

Persecution

Acts 6:8-8:1

26 December 2021 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Idea: Pressure on our faith pressures us to be faithful.

Big Question: Is persecution a sign we're being unfaithful?

Introduction

No one else's around, just five women are standing quietly in the corner of the room.

One of them sings really softly before another whispers a quick prayer.

There's no party, no gift exchange or special food.

It's Christmas in a North Korean labour camp.

{DP} That feels very different to the kind of Christmas most of us have just had.

We can and did gather publicly to celebrate as we sang and read from the Bible.

Not only is Christianity illegal, North Korea is one of five countries where Christmas itself is completely banned.¹

Any Christmas celebrations must be held in extreme secrecy because they're risking their lives.

So, in the squalor of an outhouse, surrounded by smells that probably aren't that different to the ones when Jesus was born, Christians celebrate the birth of their Saviour.

In some countries, following Jesus means constantly risking your life.

If it became known that you were a Christian, it would be costly.

Christians in many places experience increased danger around the time of events like Christmas and Easter.

At this time of year that are targeted, but every day, they live with the reality of persecution.

Outline

Today's Boxing Day. The second day of Christmas.

For some it's another family day and for others it's a recovery day.

I know many of us think of it as a sales day and there'll be plenty of people worshipping a bargain, pushing down the doors right as we speak.

It's also the first day of the Boxing Day Test and the launch of the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race.

It's quite tricky to work out why Boxing Day got its name.

That might surprise you because there's no shortage of theories out there.

Perhaps you've been told it's about returning gifts, giving gifts to those who're poor or even about getting rid of the boxes that presents came in.

Snopes.com tells me that no one knows for certain why it's called Boxing Day and there's probably a bit of truth to all of these reasons.

Bible passages like Colossians 2 make it really clear to us that there aren't some days that are holier than others.

But for a long time, it has been common for the Christian church to celebrate the day after Christmas as St Stephen's day.

When I met with the guys from the other Grace Bible Churches last week, one of them told me that only I'd know that.

St Stephen's day isn't a big thing in our tradition.

Stephen's someone we know about with a lot more certainty than the reason for Boxing Day though.

He was one of the first deacons appointed by the early church as we're told in Acts 6.

Maybe it's his work in helping to support Greek widows that ties him to Boxing Day, I'm not sure.

The other thing we know is that he was persecuted and ultimately martyred for his faith.

So, this morning, we're going to be looking at the topic of persecution.

Which also ties in with a new series we're starting.

{DP} This summer, we're going to be doing a short series looking at the 5 Ps of the Christian Life.

Perhaps you're thinking, "The what?" The 5 Ps of the Christian Life.

I can almost guarantee that you've never heard of them before and there's no passage in the Bible that we can go to find them listed.

And why five and not three or seven? Well, I could've had five or seven or twelve, but we've got a five week block.

They're not exhaustive, but I think that these five give a decent summary of the Christian life.

{DP} What are the five Ps we'll be looking at?

- Persecution
- Proclamation
- Prayer
- People

- Praise

From very early on in the life of the church, we find that the church walked in the footsteps of their Saviour.

Just as Jesus was unfairly persecuted, so were those who followed him.

And history continues to keep repeating itself.

This morning we're going to see that **pressure on our faith pressures us to be faithful.**

- Opposing Stephen (6:8-15)
- Opposing God (7:1-53)
- Opposing Death (8:1-8)

Opposing Stephen (6:8-15)

The part of the Bible we're looking at today is found towards the beginning of the book of Acts in the New Testament.

Acts is a history book that tells us about what happened in the early church, after Jesus rose from the dead.

It was written by Doctor Luke and it's his sequel to what we know as the gospel according to Luke.

Acts describes how the number of disciples are growing and the church is exploding as people find out about Jesus.

More than three thousand people are converted in a single day.²

This means that the church needs to get more organised to be able to deal with all these people.

The twelve disciples' problem becomes that they just can't do everything themselves.

