

## **Is it possible to rejoice in our suffering?**

**Scripture: Acts 7:54-60, Philippians 1:29**

### **Introduction:**

- Good Morning. I realize it is very difficult time for all of us right now but even during our challenging times we may experience things in life that might bring us to laughter. I want to begin my message by sharing such experience I had in the past week hoping to provide a brief respite from the everyday tension we are experiencing in our world. As you know I have a child with a down syndrome and this week my wife saw him sincerely praying on his own to Jesus probably for the first time. As you know all of our children haven't been able to return to school and are currently being homeschooled by many of us. While all my other children were given very specific studies they can do at home, Moses has been struggling to keep himself busy. Naturally he turned to games and Youtube videos to entertain himself but in his mom's opinion it was getting too excessive. So one morning in the middle of the week, my wife told Moses to stop watching TV and follow daddy outside to do some exercise. Of course Moses didn't listen, so my wife was compelled to raise her voice and then things got little physical when my wife snatched the remote control from Moses. Moses almost wrestled with my wife to get it back causing my wife to become more furious with him. Sensing the obvious tension and the threat to his well-being, Moses retreated to a corner of our living room crying. It was there when he began to cry out to Jesus in tears. My wife overheard him say, "Jesus! Followed by minute or so of his usual speech in gibberish, then she heard him say very clearly, "Jesus please help me, I'm gonna die, my mommy is mean, please help me." When I heard my wife's story, I literally fell to the ground laughing but I also sensed a feeling of satisfaction that brightened my day a little bit. I was proud of Moses for seeking God in times of his perceived need and I also felt pleased that our family was able to collectively show Moses the importance of prayer life for him to be influenced by it.
- I'm sure most of us had an opportunity to travel through an airplane before. Before the airline takes off, we are always required to listen to a stewardess providing safety instructions. Part of the instruction pertains to times of emergency when aircraft's oxygen mask is discharged. Parents are told to wear the mask over their mouth and nose, with the elastic band around their head to make sure they are secured before they help apply the mask to their children. The reason is because without oxygen, a parent might not be physically capable of putting their child's mask on, let alone their own. By attending to the parent's own first, it ensures the parent will have the mental and physical facilities needed to take care of their children. I definitely believe the same principle applies to our spiritual well-being. I believe that taking ownership of our spiritual life as a parent must come first before we provide our children with spiritual instruction. Our displaying of how we remain spiritually vibrant will provide necessary stimulus for our children to follow our lead. While I am extremely frustrated that we cannot come together to worship God regularly, if we can draw one positive from our current predicament, it is the fact that each families of our

church are spending more time together than probably ever before, and now is a good time for us to really try to build and strengthen our faith as a family.

- With that in mind, this morning I want to speak on the subject of how we can genuinely experience gratitude and joy toward God even in the midst of our suffering. I realize that right now may not be the easy time to talk about this subject because the reality of suffering really hits home for many of us, but I am convinced that God's Word will truly help us to see beyond our present circumstance, and provide us with God's perspective that we desperately need in times like this.
- Before we take a look into our text this morning, I want to talk about what other believers around the world are thinking and feeling about our current struggle. I have been listening to many different messages from pastors in many different continents, trying to ascertain what God may be telling us through them. I want to share some helpful views that resonated with my spirit in my hearing. First type of messages generally expressed concern over the future of our church. Many pastors and church leaders preached that our current state of doing church, that is being away from each other, worshipping through virtual means in our respective homes, may become so familiarized by God's people that we may lose sight of the purpose and reason for our meeting together as the community, leading to gradual loss of congregants and spiritual decline.
- My response to this concern for now is that I believe many people of God are already sensing the desire for our community to gather together again, myself included, and may have already identified in our hearts how important that is.
- Second type of message emphasized God's providence where many leaders believe that God is trying to repair what is wrong with our church through this adversity. One of the key item requiring restoration was God's calling for our church to rediscover and experience what 'church' truly means. For many of us who grew up in the church, we have often been taught that church is not simply a building. Each believers are the temple of God and therefore wherever Christians are that is the church, so we must go and live in the world as the salt and the light. But despite what we have learned we have not been able to truly practice our spiritual life, away from our church buildings and facilities. So when we think about church, we naturally think about our church building located at 12200 Blundell Road. But because of the spread of Corona virus, we lost our choice to gather at the church buildings, and perhaps was obligated to accept that wherever we are is the church, we are where Christ resides, therefore where we are becomes the holy place of God.
- Second item was somewhat related to the first and it had to do with reexamining our faith in the light of the Gospel and Christ's command to go make disciples to the ends of the earth. What does Jesus' disciple look like? I believe one characteristic we cannot ignore in a true follower of Jesus Christ is their willingness to suffer for Christ's sake with gratitude. The way to cultivate this heart for Jesus, will not be through our efforts and hard work alone because that will only lead to burden, disappointment, and even doubt about whether we can truly be Jesus' disciple. Rather such heart will be a guaranteed fruit we bear as we

accompany Jesus on a daily basis, as we grow and learn to trust in Jesus on the way to living according to his ways.

