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## Sermon

### ***Blessedness and Persecution***

**1 Samuel 22:9-18; Acts 6:8-15; Matthew 5:11-16**

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We have been following the progress of David through 1 Samuel over recent weeks. Last week, we heard how David, as he fled from Saul's persecution, went to the tabernacle to get food and weapons – provisions for the journey. There was an aside: that Saul's chief shepherd was detained at the tabernacle – Doeg. Now Doeg has told Saul that he saw David there and Saul exacts vengeance on the chief priest, Ahimelech, killing not just him but all his family. Of course, Ahimelech had not sided against Saul, he had no reason to believe David was not in the King's good books. It is a grossly unjust action of Saul and his men would not lay a hand on the priests – so Saul turned to Doeg who perhaps as an Edomite did not have the same respect for Jewish priests and he killed 85 men that day.

There are consequences for actions in this world. If God prevented every bad action we would have an impossible world. Since we cannot know for sure what consequence any action might have, we would never know whether our action would succeed or be blocked. We would try to do some things and either they would not happen or they would be reversed. Other things would happen. We would have no freewill at all.

I don't imagine David intended any harm to Ahimelech in getting bread from the tabernacle. Saul who was becoming a despot grossly overreacted to a setback. People take actions and there are consequences which follow.

There is however another background to this incident. When Samuel was a boy, he assisted the priest Eli. Eli's sons were corrupt. They stole food from the sacrifices for themselves and slept with the women who were serving in the temple. Such contempt for the worship and holiness of God greatly offended the Lord and he sent a prophet to warn Eli. When that message was ignored, Samuel's first prophecy was to pronounce a judgment on the house of Eli. It said that no descendent of Eli's would live to old age. Ahimelech was a great grandson of Eli. Actions have consequences. God does enact judgments and they will happen.

The story shows us the fulfillment of that earlier prophecy against Eli's house. The story shows us the fulfillment of the earlier prophecy against Saul – that God had rejected him and would tear the kingdom from him – and his disintegration continues.

God will be faithful to his Word. We can try to suppress it. We can try to ignore it but we cannot stop what God says. Scripture has many warnings about ignoring God's Word – we need to be careful to observe what he says and obey him or we can hardly be surprised if we reap the consequences just as he has warned us.

Not only is God's Word certain and true, but it also calls the hearer to service and submission. And those who respond to it, are changed by it. We see these positive principles being worked out in David. He wrote Psalm 52 when he heard about Doeg's action.

"Why do you boast of evil, you mighty man? Why do you boast all day long, you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God? ... You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth."<sup>1</sup>

The Psalm continues looking for justice to be done.

Just one person escaped the massacre - Ahimelech's son. He fled to David. When he told David what had happened, David accepted blame for Ahimelech's death and offered to protect to the young man.

We have been following David's progress, but today is the observance of our Patron saint, Stephen. The accounts of Ahimelech and Stephen both involve suffering, bloodshed and death. But we need to be realistic about the world we live in. While it was created good, it has been distorted by human sin and bad things do happen.

Stephen gives us a lead and an example. So what was he like? Luke says he was full of the Holy Spirit and so he was full of grace and power.

Where have you see power?... Was there grace as well? Where have you seen grace? Was there power as well? Lord Acton's dictum, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," related to political power rather than miracle-working power. But we do not often see power with grace. That is a rare balance.

Stephen did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. We need to be showing God's grace and power. We need to expect the Holy Spirit to be at work empowering us.

That is what the sail of our logo signifies: Full of the Spirit - the wind, the breath of God. As the boat is propelled by the wind, so we are empowered by the Spirit of God. Without wind, a sailing boat is dead in the water. Without the Spirit we lack the power and abilities God intends us to have as we live in and extend his kingdom.

A life without the Holy Spirit is the abnormal Christian life. We are supposed to be full of the Holy Spirit. If you aren't - seek him; make it the focus; pursue the release of the Spirit in your life to equip you to be the man or woman Christ calls you to be.

Stephen was also remarkable for being a good apologist - someone who argues for the faith. He was so good at presenting the gospel that the Jews got angry with him because they could not answer his points. So they resorted to false accusations of blasphemy leading to his execution.

The mast in the logo is the cross. It reminds us that it is at the cross of Christ that we find forgiveness. It is there that we find redemption. There our burdens are laid down and we receive new life.

Of course the mast supports the sail. So it is that we can only be empowered by the Holy Spirit when we have come to the cross and received Jesus as our saviour. Without that relationship with Jesus we cannot be filled with the Spirit.

The cross reminds us too that following Christ means taking up our cross. Jesus warned us that to follow him would mean suffering for the faith.

In the gospel reading, which was a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed those who were persecuted. People reject God's message to them because we humans have a rebellious streak in us. We do not want to acknowledge there is a God to whom we are accountable. We do not want his ways.

Sadly, that resistance can get mean. So what does Jesus say about being persecuted? He says we are blessed. He says we should rejoice and be glad, because our reward in heaven is great. He says we are in good company with the prophets. And of course we are in good company with him.

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<sup>1</sup> Ps 52:1-3

Now Jesus was not impractical or airy-fairy. He was not a vague dreamer. He is realistic, but he takes into account spiritual realities as well as the physical. He did not say we should rejoice when we are persecuted to sound holy. He is saying from God's perspective we are blessed. We are embracing his values, we are heading in his direction. The long-term, the eternal outcome will be good.

I think Jesus is being entirely realistic about the fact that there is a battle. He is speaking in a similar vein to Churchill, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets..."

These are stirring words which face the hard realities and look beyond to the outcome. Just so, Churchill said, "You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory. Victory at all costs — Victory in spite of all terror — Victory, however long and hard the road may be..."

With Jesus the ultimate victory is assured, but there is still a battle to be fought. The kingdom of darkness resists the Kingdom of God and when you have battles people get hurt. We are blessed when people persecute us because of righteousness because it shows which side we are on - ours is the Kingdom of Heaven. We are blessed when people insult us because of Jesus – why? Because our reward will be great in heaven. If you don't believe in that future state you will not think much of the reward! But Jesus commends it to us and followed his own advice – in Hebrews we read,

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus said we are to let our light shine. That is what Stephen did. We are to let people see that God is at work among and through us. "They will see your good works and praise your Father who is in heaven." Of course, if you never let on that you are a Christian, they won't be able to do that. Stephen was not afraid to be known as a follower of the Way – a Christian. It was a hostile environment but he stood up for what he believed and argued for it.

Stephen is honoured as the first martyr and an effective follower of Jesus. We too need to be faithful where we have been placed. We need to expect God to be at work among us. We need to speak when the opportunities come. As we do, we will see the Spirit of God at work in and through us - we will know the filling of our sail.

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<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 12:2-3