They don't want to neglect the ministry of the word of God and prayer.

Serving food to widows is important work, but it would take them away from the word and prayer, so they asked the people to choose seven men to help out.

One of the ministers they choose is Stephen, "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."

Stephen is given the job of helping to support the Greek-speaking Jewish widows.

Not everyone is happy about this new ministry venture.

In the synagogues of Greek-speaking Jews, people are getting upset.

Perhaps because they feel like the deacons are muscling in on their territory.

It probably also doesn't help that even some priests are becoming Christians, 6:7.

Whatever the reason, they begin to oppose Stephen.

When they try to argue with him though, they're constantly frustrated because God gives Stephen wisdom to answer them.

Acts 6:10 NIV11 ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

They decide that the next best thing is to get people to tell lies about him, saying that he was speaking against God, verse eleven.

And not just God, but also against Moses.

Why not? It's a strategy that worked when dealing with Jesus.

And it works this time too.

The lies make people really angry and so they drag Stephen before the council of rulers, called the Sanhedrin.

The liars were saying that Stephen was doing two things that were opposing God.

Firstly, that he was against the temple and secondly that he was against Moses.

Both of these charges were untrue.

By their own admission, Stephen was saying the very same things as Jesus, but the accusers were twisting their words.

Yes, Jesus and Stephen taught that there were religious traditions that were wrong, but they never changed what Moses said.

And Jesus never said that he'd destroy the temple.

He said that THEY – the people he was speaking to – would destroy the temple and HE'D be the one to rebuild it.

John 2:19 NIV11 ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

Stephen's got everyone's attention. All eyes are on him. How's he going to respond?

We're told in verse 15 that he has a face like an angel.

What does an angel's face look like?

On the back of Christmas, all the angels lighting up the sky for the shepherds might come to mind.

What's an angel?

It's a word that we borrow from the Greek language that means messenger.

I think the point is that he clearly looked like a messenger of god.

Stephen isn't arrested because he was doing anything wrong.

There were people who didn't like what he was doing and when they couldn't come up with a good argument to oppose him, they made up lies.

They opposed Stephen, so they make this wrongful arrest.

Opposing God (7:1-53)

They don't just oppose Stephen. Really, they're opposing God.

The high priest asks Stephen to confirm what's being said, 7:1:

Acts 7:1 NIV11 ¹ Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

How is Stephen going to respond to these false charges?

He gives a really passionate speech – the longest speech in the book of Acts – so we've only got time for the highlights.

His reply might leave you scratching your head at first because it seems like he's just giving them a history of Israel.

Actually, he goes back to Abraham, before Israel even existed.

And it isn't so much a history lesson as a reminder of two specific things that happened.

He's actually giving a defence for the two charges they made against him – denying Moses and the temple.

His defence is to show them that he's not the one who's rejected God.

They are.

Firstly, they didn't listen to God, they rejected Moses.

God made a promise.

He told a homeless and childless Abraham to leave where he was living and go to another place.

This land would be a gift from God to Abraham's family, but not for a long time.

That's an amazing promise when Abraham didn't even have any kids at the time.

God delivered on that promise, according to verse seventeen.

But first, he had to give Abraham a son named Isaac; use Joseph to keep his family from starving to death; and send an angel to speak to Moses from a burning bush and tell him to lead his people out of Egypt.

But the Israelites repeatedly rejected Moses and his leadership over them.

Verse 35:

Acts 7:35 NIV11 ³⁵ “This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush.

God also said through Moses that he’d give them a prophet – someone to speak to them on behalf of God.³

Moses was a prophet – he went up on Mount Sinai to listen to God.

Verse 39:

Acts 7:39 NIV11 ³⁹ “But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.

They rejected Moses and started worshipping a calf, then the sun, moon and stars.

Secondly, they rejected the temple.

Through Moses, God told them to make a tent called a tabernacle to be a temporary temple they could cart around from place to place.