- We can take a look at Jerusalem Church as an example. When the Holy Spirit came upon the Jerusalem church, first thing they recognized was that Jesus was with them. Remember Jesus had died and gone to sit on the right hand of the father but the Holy Spirit enabled them to live in the presence of Jesus. In the presence of Jesus the church was united not just in their words and deeds, but even in their hearts. One of the amazing evidence of this fact was how each members of the community, without the prompting of the apostles, were willing to sell their possessions so that all the needs of the people of the church were met. We are able to see that this didn't happen because of collective hard work or effort, or some movement initiated by a charismatic leader. This was simply each believers being obedient to leading of the Holy Spirit residing in their hearts, and their action was the fruit of their walk with Jesus, that is to say as the Holy Spirit becomes the guiding center of one's heart, He opens our eyes to the reality of Jesus and cause us to bear fruit. Another important fruit that was borne through this community was joyful gratitude even through sufferings as Jerusalem church experienced substantial suffering through persecution. One notable example was the story of Stephen. Stephen was one of the seven deacons originally called to serve the tables, but would become the first martyr of Jerusalem Church.
- Why was Stephen killed by Jewish religious leaders? His story begins from Acts chapter 6 to the text we read this morning and I will offer a brief synopsis. In the middle of Chapter 6 Stephen was brought before the ruling council of Jerusalem called Sanhedrin because he was charged with blasphemy speaking against the law and the Temple. In his defense, Stephen challenged two pillars of virtue for first century Judaism which was the Law and the temple. For Israel, the Law was what bound them together with God as His special people in solemn covenant with Him. Temple was where God resided therefore it was the only place to worship God and it gave Israel special privileges with God. Stephen's message challenged both pillars by means of Jewish history dating back to Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Solomon. Stephen argued that in regards to the temple, Old Testament stories demonstrate that God's presence was not tied exclusively to a particular land or building but rather God was joined to His people wherever they were, whether it be Egypt or elsewhere. In regards to the Law, throughout history, Israel has refused to obey the law given by Moses at the Mount Sinai and persecuted God's prophets who spoke for God. In the end, Stephen claimed that Jesus, whom the religious leaders murdered, was the Messiah who was the fulfillment of both the temple and the law. Stephen was murdered because he witnessed the Lordship of Jesus Christ to the Jewish religious leaders.
- Under the Romans, the Jews could not carry out executions so it seems like what began as a formal trial deteriorated into a lynch mob, so furious were the Jewish leaders at Stephen's words. Before we get into Stephen's Christ-like response to his would be murderers, we need to pay close attention to his source of calm, courage, and merciful spirit. **READ (PPT 2)** Everything we will see happen in Stephen's story will be brought about through the work of

the Holy Spirit whom we also possess. Being filled with the Holy Spirit simply means being obedient to leading of the Holy Spirit; it means choosing to allow the Spirit of God to be controlling influence in every part of my life. It was the Holy Spirit that enabled Stephen to see the vision of spiritual reality of heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Why was Stephen sharing his vision to the religious leaders? And why were they so furious with him? **READ (PPT 3)** As you can see in the text, Stephen's declaration was directed toward the religious leaders who had tried and judged Jesus before, because what Stephen saw and told them is exactly what Jesus said would happen.

