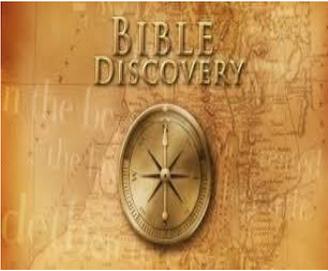


September 20, 2015

Acts 4:1-20

The Gospel on Trial



Are you on trial for your faith? That happens in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt or Russia and China, right? Well, what about our neighbour to the south – the United States? Recently, the Oregon Bureau of Labour and Industry awarded \$135,000 to a lesbian couple following their law suit arising from “emotional suffering” due to a Bakery declining to bake them a wedding cake because of the bakery owners’ Christian beliefs. As a result the bakery ended up closing the store and the family has suffered in many ways. Ever since the day they turned away the lesbian couple’s business, the Kleins who owned the store have had their business subjected to boycotts and pickets. LGBT activists and their supporters have threatened any wedding vendor who would do business with them. Their five children were subjected to death threats - *death threats* - for simply refusing to participate in a same-sex wedding.

In Texas, the House of Representatives passed and sent the State Governor a bill earlier this year saying that Texas pastors, churches, religious institutions can’t be sued by private parties or penalized by government for spurning gay weddings. This is the latest in events originating with self-professed lesbian mayor of Houston, Annise Parker blocking a referendum to allow voters to decide whether to overturn a transgender right’s ordinance allowing self-identified transgenders to use bathrooms designated for the opposite sex. She then subpoenaed Pastor’s sermons that addressed homosexuality, gender identity, or the mayor. Although the subpoenas have been withdrawn, many believe a climate of political intimidation remains.

Here in Canada, a group of Canadian Christian leaders is raising the alarm about what they say are attacks on their faith, citing barriers to the Christian university Trinity Western setting up a law school, and doctors opposed to ending pregnancies being forced to refer patients elsewhere due to lack of privileges at hospitals. Following a letter from Bank of Montreal to the Law Society of Upper Canada, which governs Ontario lawyers, arguing against accrediting Trinity Western's proposed law school, the province of British Columbia last December revoked its approval for the proposed law school, which planned to launch in 2016. This seems in response to law societies in B.C., Ontario and Nova Scotia who had voted to deny accreditation to future graduates even though the Law societies in Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nunavut had all decided to accept Trinity Western's graduates.

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And in Regina Saskatchewan, Peter LaBarera will go on trial for leading a peaceful pro-life/pro-family protest at the University of Regina where he was speaking in April, charged with criminal mischief following his description of sodomy as a sin and showing a poster of an unborn child while engaging students in discussion at the university which said his poster and comments were disgusting.

Why am I telling you all of this? The days of gospel persecution of Christ’s church in North America are no longer found hanging on the far horizon; they’re already here. It’s beginning with the bakers in Oregon, pastors in Texas, law students in B.C., doctors throughout Canada, and free speech on our campuses. Before long, the consensus may be that faithful biblical exposition is “hate speech.” How long will it be until the mention of the Bible, the sharing the name of Jesus, the offering of salvation, peace, joy, love that only a heart surrendered to God can bring will be an offense in our own nation? I ask because it brings to mind a time when a crowd had gathered in another urban center, ready to hear someone speak. They had been drawn by the miraculous healing of a crippled beggar – taking him by the right hand and giving credit to Christ, the crippled beggar feels his feet and ankles become strong. Their attention was given to the one who had humbly

given of what he had to such a man in need. The man rose to the occasion, feeling a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit. He spoke with conviction and clarity, and found remarkable reception among the people. But word of his explicitness about Jesus quickly made its way to the powers-that-be and ruffled their feathers. Soon they descended upon the young firebrand, and he and his ministry partner spent the night in custody before facing interrogation the following day. Still his courage had not been in vain. They may've arrested Peter and his companion John, but *"many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand"*.

Therefore my message to you today is don't panic. For 2,000 years, persecution has been what it has meant to identify with Christ in the world — the normal experience of those who follow a man who was rejected and crucified. Suffering for the gospel was not just tolerated in the early church; *it was expected*. Peter and John learned that lesson here in Acts 4 being arrested, jailed and interrogated, and again when the Sadducees, who seemed filled with jealousy, bent and determined to stamp them out, had them arrested and thrown into jail [Acts 5]. Stephen was stoned in Acts 7. The Apostle Paul, who wrote many of the letters contained in our New Testament was tortured, pursued, jailed and executed. John was exiled to the isolated, barren island of Patmos; throughout the history of Jesus' church many have been persecuted.