King David asked to build God a permanent home, but it was his son King Solomon who ended up doing it.

They missed the point, thinking that they could control God and even contain him in a temple.

Their concern was what they could build for God and not so much the God who was in it.

Verse 48:

Acts 7:48–49 NIV11 ⁴⁸ “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: ⁴⁹ “ ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be?

In verse 51, we find out the reason he’s been saying all of this.

Stephen’s saying, “You’re just like your ancestors.” That’s the point.

He basically insults them by describing them the same way as their ancestors – stiff-necked and as ignorant as people who don’t know God.

They are opposing God and they should know better.

Acts 7:51 NIV11 ⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!

The prophets were pointing to Messiah, Jesus.

Jesus's the great prophet that Moses told them about as well as the true temple.

Your ancestors persecuted the prophets because they didn't like what God was saying.

Then he exposes exactly what they've done – they've betrayed and murdered Messiah.

Acts 7:52–53 NIV11 ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

Do you notice that although Stephen gives this defence, he isn't really defending himself?

He's defending Jesus, not because he wants to show that he's right, but because he's representing Jesus.

If he gets Jesus wrong, if they get Jesus wrong, then they're opposing God.

Opposing Death (7:54-8:1)

After hearing Stephen's accusations, the members of the Sanhedrin aren't at all happy.

Luke describes them like savage animals who bare their teeth and growl at Stephen.

Verse 54:

Acts 7:54 NIV11 ⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

How did Stephen respond to their anger?

We learn almost as much from what he doesn't do as from what he does.

He isn't frightened or scared or even worried.

There's no screaming or recanting or pleading to see his mother.

We're told in verse 55 that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit.

Isn't that a great reminder – that we're not alone.

God sent his son Jesus to come and be with us – that's the great truth that we celebrated yesterday.

But Jesus himself promised that after he'd ascended into heaven, he'd send a helper.

The Holy Spirit, God who dwells in us so that we don't have to face dark days on our own.

As he stood there, Stephen got a glimpse of God's glory.

Jesus, who was put to death by people who should've known better, was raised to life and ascended into heaven where he sits at the right hand of God.

He's on the same level as God.

Jesus wasn't just some random who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, he's equal to God.

Well, that's the final straw.

The members of the Sanhedrin put their fingers in their ears and begin yelling, "Nah, nah, I can't hear you" because they just can't stand what they're hearing.

The mob rushes at him, forcibly dragging him out of the city.

And then they begin to stone him to death.

Stephen reacts to this persecution by trusting in Jesus.

Stephen knows that although he's being oppressed, he doesn't need to fear any condemnation because he's in Christ Jesus.

If you can stand in God's court, you can stand in a human court.

He's a man who's convinced of his future by continuing to trust Jesus.

What really amazes me, though, is the way that he prays for the people stoning him.

Have a look at verse 60:

Acts 7:60 NIV11 ⁶⁰ 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.

He calls it out for exactly what it is – sin.

The sin of killing Stephen, an innocent man, but more importantly the sin of rejecting God.

This is so wrong that it drives Stephen to follow the words of Jesus:

Matthew 5:44 NIV11 ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Stephen falls asleep, which is a way of saying that he dies.

But it's also a way of saying that death isn't the end for those who have died in Christ.

One day we will be raised from the dead to be with Jesus forever.

Sleep is temporary and not final, which is why it's so fitting here.

And there's that little comment in verse 58 and then in 8:1.

There's a man named Saul standing, watching and approving of all that's being done.

If you flip over the page to chapter nine, you'll find that he has an encounter with Jesus that changes his life.

Which should give us hope because there's hope for all of those who oppose God.

Sin is opposition to God, defying him and refusing to do what he says.

The Bible tells us that every single human is a sinner.

Jesus came to die for sinners.

He took the punishment for our sin on himself.

If his death was enough to change someone like Saul, it's enough for you too.

Go and read about what happens to him in chapter nine and trust in Jesus too.

The Jesus Stephen serves, opposes death.

