

Words and Deeds: Suffering Disgrace For The Name
By Jason Huff
2 Samuel 6:14-23; Hebrews 11:23-28; Acts 5:40-42

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 5:40-42. May God add His richest blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “Gamaliel's speech persuaded the Sanhedrin. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.”

In 1781, the American army defeated the British at Yorktown, ending the Revolutionary War and securing our independence from England. As part of the surrender ceremony, the British army band was required to play a march. They played a song called “The World Turned Upside Down.” The idea was fitting because indeed, the world had been turned upside down. The greatest superpower of the day had been defeated by a ragtag militia George Washington and his officers had forged into a true army. Now the United States would have a president elected by the people, and at elections, there would be a handover of power from one president to the next that had never ever been seen before in world history. And as we all know, the creation of the United States would change the world in ways never imagined.

Much of that was taught in our history classes. But I also found it fascinating to learn the history of the song, “The World Turned Upside Down.” It's the rest of the story that almost no one but history buffs know. In the 1640s, the British Parliament outlawed Christmas celebrations. Christmas was celebrated much as it is today, but the two week period we hear about in the “Twelve Days of Christmas” was a time of feasting and carnivals and dancing. The Parliament at the time had many godly men who saw it as their duty to enforce their particular religious views on the land – and their view was that there were to be no holy days other than each Sunday of worship. Christmas celebrations were seen as indulgent, even immoral, and remnants of Catholicism they were trying to do away with.

So they said businesses had to be open on Christmas. Penalties and fines were to be given to anyone holding or attending a Christmas church service. That didn't go over too well. “The World Turned Upside Down” was actually a protest song that lamented the loss of the celebration of Christ's birthday and called for change. It was a way the common man could express his desire to worship as he saw fit, not as the government saw fit.

This history is fascinating to me because I found it while I was researching material for today's passage. As we discussed last week, the apostles were doing miracles everywhere – and the Jewish leadership despised the fact that they were getting all the attention. And what keeps happening is that the Jewish council – the Sanhedrin – keeps telling everybody to stop talking about Jesus. But they don't! At the end of this chapter, we're told “day after day,” “they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the messiah.”

Just as the song protested Parliament telling the people they couldn't worship, the apostles told the Jewish leadership, "We can't stop talking about Jesus, because we have to obey God, not men." The fight for the right to worship as we believe God is calling us is nothing new. It was a central principle in this country's founding – in that era, almost every country had a specific church that was the "state church" supported by taxes and government structures. Our country believed from the start that freedom of religion was paramount. That's one of the things I can proudly celebrate on July 4th, that the free exercise of religion is still alive and well in our country, and if we lose that right, we lose the core of what makes America great.

But that's not our core topic today. What is turned upside down in this passage is not the disciples standing up to the Sanhedrin. What is turned upside down is the view of suffering. Today's passage was in last week's reading, but this part was so haunting to me, I couldn't shake it. I wanted to explore it more. One line in particular got my attention: "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."

Before we explore this concept, I want to step back into what happened last week, because it gives us a huge amount of context for this statement. The high priest and his followers had gotten the apostles thrown into prison. They were looking to try them and stone them, potentially. They were under lock and key and guard. And God sent an angel who in an amazing miracle gets them through locked prison doors, past watchful sentries, and sends them on their way to preach in the temple courts.

There can be no doubt that God was directly involved with this incident in that He does the impossible to get the apostles out and preaching. Yet that very morning, once they are found, the apostles are taken before the Sanhedrin, and their defense of Jesus so angers the council members that they are ready to execute them. Only a speech from a wise elder named Gamaliel stops them. And so before they are released, they are flogged.

Jewish flogging wasn't as nasty as Roman flogging; the beating Jesus endured by Roman hands was far worse because of the whip used. But it was still awful and incredibly painful. And the entire point of it was to bring shame and disgrace to the apostles – another kind of suffering than what we usually think of. The Jewish Virtual Library comments that notable figures (like dignitaries and priests) were exempt from flogging and could just pay a fine for an offense. The apostles had broken no law, yet they were stripped down in public and beaten at the whim of the Sanhedrin. And in an honor and shame based culture, shame stayed with you. Being beaten for a crime meant you had shamed yourself, your family, your friends. It was designed to break any interest the crowds had in the apostles. Yet because of God's hand, they were all the more effective at sharing Jesus.

