

August 4, 2013
Church Planting

Is God Really in Control?
Acts 8:2-8

Opening words: This summer we are looking at the first eight chapters of the Book of Acts. I have called this sermon series, *Church Planting*. So much has happened to this point. The Holy Spirit was unleashed on the world and the church was created. Lives were being changed. The disciples were transformed into apostles, who began to flex their spiritual muscle. Under their leadership, individuals were healed and thousands were experiencing the power of the resurrected Jesus. The church had grown beyond Palestine. Through the eyes of God, everything is perfect. Through the eyes of the Orthodox faith, things are growing worse. It is for this reason the Christian persecution begins. They are trying to stymie the growth of this Jesus movement.

The first martyr of the church was Stephen. You remember his story. He was respected by everyone. He was the first one, besides the Apostles, to perform a miracle. For that act of kindness, he was arrested and tried. He was found guilty of telling the truth, and last week, we learned he died by being stoned. This week, we learn the persecutions are spreading, and for this reason, the church is forced to scatter. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Acts 8:2-8. Let me call this message *Is God Really in Control?*

Acts 8:2-8 ² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

This morning, the Colonial Hills Baptist Church is a grieving church. Their story has been in the news recently. It grabbed both my attention and my heart. The Indianapolis church had sent their young to a church camp in northern Michigan. It was a successful time away, and everyone was excited about returning home. Everyone must have been thrilled their 365 mile trip home was nearly complete. Then, tragedy struck. One mile from the church the bus' brakes failed. It slammed into a wall and overturned. There were 37 people on the bus. Dozens were injured. Three were killed, including the youth pastor, his pregnant wife and a chaperone. The youth minister was the senior pastor's son. The parents who had assembled at the church to pick up their children were shocked. Their happy reunion was replaced with sadness. Does that story make you wonder? That story makes me wonder.

On Tuesday, a mother was pushing her eight-month-old daughter's baby stroller in West New York, New Jersey. She was doing nothing wrong when tragedy struck. It happened in the blink of an eye. A commuter van, running between New Jersey and New York City, went out of control. It hit two lampposts and a tree. One of those lampposts fell and hit the baby stroller. The baby was suddenly gone and the mother will spend the rest of her life putting the pieces back together again. That story made me wonder. Have you ever wondered? Have you ever wondered why God lets things like that happen? Have you ever asked this question: Is God really in control?

This message is not about why bad things happen to bad or foolish people. We know why bad things happen to them. Every night the news gives us their stories. How many gang related shootings have you heard about lately? How many drug related shootings have you heard about lately? Have many motorcycle drivers have been killed who refused to wear their helmets? How many automobile drivers have been killed who were not wearing their seat belts? Drunk drivers are asking for it. We understand why bad things happen to bad or foolish people. What we don't understand is why bad things happen to good people, to innocent people? It is those stories which force us to ask the question, is God really in control? Ours is not the first generation to ask that question and our generation will not be the last to ask that question. The early church must have asked that question. That is what we find in this morning's scripture lesson. If you are ready to look at the text together, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves in the eighth chapter of Acts, verses two through eight. This passage is challenging for anyone who assumes God will eliminate the hardship in our world. It does not matter how you turn the story, you find pain and suffering. Listen to what I am about to say. The people who are experiencing the pain and the suffering did nothing wrong. Stephen did nothing wrong. He was doing what he was told. He was telling the world about Jesus, and for his evangelistic efforts he is killed. The members of the early church did nothing wrong, yet verse three tells us they were imprisoned for their faith. It is obvious. Pain and suffering have been part of the church from the very beginning. And with the pain and the suffering comes our question for today, is God really in control? The answer is YES!

Today, I want to take the next few minutes and unpack our question, is God really in control? We struggle answering that question for two reasons. First, we struggle with pain and suffering because we fail to correctly identify the **origin** of pain and suffering. We live in God's creation, but we also live in Satan's playground. Second, we struggle with pain and suffering because our emotions make us nearsighted. We have a difficult time seeing the final **outcome**. It is those two things I want to look at today. The text for today illustrates the answer to our question. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**" Helen Keller once said, *"Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming it."*

Origin

I believe you should learn something new every day. Do you know what I learned the other day? I learned that the Vikings did not wear horns on their helmets. That is a misconception. The origin of that that misconception comes from the ancient Christians in southern Europe who feared the northern Europeans. The southern Europeans portrayed the northern Europeans in art with horns in their helmets to align them with Satan, who is symbolized by a horned goat. Likewise, Jesus is symbolized by a lamb. That means the Minnesota Vikings helmets are all wrong. How many of you accepted that misconception about Vikings wearing horns on their helmets? I did!

That is not the only misconception in history. Maybe you have accepted one of these:

1. Ben Franklin did not discover electricity. (He was simply trying to prove the electric nature of lightning)
2. The Great Wall of China cannot be seen from the moon.
3. Marie Antoinette did not say, "Let them eat cake."
4. Witches were not burned at the Salem witch trials. (However, 20 women were hanged.)
5. Nero did not fiddle while Rome burned. (He was 30 miles away when the fire broke out.)
6. Lady Godiva never rode her horse in the nude.

