

Lemonade

There's an old saying: "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." I plugged those words into Google recently. In less than a tenth of a second, it came up with a list of 756,000 web pages containing the phrase. Who knew the philosophy of trying to make something good out of bad circumstances was so popular?

It's actually an ancient concept and, like all good things, comes from God. While examples abound in the Bible (such as Joseph's rise to prominence in Egypt after his own brothers sold him into slavery), one brief passage puts it all together: "We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." (Romans 5:3-4.)

This week we will see how, during one of the worst times of suffering in church history, God used his people to further his kingdom. It's time to make lemonade.

Monday – Great Persecution

1. Please read Acts 8:1-4. (For the events leading up to these four verses, review chapters 6 and 7.) According to verse 1, what happened to the believers? Why do you think the apostles were able to remain in Jerusalem?
2. In chapters 4 and 5, the earlier troubles the apostles faced are described in detail, but they are not called persecution, let alone great persecution. Why would Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, decide to use the phrase "great persecution" in 8:1?
3. Some New Testament scholars think that in the time leading up to this great persecution, most early Christians focused on staying in Jerusalem under the apostles' teaching. While their desire to stay together in Jerusalem seems natural enough, consider Jesus' instructions to the contrary in Acts 1:8. How does that verse help you understand how God could allow his Church to be persecuted?

Making it Personal: Are you facing difficulties now, even "great" difficulties, wondering how God could allow them to happen? Read Romans 8:28 and Jeremiah 29:10-14. Pray for his guidance and comfort to bring you through these times, and into the good he has planned for you.

Tuesday – Caring for the Body

1. Read Acts 8:2. Who do you think these "godly men" were? Why would they take the time to bury and mourn Stephen in the middle of great persecution?

Text insight: The men caring for Stephen had quite a time-consuming job on their hands. Typically they would have laid the body in a tomb within the first 24 hours; on the third day, custom required that they return to verify the deceased was really dead. While all this was going on, the family and friends were in mourning for an entire week.

2. We can, at times, become weary and tempted to let our service to others slacken. What does Paul have to say about that in Galatians 6:9-10? What do you think "the proper time" means?
3. The early Christians probably knew well Jesus' words from Matthew 25:31-46. How does the care shown for Stephen fulfill Jesus' teaching?

Wednesday – Imprisoned

1. Luke's account swings from persecution (Acts 8:1) to ministry (8:2), back to persecution (8:3) and then again to ministry (8:4). What happened in verse 3?
2. Imagine the persecution police coming to your door. What would happen to the rest of your family if the men and women in your home were dragged off and imprisoned?
3. Luke leaves it to our imaginations to figure out what happened to the children. From what you have learned of the early church in our study of Acts so far (for example, see 2:42-47 and 4:32-35), what do you think happened to the children of those imprisoned?

Thursday – Scattered

"In his continued warfare against the church the devil finally overreached himself. His attack had the opposite effect to what he intended. Instead of smothering the gospel, persecution succeeded only in spreading it." John Stott, *Acts – Seeing the Spirit at Work*, p. 39.

1. According to Acts 8:4, what were the believers doing? Where were they doing it?
2. The importance of going to those who have not heard the good news about Jesus is emphasized in Romans 10:13-15. What is the promise in Romans 10:13 for those who hear the good news, receive it and believe?

Digging Deeper: The early believers were not the first to be forced out of their comfort zone in order to tell others about God. Read the book of Jonah (very short, only 48 verses in all) for the story of the most reluctant preacher ever.

Friday – Salt and Light

1. Please read Matthew 5:13-16 and 1 Peter 3:15-16. How do these verses apply in your life?
2. Now look at Acts 8:5-8. How did Phillip live out the instructions found in Matthew 5 and 1 Peter 3?
3. Take a close look at Matthew 5:16 and the last part of 1 Peter 3:16. In light of these promises, what do you think God accomplished through Phillip's actions?

For the Weekend: Re-read Acts 8:1-8, Matthew 5:13-16 and 1 Peter 3:15-16. Then pray for God's grace and guidance in your words and actions, so that others may praise your Father in heaven.