So digging into this, we find a truth that really might surprise us: *God may honor faithful Christians by leading us towards suffering.* Now we know what we pray every day what we ask God not to lead us towards, right? Temptation. God saves us from sin. He leads us away from it. Even if we're tempted for our own good, God provides us a way out so that we don't sin. 1 Corinthians 10:13, Paul, he says, "God is faithful; He will not allow you to be tempted more than you can bear, and He will provide a way out of it so you can endure it."

But God often honors Christians with suffering for His name. On this day, in this place, we know God was at work, sending an angel, doing the miraculous, sneaking these guys through as if they were invisible. No one can doubt that God was directly involved. God gets them out of prison. He does not get them out of a savage, humiliating public beating. He absolutely could have done it, but He didn't.

In his first letter, Peter says, "If it is God's will, it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for [our] sins." Later in Acts, when Paul becomes a believer, God tells him how much he will suffer for his name. Longsuffering is one of the fruit of the Spirit.

Now this doesn't mean that suffering in and of itself is noble or right or good. Peter in that same letter warns against thinking that suffering for doing wrong has some greater godly good. And suffering doesn't have intrinsic value – it doesn't naturally, on its own, without the Spirit's intervention, do something good for us. Suffering turns out to be a tool.

Martin Luther, back when he was a terrified monk, whipped himself regularly. This was not uncommon. Through the centuries, people tried to get closer to God by denying themselves everything – going on incredibly long fasts, refusing to do anything that might bring them the slightest enjoyment. They assumed that because Christ suffered, suffering was automatically going to bring them closer to God.

Martin Luther found that this kind of thinking was a lie, though. He found that his soul was relieved from his fear of death and hell not through suffering, but through experiencing the grace of God and knowing that God loved him and had saved him. His hope was not in his own goodness or by beating the sin out of himself; his hope was in Jesus who died so that he could live joyfully. Suffering has its place in God's Kingdom. Suffering God brings can have good and redemptive purposes. He will both lead us into it and lead us out of it if it will benefit us. But suffering is not a natural good – only when God takes us into it can it be for our benefit.

Knowing that God can lead us down the path of suffering – and in fact, may do it to honor our faithfulness – is hard enough. But then there's the way the disciples took it. Their attitude makes us examine our own. And it gives us our take-home question for the day: *What is our attitude towards suffering disgrace for God?* Because the apostles are not just taking one for the team; they aren't like, "let's get this over with." They aren't crying out to God, "Where are you?" Because they've just seen Him release them from prison in an unexplainable way. Instead, they are rejoicing. They are giving praise to God that they were counted worthy of suffering for the name of Jesus.

And think about the story we heard about King David today. After years in the hands of the enemy, the ark is back in Israelite hands, and it is finally being brought into the holy city, Jerusalem. And so David is rejoicing before the LORD, dancing with all his might. You don't think about the queen of England cutting up on the dance floor. To dance at all, one must be dignified. But David is out there in a loincloth leading the celebration in front of everyone. He doesn't care about His own dignity. He just wants God to be praised.

And his wife Michal thinks it's disgraceful. Now Michal had loved David. In an era of arranged marriages, the fact that it's mentioned multiple times that Michal loved David is important. She lied to her father, King Saul, and helped David escape when Saul went nuts and tried to have David killed. Yet she despised David for glorifying God this way. But David was so dedicated to the LORD that he never changed his mind about it, and they never reconciled. David was willing to be so shamed as to lose his wife's love in order to honor God.

We have talked before about our own attitudes towards suffering, so I'm not going to go back to that well. Long story short – we avoid suffering whenever possible. The vast majority of our prayers we lift up in our worship are for the relief of suffering, usually physical suffering. We really want a pass from suffering.

But what if God has different intentions for us? What if God is honoring us when we suffer for His name? What would happen if we rejoiced when we were disgraced for sharing Jesus? I don't think any of us want to intentionally offend people, least of all our friends. It might not look like it because I can speak in front of a large group every week, but I can be pretty anxious in social situations, and I get the sense that many of us are too. I worry about what people are going to think of me. I'm the guy at the party that will find a quiet corner to have a conversation with a friend or two. I'm not the life of the party; I'm the guy who could skip the party and stay home watching Star Trek reruns.