In fact, the story of the early church is one of opposition and oppression. At its inception, you certainly didn't become a Christian for the easy life it offered. Years after his initial confrontations with persecution for his faith, Peter writes, *"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you"* [1 Peter 4:12]. Our Lord Jesus Himself warns us as recorded in John's gospel on the night before Jesus was to be betrayed, *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I*

have chosen you out of the world. This is why the world hates you." [John 15:19-20]

That basically says, "If the world fits, you're the wrong size!" Later that same evening Jesus went on to say, *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* [John 16:33] The King James uses the word "tribulation" for trouble.

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wrong size!**

So how's it we're prone to think it strange. How is it *we're surprised*, even shocked, when we're not loved by the world? We yell at government expecting a judicial response to our cry, *"Give us our country back!"* Our angry, desperate reactions go unheeded showing how out of step we are with the tenor of the New Testament. Our entitlement and resentment reveal a heart foreign to the reality of *"a better country, that is, a heavenly one awaiting us"* [Hebrews 11:16]. Have we forgotten we're pilgrims on a pilgrimage just passing through? Have we neglected our duties to our sitting King? Soon enough, our expectations may need to adjust to what is the norm of the body of Christ in other times and other places. We'll come to realize when we proclaim the gospel of Christ the world won't receive it without retaliation. As Christians, we should expect to be persecuted.

Jesus said as much. *"A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you"* [John 15:20]. Paul picks this up. *"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"* [2 Timothy 3:12]. Such Scriptures suggest we should be more concerned if we're not being persecuted. How did Paul and Barnabas spread the gospel? *"They returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God"* [Acts 14:21-22]. It's a sobering word, but not a cause for despair as we examine the foundations of gospel 101.

But we must ask... So what does this mean for you and me in our lives today? How do we endure? Wherein is our hope? We begin recognizing that if we're in Christ we are secure! We've a home waiting for us and our goal, our motivation is to work as though He's returning today even while we toil endlessly expecting Him to tarry a thousand years. Therefore, hold on, don't lose heart! We must look to the rest of the story for Peter and John. Arrest didn't sink the advance of the gospel. To say we'll suffer opposition isn't to say the spread of the gospel is stymied. In fact, what we learn from Peter and John, and from the apostle Paul, and from Jesus

**My message
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Himself is arrest and advance go together in God's invincible story. We'll find opposition, suffer affliction, which while difficult and painful, is fruitful for God. It'll become more like Church from its early ages, when the gospel though attacked on every side, spread like wildfire. Think of what Paul shared from his prison cell, "*I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.*"

You may put the gospel on trial but when you try to shut up someone whose words and life clearly and boldly declare the good news of Jesus Christ, you only help it grow and spread.

And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." [Philippians 1:12-14]

You may arrest the messenger, but no, you can't arrest the gospel. You may put the gospel on trial but when you try to shut up someone whose words and life clearly and boldly declare the good news of Jesus Christ, you only help it grow and spread. You may shackle the feet of the messenger, but his message will run. Yet if we're to stand firm in our faith for Jesus, if we're to clearly and boldly declare the good news of Jesus Christ, if we're to profess the truth in the face of adversity, criticism and

rejection, we must ask ourselves – searching for the answer from deep down within our souls - does our Christian faith hold up under scrutiny? Would there be enough evidence to convict us? Can we trust the eyewitness testimonies to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus letting that lead us in faith? Only as we can reverberate with a resounding yes from within our hearts can we know that we are secure in the master of the universe, that we've the One who has promised to be with us always – through to the end of the ages and are certain we've His Spirit dwelling within us and therefore know *greater is He who is within us than he who is within the world!*

Okay, so the world can put the gospel on trial. They can even seem to have the upper hand. Certainly it may have seemed that way on a darkened hill called Mount Calvary shadowed by a stark, wooden cross, but just 3 days later there was a rolled away stone and an empty tomb to prove our Saviour is alive - alive for evermore and we need not fear what the world thinks it can do. We only need to decide to stand with and say aloud to all who may hear, as Peter and John spoke to the Sanhedrin, as countless faithful have stood and spoken clearly through the ages, "*judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you (the world) rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*" [v. 19, 20]

Perhaps today you're experiencing persecution. Perhaps the fear of persecution is what has kept you from living your life in Christ – but it has left you feeling empty and miserable. Your spirit wants to have relationship with your heavenly Father. Today is the day you can. Simply ask Jesus to come into your life, ask Him to forgive you of your sinful life and to make you new. Jesus will – He's waiting for you to ask. Give us a call at 519-317-8659 or email us if you'd like to talk about this further.

God Bless you,

Pastor Dave