in that moment because they were tested and I was forced to realize that I had a long way to go still.

II. Being challenged in our faith provides opportunity for our resolve to be strengthened.

A. Throughout the book of Acts, we find disciples who are invigorated in their faiths because of the challenges they endured...the Apostles being chief examples.

1. We looked a negative example of Peter being a little bit too confident in his faith, so let's balance that out by beginning with a positive example of him having grown in his faith. In **Acts 4:1-22**, we read of Peter and John being arrested for having healed the man who had been lame since birth. They are questioned by the Jewish religious leadership, *"By what power or in what name have you done this."* Instead of shrinking in the moment like he had done before, we find Peter being more resolved in this moment through the power of the Holy Spirit to stand upon his faith in Jesus Christ.

"Rulers of the people and elders: If we are being examined today about a good deed done to a disabled man, by what means he was healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing here before you healthy. This Jesus is the stone rejected by you builders, which has become the cornerstone. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:8-12)

2. Because of these strong words, Peter and John are threatened to not speak any longer in the name of Jesus, and upon their release...these Apostles go to their brethren and begin to share with them everything that had happened to them. They praised God for His provisions to them, and prayed that He would continue to be with them and give them boldness to continue to speak out in the name of Jesus. (Acts 4:23-31)
3. And continue to speak out in the name of Jesus these men and the rest of the brethren did! *"With great power the Apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great graces was on all of them!"* (4:33) The challenges these brethren had faced benefitted them because they had been led to even greater levels of faithfulness, and this faithfulness spilled over into other areas of their living for Jesus. (4:34-37)

B. There can be great encouragement found when we are able to endure challenges to our faith.

1. Since that day when I had my faith challenged, I have been blessed by God to be able to grow to give a better account of my faith and beliefs when I have been questioned concerning what I believe, and I owe a great deal of that desire to grow to the fact that I was found lacking when challenged before.
2. However, there is also a benefit that is experienced when we are challenged and we find ourselves being successful in those moments...we are inspired to do it again! It is a tremendous feeling to know that we have given a good showing of our faiths when we have been challenged in one way or another. Whether it be that we have been questioned or maybe we have even even straight up maligned and disrespected because of our faith in God...if we have stood firm in those moments then we ought to be inspired and motivated to be willing and able to do that again and again.
3. Too often we see those times as wholly negative, but we need to recognize that it is in these moments when we overcome the challenges that our faiths can flourish and be made even stronger. If we will embrace these challenges and continually go to God praying for continued boldness and strength, then I am confident that we will be everything God desires for us to be when the going gets tough.

III. Being challenged in our faith is a sign that we are a part of the kingdom of God.

A. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks to the blessed nature of those who are willing to be persecuted for the sake of their righteousness. (**Matthew 5:10-12**)

1. What does it mean to be righteous? I would feel pretty confident in saying that we could define righteousness in this context as being anything that Jesus is teaching that citizens of the heavenly kingdom ought to be. Everything that is listed in **Matthew 5-7** seems to be a part of living a righteous life in the kingdom of God. When we are giving great effort to live this type of righteous lifestyle and we suffer for doing such a thing...then Jesus is teaching that disciples can take comfort.
2. *"You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you."* There will be times when righteous actions will be seen as not right or appropriate and kingdom citizens will suffer insult, persecution, and false evil things will be said about them. This was true for the prophets of old and it will be true of God's people here on out.

B. Therefore, we ought to see the sufferings we endure for Christ as a natural byproduct of living for righteousness sake and not for our own sake.

1. As we are striving to be salt and light in this world through our loving hearts, humble service, and unwillingness to give into the temptations of the world...there will be some who are turned off by this. They will see us as being so different from the rest of the world that it makes them uncomfortable and they are convicted by our actions. When this happens, we ought not be surprised when they try to challenge us and even cause us difficulties.
2. This seems to be Peter's point in **I Peter 4:1-5**. Peter points out that we will suffer in this flesh because we choose not to live in sin any longer. This suffering might come in the form of those who we used to run with who now see us as a threat to their way of living. They're now surprised that we no longer run with them in this way and they might even seek to slander us because our changed lives are convicted their sinful lifestyles. Even in those moments when we might be challenged and slandered for our godliness, we can find the benefit that it is happening because we are choosing to be kingdom citizens whose heavenly blessings far exceed anything that might be found here in this life.

IV. Being challenged in our faith allows us to share in the sufferings of Christ.

A. By far one of the most encouraging instances of disciples responding to having their faiths challenged is found in **Acts 5:12-42**.

1. Remember that just the chapter prior, Peter and John are warned to no longer speak out in the name of Jesus, and yet we are told that *"Many signs and wonders were being done among the people through the hands of the Apostles."* (5:12) Because of the good work they were doing and the fact that the people were speaking well of them, *"The high priest rose up. He and all who were with him, who belonged to the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. So they arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail."* (5:17,18)
2. After being freed from prison by an angel, re-arrested, flogged, and ordered to not speak in the name of Jesus anymore...*"they went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be treated shamefully on behalf of the Name. Every day in the temple, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah."* (5:41,42)
3. I want for us to take special note of the fact that part of their rejoicing centered around the fact that they felt as if they were being counted worthy of Jesus because they were being treated so badly by those who hated their good deeds. Most people would view such afflictions as being wholly negative, but these disciples saw these things as being good! It allowed them to see themselves as sharing in the good work of Christ Jesus.

B. That same feeling can be experienced by us when we find ourselves being challenged or persecuted for the faith we hold to in Jesus.

1. It can be so easy for us to be immediately discouraged when we are suffering for our faiths, but Peter would have us to be reminded that such things ought to encourage us!

*"Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you as if something unusual were happening to you. **Instead, rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may also rejoice with great joy when his glory is revealed. If you are ridiculed for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.** Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or a meddler. **But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in having that name.** For the time has come for judgment to begin with God's household, and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God? And if a righteous person is saved with difficulty, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? So then, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator while doing what is good."* (I Peter 4:12-19)

2. From this text, we can clearly see that we ought to find joy in sharing in the sufferings of Christ because just as Christ suffered for His righteousness and obedience to the Father and yet was raised to glory with Him...so shall we suffer for our commitment to righteousness and obedience to the Father and then be raised to glory with Him in the last day. The sufferings, challenges, and opposition that we face in this life because of our commitment to Jesus will only build up an *"incomparable eternal weight of glory"* (II Corinthians 4:17) that we will experience in the next life. It might not seem beneficial now...but the challenges that we face because of our faith can benefit us in great ways including leading us towards excellence.

Far too often we become short-sighted and only see the here and now without considering the long term effects of what we experience in this life. We often see opposition, challenges, sufferings, and persecutions as being wholly negative, but it is my hope that our considerations this morning have helped us to see that the next time we go through such a thing...we can go through it knowing that there are great benefits that await us if we will keep our faith in our Lord and remain faithful till the end.