But what if God honors us by giving us the opportunity to share Jesus with other people, and that there's special honor in when we're disgraced for it? What if somebody called you a bigot or a fundamentalist or something far more profane? What if someone unfriended you on Facebook? What if it lost you a job? And what if that was actually something to rejoice about?

I think about Andrew Brunson in prison for well over a year now, locked in a tiny cell, given a sham trial by a sham panels of judges because a paranoid dictator hasn't gotten his way, whose reputation has been run through the mud only because he's an American Christian sharing the gospel in Turkey. That's hard time - and yet from reports from Norine, the one thing that worries him is that he's been forgotten, the same concern Paul had when he was languishing in prison expecting execution by Nero.

I think about cake bakers and T-shirt makers around the country who have been stripped of their businesses through fines and public disgrace because they want to honor God with their creative talents. The Supreme Court case about this recently opened the door just a smidge, but what the court did doesn't provide protections for every case – just those where obvious anti-religious bigotry got in the way of justice.

And when I think about these things, I have to think: what is holding us back? I think perhaps it's the fear of shame. I mean, our passage says that wherever they were, the apostles were sharing the good news. It's not clear if they were going door-to-door, but “house-to-house” sounds like it. At very least, people were having the disciples in their homes and inviting others over to learn what Jesus had done for them.

Now sharing Jesus with a world that hates Him, and hates us for following Him, that's not just hard. It really is turning our worlds upside down. But we've learned some things already from the book of Acts that shows us that it's not impossible to share Christ and bear the disgrace.

First, and most importantly, we have Christ's love. If you know that you are loved by Christ, that He is supporting you, that He has already died for you and is working in your life to make you ready for His Kingdom, that He's given you the Holy Spirit, then being rejected for His sake is not as big a deal as we think it is.

Think about it this way – if someone were to make fun of your spouse or your kids, you'd stand up for them. Maybe not punch them in the nose, but you'd defend them. And if you were talking to a bunch of your friends and you were saying how great your wife is and one of them said, “She's not so great,” you wouldn't be embarrassed of your spouse, you'd be embarrassed of your so-called friend. We stand up for our family members, even (often) when they really don't deserve it – we might be able to call them out for bad behavior, but we'll defend them against anybody trying to speak ill of them.

In all those situations, we're defending ordinary people, people with faults, people who may indeed have something we might be ashamed about. But there's nothing to be ashamed about with Christ. For those of us who know His love, He is joy, He is peace, He brings us comfort, He is our shelter, He is our teacher, He is the One who trains us to be more like Him, who disciplines us to bring us out of our sin, who loves us completely and totally. The apostles were treated shamefully, but they were not ashamed of Jesus.

And if all of this sounds impossible, that you can't or won't do it, I encourage you to turn to Christ again. Because I am excited to tell friends about my favorite movie or the new ice cream shop we found. When I discover something wonderful, I want other people to know about it. If you have no wonderfulness to share about Jesus, maybe you haven't really met Him. Pray about it and talk to me, and we'll see if we can't find your hope and joy in Jesus after all.

Second, we are together in this. The apostles rejoiced together. They had Jesus, and they had each other. You know, if you share Jesus, you may get brushed off; you may get yelled at; you may lose a friend. But you have friends here who care about you.

And if you want to talk about it, your faith, Jesus, call me. Here's the thing – I have another part-time job, sure, but I am not too busy for you. And I apologize if I ever have seemed that way. Once I thought that being busy was a sign of being effective. But a pastor's job is different. The best pastor has open space to be your pastor. I have that, and I want to spend it with you. You have support here – from me and from everyone here. And if we need to work on caring more for one another so that we trust one another enough with the hard stuff, we'll do that.

Friends, we may not have to suffer like the apostles did for the name of Jesus. But we should be ready for our worlds to turn upside down for Him. If you know Him well, you know your life has already gone topsy-turvy over Him, and it's a wonderful thing. May we all be so blessed as to have our sin overturned and our lives rattled by the good news of Jesus' salvation.