

C@M Community Group Guide: “Acts: A Shepherd’s Trials”

The Point:

“Your life will often be misunderstood, at times mocked, and may even become the scorn of others. Some will listen, some will leave, and you will suffer.”

Passage:

Key Focus: Acts 23:11 and 24:10-26

Weekly Reading Guide:

Monday: Acts 22:14-30

Tuesday: Acts 23:1-11

Wednesday: Acts 23:12-24

Thursday: Acts 23:25-35

Friday: Acts 24:1-9

Saturday: Acts 25

The Plug:

- **Gospel Class:** Our church is more than a get-together – it’s a covenant community. If your group members aren’t covenant church members, encourage them to come to the Gospel Class on *Saturday, February 8*. They’ll learn more about what covenant membership is and get a chance to talk to a pastor.
- **Living Sent Celebration:** On January 26 (**next Sunday!**), our church will gather at 50 Monroe Street to celebrate and discuss the future of our church. Personally invite your group members, and tell them to invite their friends and family. This is one of the most important times in the life of our church!

The Prep:

As always...

- Prayerfully read and meditate on the Scripture passage: What is God saying? What is God saying to you personally? What is your response to God?
- Read through all the material. List 1-3 ways in which this passage can impact the way you live.

Rather than attempt to give commentary on this passage, I would like to focus on the topic of Christians that are persecuted for their faith and witness. In light of that, I’d like to share with you an excerpt from John Piper’s sermon *Blessed are the Persecuted*.

A Life Devoted to Righteousness Will Be Persecuted

So we can see why a life devoted to righteousness or godliness will be persecuted or reviled or spoken against.

1. If you cherish chastity, your life will be an attack on people’s love for free sex.
2. If you embrace temperance, your life will be a statement against the love of alcohol.
3. If you pursue self-control, your life will indict excess eating.
4. If you live simply and happily, you will show the folly of luxury.
5. If you walk humbly with your God, you will expose the evil of pride.
6. If you are punctual and thorough in your dealings, you will lay open the inferiority of laziness and negligence.
7. If you speak with compassion, you will throw callousness into sharp relief.
8. If you are earnest, you will make the flippant look flippant instead of clever.
9. And if you are spiritually minded, you will expose the worldly-mindedness of those around you.

Two Responses to a Righteous Life

When you desire to be godly in all your affairs and relationships—when you follow the righteousness of Jesus in his strength and for his glory—there are two possible responses people can have who stay around you. These are described in John 3:20–21.

For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. [That is one possible response: hating the light and not accepting it.] But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God. [That is the other possible response: doing the truth and coming to it and freely admitting that all good in us is accomplished by God.]

The two options are persecution or conversion. (See these two options in Matthew 5:10 and 16.) But, we ask, what about all the unbelievers in my life who are neither converted nor persecuting—who are just civil, or even polite? There are at least two possible explanations.

Two Explanations Why Neither Response Seems to Appear

One is that your light is under a bushel. You are keeping the stumbling block of the cross well concealed (Galatians 5:11; 6:12–13). You don’t let your distinctive values show.

The other is that you are letting them show and the people around you are moving toward one or the other of these two poles: persecution or conversion. Neither of these must happen immediately. There are all kinds of factors that can hinder expressions of persecution. We see these often in the gospels when the Pharisees were angered but were hindered by expediency from expressing their anger in outright persecution. Neither persecution nor conversion will always happen immediately. In fact, many people are torn inside themselves, partly hating the claims of

Christianity in your life, partly attracted by them.

So we should all examine ourselves to see if we are playing a kind of cowardly Christian incognito. And if so, we should repent and resolve to be more sincere in the expression of who we really are. But we must not assume that, because there is no persecution right now and no conversion right now, the fault must lie with us. The gestation period for the new birth may be nearing a happy end. Or the storm may be ready to break against you. But in either case you can be very content. Which leads us to our other consideration this morning:

The Blessedness of the Persecuted

Verse 11: "Blessed—fortunate—are you when men revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad."