Conclusion

How do we process an account like this?

Stephen was clearly a super-Christian, so while we might find this inspiring, does it really have any relevance for us?

Christians aren't meant to go and look for persecution in their lives.

But if you live a godly life, then don't be surprised when you encounter persecution.

Paul writes to Timothy:

2 Timothy 3:12 NIV11 ¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

Persecution should be an expected part of the Christian life.

Jesus says that it's a blessing to be persecuted because that's exactly what happened to the prophets.

Long before there even were Christians, people were persecuted for being faithful to God.

Jesus says:

Matthew 5:10–12 NIV11 ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It's really important to see there that Jesus is talking about getting persecuted for righteousness' sake.

That doesn't mean getting persecuted for a preference or your personal choice.

Being persecuted for the sake of righteousness isn't the same as being persecuted for being a goose.

Don't confuse the two and claim that everything you face opposition for – like the colour of your hair or you mismatched socks – is a matter of righteousness.

Christians often fall into the trap of thinking that persecution is a sign that they're doing the right thing.

Jesus got it right every time, but you're not Jesus.

We need to carefully check our hearts to make sure that it really is genuinely a matter of righteousness and we're not just being geese.

I warn you that your heart is evil and you will try to twist all kinds of preferences being justified as being righteousness issues.

Be careful of making a mountain out of a molehill and then making that a mountain to die on.

Have you ever wondered how you'd respond if you were asked to give up your life for Jesus?

It's hard enough to follow Jesus when there's not all that much pressure on.

Then the challenge is to remain faithful for Jesus amongst normality.

But what about when the chips are down and your life's on the line?

Will you trust Jesus or will you deny him?

It's a tough question and I'm not really sure that we can be sure how we'll respond until we're in the moment.

Yet we know that we've got the resource we need to remain faithful.

Many of you will know the Christmas carol, Good King Wenceslas.

*Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the Feast of Stephen
When the snow lay round about
Deep and crisp and even*

It's based off the legend of Saint Wenceslaus I, Duke of Bohemia in the early 900s AD.

It goes on to talk about the King looking out and seeing a poor man collecting firewood on Boxing day.

The king and his servant go out into the bitter weather to take him some supplies.

As they walk along though, the page can't go on.

His master tells him that it'll be easier if he steps in his footprints and with this help he's able to press on.

Like the servant in the song, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

And Jesus himself told us to expect exactly the same treatment that he received.

As servants of Jesus, we can't expect to be treated better than he was.

John 15:20 NIV11 ²⁰ Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

There are lots of similarities between Stephen and Jesus – too many to be a coincidence.

We can walk in the footsteps of Stephen who walked in the footsteps of Jesus.

That's what it looks like to be faithful.

We too can face persecution knowing that we will ultimately stand before God.

The early church was small and fragile, but they were also bold and deeply committed to Jesus.

Instead of Stephen's martyrdom killing the church as the religious leaders hoped, it fuelled the mission.

Acts 8:1b NIV11 On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

The church father, Tertullian, writing in the second century after Christ, famously said, "We spring up in greater numbers the more we are mown down by you: the blood of the Christians is the seed of a new life."

"We multiply when you reap us. The blood of Christians is seed," or as it's better known, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

Stephen's stoning was the beginning of the gospel going out well beyond what it had before – to Judea and Samaria.

So don't forget our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted, especially this Christmas.

Often, the thing we want to pray for is that they'll be taken out of that situation.

My understanding though, is that what they ask for is our prayers that they'd be faithful.

That they wouldn't be give into the temptation to give up when they're standing for the gospel.

This Boxing Day, this St. Stephen's Day, we remember this dear brother in Christ who we'll join in heaven, praising our Risen Saviour forever.

Being a Christian means following in his footsteps as he followed Christ.

Pressure on our faith pressures us to be faithful.

¹ 5 Countries Where Christmas Is a Crime - Open Doors USA

² Acts 2:41

³ Deuteronomy 18:14ff