

In the beatitudes, Jesus says “Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice on that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets” (Lk 6:22-23). It is radically counter-intuitive and counter-cultural to feel worthy and joyful to suffer dishonor and pain in the name of Jesus.

When the Sanhedrin warned the apostles several times to stop preaching about Jesus (cf. Acts 4-5), Peter firmly claimed the right and need to obey God; the Sanhedrin responded by beating the apostles before releasing them.

St. Stephen fervently honored his charism of wisdom and teaching; confronting the people for being “uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you” (Acts 7:51). Stephen, like Jesus, was falsely accused by the Sanhedrin, who bitterly resented the signs and wonders performed by both that elicited such a powerful belief in the common “uneducated” person. The deepest work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life is to conform oneself to Jesus, to reproduce the pattern of Jesus Christ. In each Christian’s own, unique way he is to relive the life of Jesus and make it present in his own. St. Stephen’s face seemed like that of an angel as he also shared a discourse with the Sanhedrin (Acts 6-7). (Recall Jesus’ Transfiguration before the Passion; we see Stephen also replicate this aspect of Jesus in a visual way.) The leaders of Israel killed Stephen as he indicted them for their hard heartedness, just as was true of Jesus. As Stephen was being stoned to death, he again paralleled Jesus in commending his spirit to God, and by asking that this sin not be held against his murderers, as Jesus did on the cross. By interceding for all those who killed him, Stephen helped facilitate the conversion of Paul, who soon after Stephen’s martyrdom met Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Paul went from being the persecutor to being persecuted, as he in his own way became like a new Jesus, with the life of Jesus becoming relived through him. In the gospels, Jesus presented Himself as fulfillment of Scripture: the new Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Jonah; the True Temple, Living Manna, and the Suffering Servant. “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). Jesus was prefigured in the Old Testament by the prophets to the fullness of the divine plan that was fulfilled in Him. Jesus cast shadows backwards as glimpses of Him were present in the Old Testament. In Acts, Jesus casts His light forward, to the future history of the people of God after His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and Jesus is even now post-figured as he becomes present in each member of His body. His divine presence and mission are renewed by

Peter, Stephen, and Paul, and subsequent Christians.

Similar to Jesus, another Herod had Peter imprisoned on the Passover (Acts 12). Just as Herod Antipas had killed John the Baptist, Herod Agrippa had pleased people by killing James, the brother of John. Both Jesus and Peter were arrested, handed over, guarded, and unclothed by the soldiers. An angel had Peter arise and pass through locked doors, and he too was thought to be a spirit by the first person who saw him, a woman. The disciples were in the upper room, amazed to see Peter come to them. The deepest work of the Holy Spirit is to reproduce in each of us the pattern of the life of Jesus.

In Acts 16, Paul had released a girl from the grip of a demon, and was imprisoned through the manipulations of the angry owner of the fortune teller girl. Paul prayed and joyfully sang praise and thanksgiving, which is the most powerful weapon at times of suffering. Through such joy and praise, a terrible situation changes into a powerful truth zone where God sovereignly reigns over all circumstances in our life. It frees us from hopelessness, discouragement and depression, as it lifts our spirit. Paul’s sufferings were predicted three times, just as Jesus predicted His Passion three times. In Acts 21:13, Paul firmly stated his conviction of readiness to be imprisoned and die for Jesus. Peter had made the same impassioned vow, only to later deny Jesus three times. The difference? Peter had not yet received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, while Paul had been emboldened by the Holy Spirit prior to his proclamations. Paul replicated Jesus in the accusations against him by the Sanhedrin at the time of the Passover, while also being placed before the Roman governor Felix and King Herod, who did not find him guilty, while the high priests sought the death penalty for him. Paul was told in a vision that he would be saved to share his testimony soon in Rome.

The Greek word *martyria* means witnessing, giving testimony. Martyrs testify that that Jesus is worth more than life itself. Even though we may not face martyrdom, the commitment to faith in Jesus means we are willing to shed our lives for Him. In Romans 10:10, Paul said to be Christian is interior belief with exterior confession. During the first 300 years of the Church, the faith flourished during times of persecution, as witnesses were so inspired by martyrs’ faith. Today there are two types of martyrdom; red and white. White does not signify *physical* death but there are many small ways we may die for Christ in our secular culture, like losing family and friends due to our faith. What sacrifices are we willing to make for our faith? Read stories of martyred saints to see how God has empowered those with joy who called upon Him in horrific situations.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus declared Peter to be the Rock the Church would be built upon, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Jesus claimed the Church was on the offensive onslaught against the kingdom of darkness; liberating those captive to it step-by-step, as the Church dismantles the evil of the devil. We are more than conquerors; through Jesus we are walking in victory, even in the midst of apparent defeat. Dr. Healy queried, "Who would have thought a small band of disciples could travel into the heart of the world's centers of power, money, and influence, bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ, to ultimately change the world?"