Now this is a shocking piece of counsel. What can possibly justify the command to be glad when we are hated and mocked and tortured and killed? And make no mistake about it—Jesus does have death in view here. This is what they did to the prophets (Matthew 23:30; 1 Kings 18:13; 19:10; Nehemiah 9:26; Jeremiah 26:23). This is what they would do to the disciples. So he says in Matthew 24:9, "Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake."

Why This Shocking Counsel from Jesus?

What can justify such counsel to people in pain?—"Rejoice and be glad!" I see two possibilities: either this is the talk of an insensitive, sophomoric, ivory tower theologian who has never known what it is to scream with pain, or this is the talk of one who has seen something and tasted something and knows something about a reality that most people have never tasted or glimpsed.

This is the Lord speaking. It is not some pastoral novice that blunders into a funeral home slapping people on the back, saying, "Praise God, anyhow." This is the Lord. And he says to his disciples, most of whom will drink the cup of martyrdom, "Rejoice and be glad" when you are persecuted, when you suffer. How can he say this? He can say it because he knows beyond any shadow of a doubt that the reward of heaven will more than compensate for any suffering we must endure in the service of Christ. "Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven." There is a mystery here—the mystery of joy in the midst of agony; the mystery of gladness in the midst of misery and groaning. And this mystery is contained in a miracle, namely, the miracle of faith—the bedrock assurance that heaven is a hundredfold compensation for every pain. To the degree that you believe what Jesus sees in heaven, to that degree you will be able to rejoice and be glad in suffering. "Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven."

...I close by pressing home one of the clear implications of this text. Jesus wills for his disciples to desire the reward of heaven more than we desire the reward of the world. Jesus wills for us to have our treasure in heaven not on earth (6:19–20). Jesus wills

for your heart to be so set on heaven that to leave this earth is a cause of rejoicing. Not without tears!—as Paul said, "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing," and as Jesus sweat blood in Gethsemane in the face of his own pain, but for the joy set before him endured the cross.

Jesus wills for us to have our hearts primarily in heaven, our hopes primarily in heaven, our longings primarily in heaven, our joy primarily in heaven. There is no other way that you can rejoice and be glad at the loss of your earthly joys. How shall we rejoice and be glad when these things are taken from us if we have not loved heaven more?...

<http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/blessed-are-the-persecuted>

The Plan: Leaders

As always...

- Open with prayer.
- Introduce your group to the Scripture passages.
- Walk your group through the discussion questions.
- Share thoughts on applying the truths learned.
- Summarize using the "Ponder and Practice" section and finish in prayer. **We encourage you to use the Living on Mission Questions in your group as well.**

Discussion:

1. Share with the group any insight, truth, or observation from Sunday's message that helped you, troubled you, or ministered to you.
2. What does it mean to be persecuted in our culture?
3. Is all persecution of Christians unjust? See 1 Peter 4:12-16
4. How does the world respond to insults, hardships, suffering and persecution, unwarranted or not?
5. The Bible has much to say on this topic. Read the following Scriptures asking: Why will we be persecuted? How should we respond when it happens? What is the reason for it? How can God use it in our lives? Matthew 5:10-17,44; Acts 4:16-21; 2 Corinthians 4:7-18; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-8; 2 Timothy 4:14-18; 1 Peter 2:12, 18-25; 1 Peter 3:14-18; 1 Peter 4:19; John 15:18-27; James 1:2-4; Romans 5:3-5; 1 Peter 1:6-9
6. What things keep us from suffering well? What is the solution for overcoming these obstacles?

Ponder and Practice:

On January 1, John Piper wrote a blog entitled *Don't Waste Your Weaknesses in 2014*. In times when we are misunderstood, whether by those that don't know us or by those that know us best... in times when we are mocked, insulted, or persecuted for the sake of righteousness... in times when we fear taking the step

of obedience because we know persecution might be the result... we need to be reminded Who our strength is, and we need to capitalize on our weaknesses (not just our gifts). Why? Because there is not one thing that comes into our lives (if we are children of God) that God has not ordained for His glory and for our “glory to glory” transformation into the image of Christ.

