

LEAP: How Does God Move Us?

by Pastor Kurt Hoover

Holy Spirit Litany adapted from Psalm 51

Pastor: Create in me a clean heart, O God,

All: and renew a right spirit within me.

Pastor: Cast me not away from your presence,

All: and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

Pastor: Restore to me the joy of your salvation,

All: and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Pastor: We worship You Lord in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen

Acts 5:29-42 ²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” ³³ When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. ³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵ Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. ³⁷ After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸ **Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail.** ³⁹ **But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.**” ⁴⁰ His speech persuaded them. 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.⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴² 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.

Acts 11:19-21 ¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Acts 12:1-4 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

On of the most compelling aspects of the early church was not only it's thriving and popularity. There was something different about these people. They lived for others and not themselves...

What was also compelling was not just the way people were attracted to the movement, but what happened when the church was persecuted. Why would a popular disciple, pastor, public figure ... die for a lie. If this movement had been of human origin, then the disciples would not have persisted unto

death, but as it was, they were obedient to a higher power ... even unto death.

James and Matthew were called by the seashore from the Zebdee family business to be fishers of men. Matthew (tradition tells us) was killed during a worship service by the King of Ethiopia, far from Jerusalem. Matthew's death is not recorded in Acts, but that of his brother is. The background of James death recorded in Acts 12 was recorded in Foxe's book of Martyrs.

James was the first apostle to suffer death after the martyrdom of Stephen. Although Herod was the authority that took his head, James's fate started when an individual brought charges against him before the tribunal. When the case was over and James had been condemned to death, the man who had instigated the trial was deeply moved by the behavior and continence of the apostle. James was so filled with the Spirit of God that on the way to the place of execution the one who had initiated the charges against him made a confession of faith in Christ. When he asked James to forgive him, the apostle said, "Peace be to thee, brother." James then kissed him and both men were beheaded for their faith in 36 A.D. A Spirit-filled life may lead to physical death.

Source: Foxe's Book of Martyrs (1563)

Despite the redemption and confusion of this trial the death of one of the 12 disciples was applauded by the Sanhedrin and other powerful people in Jerusalem. At this point the base of support for the early church had been dispersed, scattered into

other towns and synagogues throughout Judea, Samaria, Antioch.

Because it wasn't safe in Jerusalem, the people Baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit and who called on the name of Jesus... they took that message and that movement throughout the known world. This was a good thing for the church. This scattering was a good thing for those who were far off and longed to be connected to God.

However, in Jerusalem ... emboldened by James death ... Herod arrested the leader of the original 12 disciples – Peter. This time the rulers were wise enough to save Peter's trial until after the high holy festivals.

Things were not looking good for the early church. There was controversy in the church. Peter had communed with and Baptized the Roman Centurion Cornelius and his family. And to top it all off there was the turn coat, Paul who had stirred up the city and was secreted away before he could be killed.

We are skipping over some interesting stories which we will come back to later. However, the main point is this. The church was persecuted, scattered.

When have you been persecuted, abandoned, struck down ... scattered? And could it be that those times in your life were by design. God intended to draw you closer to himself and make you of use to others through a time of interrupted plans and crushed dreams. When all is going well, could it be, that God would not only allow ... but actually be the one pulling the rug out from underneath your feet? But, in hindsight you may be able to see how it is that God used those moments to make himself known. To you and others.

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.
(Acts 8:4)

This was a good thing... this scattering – because it was from God. And yet it seldom feels that way at the time. The word scattered is used 4 times in Acts and is also used throughout the Bible. The prophet Zechariah records this word from God in chapter 13.

*7 "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd,
against the man who stands next to me,"
declares the Lord of hosts.
"Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered;
I will turn my hand against the little ones.
8 In the whole land, declares the Lord,
two thirds shall be cut off and perish,
and one third shall be left alive.
9 And I will put this third into the fire,
and refine them as one refines silver,
and test them as gold is tested.
They will call upon my name,
and I will answer them.
I will say, 'They are my people';
and they will say, 'The Lord is my God.'"*

Could it be that God purposely scatters his people, tests them, refines them? Scattered used 4 times in Acts... here in verse 11, twice in last weeks reading from chapter 8, and then a very poignant promise given, not from the disciples mouths but,

from one of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee named Gamaliel in Acts chapter 5 before the persecution of the early church took hold.

...Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸ Therefore, in the present case [the 2nd formal trial of Peter and his church] I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God. (Acts 5:37-39)

Gamaliel says this in response to Peter and the other apostles who replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!

This Pharisee was not playing politics; he was not trying to spin the narrative so that the Sanhedrin would come out on top. He was genuinely concerned that the leaders of Jerusalem would not set themselves up against God’s plan. Ironically it was the persecution that would follow and the death of Stephen and James that spread this Holy Spirit movement through out the known world.

When have you been persecuted, abandoned, struck down ... scattered?

God has a lot of tools in his toolbox. God is God. He can intervene in our lives in many and various ways. And He does. He is the author of creation and still is. The bleakness of a freezing winter and the power of the mighty storms speak plainly of our dependence on God. The mystery of human

motivation and what compels us to act is also intricately and forever, in every moment ... in God's hands. Not one sparrow falls from the sky without God knowing... and much more precious are you to Him then a bird.

God can trip you up and make you stand all in the same breath. But for all the tools God is using and does use in your life, there is one that stands above them all. And that is the power of faith. Faith is the tool which God uses to move your thoughts and actions in life.

However that Faith is a gift. It is not your faith or ability to believe in Him. It is His tool, in His hand. Because there are storms and we are scattered God will not use a tool in your life that is dependent on you. Faith is not a tool he has handed to us expecting us to use it wisely, Faith is a product of His presence and his Word.

God gives you something to believe in and then creates in you that belief. Be it the terror of the storms of life or the simple, often repeated message and promise of His Mercy.

God gives you something to believe in and He gives you the words of eternal life. How does he do this? In his Word. In the beginning was the Word, it was with God and that Word was and still is God.

The same words, the same name that connected the people of the early church to God's Spirit is the same word that moves and shapes our lives. You, the church, are God's promise to a lost and distracted world. The work of the church is not of human origin it is of God.

God is here now and he says to you:

**[You] are my people';
and [we] say, 'The Lord is my God.'"**



The Martyrdom of Saint James
Ca. 1640. Oil on canvas.
Zurbarán, Francisco de
Fuente de Cantos, Badajoz (Spain), 1598 - Madrid (Spain), 1664