- The angry mob covering their ears and yelling at the top of their voices in order to not hear Stephen's words any longer, drags him out of the city. Then in order to freely move their body to grab and throw the stone, they take off their outer garment and laid it at the feet of a young man named Saul. Even in the face of terror, Stephen is calm and courageous because he sees more than the angry mob charging at him with a stone, he sees Jesus standing. In the bible, Jesus is normally described to sit at the right hand of the father, but in Stephen's vision Jesus is standing. What does that mean? Some scholars explain that Jesus is advocating for Stephen in this scene as in the courtroom when a lawyer advocates for his client. Jesus promised in Matthew 10:32, "Everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth. I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven." Other scholars and teachers believe that his was scene of Jesus standing to welcome his first martyr. Whichever position we may take, there is no doubt that this scene is one of assurance and comfort which is what I truly believe Stephen is experiencing.
- What is the ultimate objective for us who are followers of Jesus Christ? Bible tells us it is for us to be like Jesus, yet I sincerely believe many of us truly do not find that pursuit to be a possibility. However, in Stephen, who was the first person to die for his faith, we are clearly able to see Christlikeness in his compassion and courage, demonstrating the possibilities that we too can change. **READ (PPT 4)** As the dying Jesus had committed His spirit to God the Father, Stephen does the same to Jesus. Stephen is openly proclaiming Jesus as the judge and the savior in the process. **READ (PPT 5)** Also like Jesus, he asked forgiveness for his killers as Lord Jesus had done.
- Stephen did not die because he had no choice. All he needed to do was to deny Jesus, not preach the message about the resurrected Jesus, then there wouldn't have been any reason for such death. He persisted in sharing the goodnews of Jesus' resurrection, and accepted his work of martyrdom through being stoned to death, because he realized the preciousness of his work. Stephen's only concern was seeing the kingdom of heaven and sharing the gospel of resurrected Jesus to the people until the very end. If God has decided that he would be stoned for the sake of the gospel, he accepted that that would be best. Why? Because his eyes were opened to see the reality of God's kingdom, and he knew suffering for Jesus was a privilege, a reason for joy and thanksgiving. Authentic followers of Jesus will bear such fruit through the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

- **What is death to a believer?** Paul tells us that when Christians die, they “fall asleep.” The body sleeps but the spirit instantly goes to be with the Lord in heaven. When Jesus returns, He will bring with Him the spirits of those who have died, their bodies will be raised and glorified, and body and the spirit will be united in glory to be “forever with the Lord.”
- On the other hand, if people haven’t accepted Jesus as their Lord, then they don’t know the kingdom of God and it cannot be their life’s priority. They will try their best to live a happy life, to live a good and prosperous life, to live a meaningful life, but when all is said and done, they would have lived a wasted life. Why? Because they are only focused on, or able to see the reality of the world, they don’t know the existence of God’s kingdom. When they would stand before the judgment seat of God, they will suffer eternity without God.
- But what about those of us who has accepted Jesus into our lives but refused to live our lives for the kingdom? I will address this question little later.
- Let us to turn to the question about why God allowed Stephen to be martyred. Why did God let Stephen be martyred? God demonstrated in the story that he can open heaven and He empowered Stephen to see Jesus. With that kind of power, God can stop people from throwing the stone, He can certainly prevent Stephen from being killed. Why did God show heaven to Stephen, why did God allow Stephen to see Jesus, all the while letting him being stoned to death? It is difficult to understand isn’t it? It is very difficult to understand all the suffering people go through. I believe even in our predominantly Christian world, it is generally true that all believers go through some kind of sufferings. **(PPT 6)** God who is all powerful and all knowing. He can do all things and He truly loves us. Then why does God allow these sufferings to occur?
- There is a reason. When God’s original people ate from the forbidden tree and sin entered our world, sin and Satan began to rule over people. We were sold to sin and lived as slaves to sin. In that world, in order for God’s kingdom to come, there must be a process of suffering. Satan holds us captive. Because of our sin, he rules over us as king, in order for God’s kingdom to come in that circumstance, Satan will try to harass God’s intent and oppose God’s work. He will persecute those who trusts God. Of course, these things should happen. This is why Jesus must have died on the cross so that the door of salvation may be open to the whole world. Only through passing the cross there was a glory of resurrection. This is the reason why God’s kingdom cannot be established in our world without suffering.
- We must truly know this fact. In order for God’s kingdom to be established in any part of our world, there must be a season of suffering. If this truth is not truly anchored in our faith, then we are always likely to flee from suffering.
- **(PPT 7) Helen Roseveare** (21 September 1925 – 7 December 2016) was an English Christian **missionary**, doctor and author. She worked with Worldwide Evangelization Crusade in the **Congo** from 1953 to 1973, including part of the period of political instability in the early 1960s. She helped to build schools and hospitals during her time in Congo. During the civil war, she was captured by the rebels and spent 6 months in jungle prison. During her time as a prisoner, she witnessed brutal death of her missionary colleagues, and