Don't Waste Your Weaknesses

In 2014, I encourage you to identify and exploit your weaknesses for the glory of Christ. I would like to give you an illustration from my own life, but first let me clarify what I mean.

Since 2007, millions of people have read books and taken inventories designed to find our strengths. These are useful for positioning people in places of maximum effectiveness.

God's Work in Our Weaknesses

But I am calling you to give attention and effort in finding your weaknesses and maximizing their God-given purpose. The Bible tells us what that purpose is in 2 Corinthians 12:8–10. Paul had been given a “thorn in the flesh” which was one instance of a “weakness.” Why?

A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul mentions four purposes for his weaknesses.

1. “To keep me from becoming conceited” (verse 7).
2. “Christ’s power is made perfect in weakness” (verse 9).
3. “So that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (verse 9).
4. “When I am weak, then I am strong” (verse 10).

Paul's Humility and Christ's Power

Even though this weakness of the thorn is called “a messenger of Satan,” the purposes are clearly not Satan’s. Satan does not want Christ’s power to be made perfect! God does. So God is overruling Satan’s design with his own. In other words, wherever the Christian’s weaknesses come from, they have a God-given purpose. They are not fortuitous.

We can sum up the purpose of Paul’s weakness like this: securing Paul’s humility and showing Christ’s power. That’s why God made sure Paul had weaknesses — to keep him “from becoming conceited” and to give him a more obvious experience of the power of Christ resting on him.

One Goal for 2014

What is your goal in 2014? I hope it is to be humble and to magnify the power of Christ. If it is, then one key strategy is to identify and exploit your

weaknesses.

What does this mean? Negatively, it means that we stop complaining (to God and to people) about the things we are constitutionally not good at. And, positively, it means that we look for ways to turn our weaknesses into a Christ-exalting experience.

When I say “constitutionally not good at,” I mean that we have done our best to overcome the weakness, but we can’t. God has ordained that, through genetics or life-experience, we are limited, broken, weak. Paul asked that God would take his weakness away (verse 8), but God said no. Which means that sooner or later, we should stop praying against the weakness and accept it as God’s design for our humility and the glory of Christ.

What This Meant for Me

I’ll use myself as a simple example. I read slowly — about as fast as I speak. Many people read five or ten times faster than I do. I tried for years to overcome this weakness, with special classes and books and techniques. After about two decades of bemoaning this weakness (from age 17 to 37 or so), I saw there would be no change. This is one reason I left college teaching and the academic life. I knew I could never be what scholars ought to be: widely read.

What did it mean for me to identify and exploit this weakness? It meant first that I accept this as God’s design for my life. I will never read fast. It meant I stop complaining about it. It meant that I take my love for reading and do with it what I can for the glory of Christ. If I can only read slowly, I will do all I can to read deeply. I will exploit slowness. I will ask Jesus to show me more in reading little than many see in reading much. I will ask Jesus to magnify his power in making my slowness more fruitful than speed. In realizing I cannot read many books, I will pour my limited scope into reading one book better than any other — the Bible. If I must read fewer of many books, then I will read more carefully the greatest book.

Exploit Your Weaknesses

Now after all these years, I say with Paul, “I boast all the more gladly in this weakness, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (verse 9). Christ has been faithful to fulfill his purpose. He has magnified himself in this weakness.

If I had angrily resented God all these years that he did not let me be a comprehensively well-read scholar, I would not have exploited this weakness. I would have wasted it.

So this year, don’t focus too much on finding your strengths. Give attention to identify and exploit your weaknesses. God has not given them to you in vain. Identify them. Accept them. Exploit them. Magnify the power of Christ with them. Don’t waste your weaknesses.

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<http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/don-t-waste-your-weaknesses-in-2014>

Living on Mission:

1. What situations do you currently face that keep you from obeying Jesus? Are you suffering? Being persecuted? How should you change your response?
2. What strengths are you currently walking in that you need to submit again to God's empowerment instead of attempting to obey Him in your own power?
3. What weaknesses do you have that Jesus might want to exploit for His glory? Will you give them over to him now?