In his educated and wise charism of preaching, Paul adapted his message to the audience he was addressing. In first evangelizing the Jews in the Athenian synagogue, Paul explained all God said and did in the Old Testament, and how Jesus fulfilled those expectations of Scripture. But when Paul went to evangelize the Gentiles in the Athenian public square, he needed to start at the basic level of proving our all-powerful God as the creator. Athens was the pinnacle of the Greco-Roman world in human civilization and intellectual ingenuity, with leading achievements in education, philosophy, art, engineering, science, government, and the military. Unfortunately Athens also hosted accompanying spiritual emptiness, cynicism, devalued human life, and the breakdown of family relationships. The Athenians were not searching for religious truth but were intrigued by Paul as an intellectual challenge. Paul evangelized by establishing a common ground as he validated some aspect of the Gentile faith. Acts 17:24-31 narrates Paul's preaching about creation. He spoke of God as totally transcendent above, while simultaneously sustaining the universe. If God stopped thinking of the universe, it would disappear as God nourishes the world in constant creation. The fashioning of the human race was done out of free and pure love for us; he needs nothing from us. The beauty of the world as an arena of God's providence, arouses in us a spiritual thirst like a blind person groping in search of Him, as God wants to be found by us in His proximity to our hearts. God now gives full and complete revelation of Who He is in Jesus.

When Paul spoke of the resurrection of Jesus, it was repugnant to the Greeks who devalued the body as a prison for the soul. Some accepted, some rejected, and others were uncertain about the germinating seed of the gospel Paul taught. He also did not wait for people to come to him; he sought the lost in the public square. Paul boldly shared the "strange parts" of the resurrection with the Greeks, just as in contemporary times people are uncomfortable with accountability and judgment issues.

While preaching in Corinth, Greece and Ephesus, Paul incurred further mixed results. Corinth could be perceived as the "Las Vegas of the ancient Near East." As a major wealthy seaport, Corinth became a melting pot of many religions and cults from all directions; a spiritual hodge-podge of moral relativism.

Paul as usual, first preached in the Jewish synagogue, later seeking out the Gentiles. God told Paul he would be protected, as God would be with him in the midst of his service (cf. Acts 18:9-10), just as God had reassured Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah, and Mary. God promises this to ALL of His people who feel fearful and inadequate to accomplish His mission. Paul remained in Corinth for 1 ½ years, ministering to many of the city's poor and underprivileged, as he felt confidence through God's assurance. Paul then traveled to Ephesus, where he heard of factionalism, legal conflicts, and return to old immoral sexual behaviors back in Corinth. He admonished the Corinthians in his two epistles to them, by fervently clarifying God's expectations.

Ephesus was a cultural and commercial center of Asia Minor (current day Turkey), known for its occult practices. Paul preached at the synagogue and evangelized at the cultural hall. Acts 19 highlights the power of Paul's preaching, and the Signs and Wonders performed. As a precursor to the Church's sacramentals (like holy water), were cloths and handkerchiefs that had touched Paul's skin, and were later applied to the sick, curing their diseases and making evil spirits depart from them. Previous occult exorcists recognized the true healing power of God and voluntarily burned their books on magic valued at 50,000 silver pieces. Paul successfully ministered in the Ephesian area for three years, transforming places of intellectual darkness into spiritual freedom. Paul exemplified going out of one's comfort zone to proclaim Jesus to others.

Paul returned to Jerusalem, only to face opposition precipitating Roman intervention that brought Paul to testify in Caesarea before Governors Felix, Festus, and King Agrippa. Paul found himself taken to Rome in chains, and he trusted in God during the difficult trip. For example, Paul warned the ship centurion about a northeaster causing disaster to all on the voyage near Crete, but he was ignored. Paul helped everyone survive, and even was bitten by a poisonous snake that further showed God's protection. He healed the sick on Malta, and after three tumultuous months, Paul arrived in Rome; not with a victorious team of missionaries, but as a prisoner who continued for two more years to evangelize while under Roman house arrest. Paul shows us how it is possible to proclaim God's word while facing very difficult circumstances; and that proclamation of God's word simply cannot be held back.