How many of those misconceptions have you accepted? Our world is filled with misconceptions. This is one more.

Do you know of anyone who has accepted the misconception that God creates hardship and suffering to draw us near? Let me say this clearly. The true origin of all pain and suffering in our world is Satan. God may have created the world, but it is Satan who brings hardship and suffering to the world. That is why Job's story still speaks to our world. Every day, Satan did horrible things to him so Job would denounce his faith. Every day, Satan does horrible things to us so we will denounce our faith. However, we won't do it, because the foundation of our lives is God! Yet, it is painfully clear. We are living in Satan's playground and with every horrible story there is another Satan sighting. With every story we shake our heads and wonder why? It is vital to your faith that you reject the misconception that God creates hardship and suffering. The origin of all suffering and hardship is Satan. We must confess our ignorance when it comes to the origin of hardship and suffering. They all come from Satan. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen**"

Outcome

This is confession number two. We must confess that our emotions blind us to suffering and hardships' final outcome. When I woke up this morning, I thought about the Colonial Hills Baptist Church in Indianapolis. How do you worship after such a horrible accident? How do you sing songs of praise after such a horrible accident? How is the minister going to stand up and preach after such a horrible accident? He did not just lose a member of his staff. He lost his son. He lost a daughter-in-law.

He lost a future unknown, yet loved, grandchild. Every morning I wake up and think about that mother who lost her baby. How do you keep on living? Emotions are funny things. They can propel us to the top of every mountaintop and they can drag us down to the valley of despair. They can sharpen our insights and blind us to the most obvious. Have you ever wished you were more emotional? Have you ever wished you were less emotional? Have you ever hidden your true emotions? Have you ever had to work your way through some emotional experience to experience something new?

The scripture lesson ends today with a word of good news. The church is moving outward. This did not happen because the governing body took action. There was no capital funds drive for new church starts. The grant application was not accepted. The church was moving outward because it was forced to move outward. Because of the persecution, it wasn't safe to stay in Jerusalem, so they moved to other places. There is no reason to believe they would have moved without the persecution. Have you ever noticed how God can use Satan's bad things and produce something good? It happens all the time.

Taryn Davis said she felt lost and isolated after she buried her husband, Michael. He was serving our country in Iraq, when he died at the age of 22. Due to her young age, 22, everyone tried to dismiss her grief by saying, "You are young. You can remarry." People did not know how to treat her so they left her alone. In her isolation, Taryn did something that brought her both great pain and relief. She contacted the widow of another soldier who was killed with Michael. Their meeting had no real agenda. They simply got together and shared. Then they decided to contact other young military widows, and in time, they founded the American Widow Project. It is open to any age but the average age is 25. It has been six years since Michael died. She still misses him but she has found a new family. She has found her purpose. Have you ever noticed how God can use Satan's bad things and produce something good? How often do our emotions blind us to the final outcome? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

One of my favorite stories in the Bible comes from the ninth chapter of Mark. You may remember the story. We have looked at it in the past. Peter has just identified Jesus as the Christ. It was one of those pivotal moments in the Bible. Things would never be the same again. To underscore the importance of that insight, Jesus takes Peter, James and John to the top of a mountain. It is at this moment the story grows strange. Without any warning, Jesus' appearance suddenly changes. The Bible says he was transfigured. We would describe him as glowing. Suddenly, with this transfigured Jesus and the disciples are Moses and Elijah. I don't know how they identified them. Maybe they were wearing name tags? Why Moses and Elijah? Through the eyes of the disciples, they were the greatest characters in the Old Testament. Moses was the great law giver. Elijah was the greatest of the prophets. It was one of the greatest moments in the life of the disciples, and they don't want it to end. Peter offers to put up tents for their honored guests. However, the best is yet to come. Suddenly, they are engulfed by a bright cloud, and God himself begins to speak to them.

God says it clearly, *"This is my son, whom I love; with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."* The disciples are overwhelmed by the experience, but it is suddenly over. Do you remember what happens next? On their way down from the mountaintop they are confronted by a man whose son is demon-possessed. The contrast between the two stories is shocking. Isn't that life? On the mountaintop everything is perfect. There is Moses and Elijah. There is God. In the valley, there is imperfection, hardships and suffering. There is the demon-possessed boy. How much imperfection have you witnessed in your life? We may visit the mountaintop occasionally, but we live in the valley. This is the question:

Is God really in control? The answer is YES! However, you are never going to see it until you understand two things. First, the **origin** of all sadness and sorrow is Satan. God created the world, but we live in Satan's playground. Second, you have to confess that your own emotions have blinded you to the divine outcome. Mother Teresa once said, *"I know God won't give me anything I can't handle. I just wish he didn't trust me so much."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**