she herself was subjected to ruthless beatings and repeated rape which lasted 5 months. As a woman, there probably wasn't a more painful and humiliating experience. She began to hold resentment toward God and said, I came all the way here to this foreign land and served you as a missionary. Why would you allow these terrible things to happen to me? It was at this time she heard the voice of God in her heart. Helen, can you be grateful to me? She couldn't understand God asking such question in that circumstance. She is a prisoner inside the jungle jail being raped repeatedly, how can God ask such question? She readily replied, no God I cannot. I came all the way here to do the work that would please you and shared the gospel, but my missionary colleagues are murdered and I am repeatedly being raped. If you are in my situation would you be thankful? That's when God spoke again to Helen. "Then Helen can you be grateful that I trust you even if I don't explain why? She was shocked. Until now, she believed God was the one she ought to trust and thank but she was told that God trusted her. What did that mean? God was telling her that God trusted her to not leave Congo and continue to share the gospel to the people even through her suffering. So even after she was freed and return to her home in England, she would make her way back to serve the people of Congo. The passage that Helen looked to during the unbearable time was **(PPT 8) 2 Corinthians 4:7-10 (Living Bible)**. "But this precious treasure-this light and power that now shine within us- is held in a perishable container, that is, in our weak bodies. Everyone can see that the glorious power within must be from God and is not our own. We are pressed on every side and broken. We are perplexed because we don't know why things happen as they do, but we don't give up and quit. We are hunted down but God never abandons us. We get down, but we get up again and keep going. These bodies of ours are constantly facing death just as Jesus did; so it is clear to all that it is only the living Christ within who keeps us safe." This text explains how the spirit filled first church of Jerusalem was able to endure prolonged suffering, persecution, and martyrdom with faith with a thankful heart. The text tells us no matter what we may go through, we will not be destroyed because we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

- Why is such path of suffering that is supposed to be a blessing so difficult and challenging for us believers? My conclusion is that we do not know Jesus as a person. We only know the bible and the kingdom of God intellectually. When we know Jesus as a person, the kingdom of God ceases to become an intellectual knowledge. Because Jesus is the king of our hearts, we are actually already living in the kingdom of God. As a result, we see suffering differently. Sometimes, we meet someone and discover that they are different from what we heard about that person. Jesus will be the same. We read and heard about Jesus but when we meet him personally, we will discover he is different from what we heard. We can be thankful for the suffering. If God would give us a choice, as long as we are clear about what path is our path to walk with Jesus, or which path Jesus would prefer, we would choose to follow Jesus even if it is the road less travelled. Following God's word may be challenging at first but our hearts will grow in courage and peace. Such heart will provide way for God to do His will, and as time pass we will recognize that we have made a

right decision. We will be commanded by Jesus when we stand before him and he will tell us 'well done my faithful servant.'

- **(PPT 9) God's work cannot be known in each given moments.** The astonishing truth about this story is that although God allowed Stephen to be martyred, He was also preparing a man Saul who was originally introduced to us as the one approving the work of the mob. We discover later on that Stephen's death contributed to Saul's conversion. **READ (PPT 10)** Then Saul would follow the footsteps of Stephen as Paul, and carries out amazing work of evangelistic ministry throughout the known world. In the end, he too would be martyred in Rome by beheading. Stephen's death also occasioned 'a great persecution' which led to the scattering of the disciples to fulfill the great commission 'throughout Judea and Samaria' **(Acts 8:1b)** even to the Gentiles.
- We need to be convinced of only one thing, that whatever God is doing is the best. Whatever God has decided and allowed there is always going to be God's plan. Think about our own experience. How can we comprehend all the God's workings for our lives? We cannot understand everything, and we don't understand. We are confused as to why such difficulties must happen. But we trust that all things will work together for good to those who believe in Jesus. God always has a purpose and a path. In all circumstances we need to ask what does the Lord want and take each steps.
- **IN CONCLUSION (PPT 11)** Our challenges we experience as a result of Corona virus is no doubt painful and we like to see it end as soon as possible. It is unfortunate for those who were infected and lost their lives because of it. The whole world is experiencing hardship including the church. However, God is doing something even through this difficult circumstance and we need to be able to see that.
- There are many of you who are going through very difficult circumstances right now, **look to the Lord**. Some may have challenges making ends meet, some may be mentally or physically exhausted looking after family full time and work, some of us might be living in fear of contracting the virus, and there is no end in sight, we are left to wonder if this is the end. It is times like this we must examine whether we are truly walking with the Lord. Let us be united as people of God being led by the Holy Spirit. Let us continue to place our trust in the Lord who is control. Therefore let us remain grateful that we are in His hands. As Stephen had done, let us open our spiritual eyes to see the reality of loving and caring Lord who looks after us. Right now is the time for us to experience this. Let us spend time in prayer as our needs arise, let us worship God as a family, let us sing praises to Him and listen to His word as it bring us comfort.
- I recently heard the news that government is allowing liquor stores to open earlier and close later because there are so much demand for it. As God gives us strength, let us go forward to share the goodnews of God's kingdom with our family members, our relatives, friends, colleagues, and to our suffering neighbors through whichever means possible. The Lord is leading us right now and we just need to follow him and obey whatever he commands us to do. When our current situation ends, we will be able to come together to

celebrate and confess the reality of **Psalm 23** because we would have gone through the valley of the shadow of death.