

International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

Main Idea: When persecution hit the church in Acts 8:1-8, two things happened. There were two God-produced results. It’s vital that we see them. They’ll help us pray for our persecuted family members. They’ll also prepare us for persecution we may experience.

- I. God used adversity to close one door (1-3).
  - A. The church lost a great preacher (1a).
  - B. The church seemed to lose ground (1b-3).
    1. Many Christians were forced to leave Jerusalem.
    2. Some Christians were put in prison.
- II. God used adversity to open another door (4-8).
  - A. The church gained new preachers (4-5).
    1. Ordinary people preached the Word (4).
    2. A new evangelist preached the Word (5).
  - B. The church gained new ground (6-8).
    1. The Samaritans heard about Christ (6).
    2. The Samaritans saw the power of Christ (7).
    3. The Samaritans experienced the joy of Christ (8).

Implications: We can learn some vital lessons about God from this...

1. We learn what God is *like*.
2. We learn how God *works*.
3. We learn what God *wants*.

Today it’s our privilege to join the annual day of prayer for the persecuted church. Our brothers and sisters need our prayers. But let’s be honest. *We* need this time of prayer. It’s a valuable reminder to us that following Christ is costly. Sometimes severely so.

“According to The Pew Research Center, over 75% of the world’s population live in areas with severe religious restrictions. Many of these people are Christians. Also, according to the United States Department of State, Christians in more than 60 countries face persecution from their governments or surrounding neighbors simply because of their belief in the person of Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

How shall we view persecution? To answer that, I want us to consider persecution from the perspective of God’s Word. There are many examples of persecution in the Bible, but we’re going to consider the one in Acts 8.

When persecution hit the first century church in Acts 8:1-8, two things happened. I’m not talking about the persecution itself. I’m talking about what God did as the result of the persecution. Two results.

It’s vital that we see these results. They’ll help us pray for our persecuted family members. They’ll also prepare us for persecution we may experience, as well as for other forms of suffering we certainly will encounter.

Through persecution God *closed doors* and *opened doors*. He’s doing the same thing today all over the world. Through persecution He is closing doors and opening doors.

Let’s see Him in action in Acts 8:1-8. The persecution we’re considering took place around 35 A.D. Just five years prior, Jesus the Christ had died, risen from the dead, and returned to heaven.

When you read the first seven chapters of Acts, you notice that these five years have been quite eventful for the First Church. Just before Jesus left His followers He gave them a promise and a charge (1:8): “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit

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\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For an earlier development of this passage, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/persecution/about-persecution>

comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

*You will be My witnesses.* And they were.

The first Christians filled Jerusalem with the good news of Jesus Christ. And the church exploded with growth. From 120 disciples in Acts 1, the Christian community mushroomed to over 3,000 in Acts 2, passed the 5,000 mark in Acts 4, and then they stopped counting—the number was so high.

Up to this point, the door for ministry in Jerusalem had been wide open. Granted, there'd been opposition, but the church members kept preaching and the church kept growing.

Then came Acts 8. Persecution hit. The results? Let's look at the first.

### I. God used adversity to close one door (1-3).

It was a sad day for the church in Jerusalem, sad because of a couple of losses that Luke mentions in the text.

**A. The church lost a great preacher (1a).** “And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.”

*His* death, of course, refers to Stephen. We first meet Stephen back in Acts 6 where he's described as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit (6:5).” He was also a bold preacher, one who knew the Scriptures well—so well that he befuddled the critics of Christianity in debate.

The church needs more men like Stephen, wouldn't you agree? But for reasons that didn't make sense on the day it happened, God took Stephen home to heaven in his prime, allowing the Jewish Sanhedrin to execute him.

In contrast, back in Acts 5, God intervened for Peter, John, and the apostles, by sending an angel to release them from prison (5:19). But for Stephen there was no angelic deliverance.

Stephen became the church's first martyr. It was a tough day. When the church lost Stephen, it lost a great preacher.

But that's not all. Secondly...

**B. The church seemed to lose ground (1b-3).** Luke explains, “On that day.” Don't miss those words. The turn of events started on *that* day, on the day Stephen died.

“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup> Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”

Prior to this day, it had been “full steam ahead” for the Jerusalem church. For five years they'd watched the Holy Spirit open new ground for the church. But now the engine seemed to sputter, and they began to lose ground.

Or so it seemed.

From the naked eye, two things happened on the infamous day Stephen was stoned.

*1. Many Christians were forced to leave Jerusalem.* Luke says “all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” The persecution was severe. It must have been for Jewish Christians to relocate in Samaria (for reasons we're explore in a moment).

It was a mass exodus out of Jerusalem. Reminds me of the accounts of believers fleeing Iraq. Christians fleeing for their lives, leaving behind their homes, their businesses, even their church.

It's doubtful that the word “all” in verse 1 means that every single Christian (except for the apostles) left Jerusalem. It's clear from Acts 9:26, 11:2, and other references that

the Jerusalem church continued to exist. Perhaps they all left, and some came back. What's clear is that the persecution broke up the church.

Acts 11:19-21 offers an interesting footnote on what happened: "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 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. <sup>21</sup> The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."

That reference seems to indicate that the Hellenist Christians were hit hardest by the persecution in Acts 8—that is, Jewish Christians from Greek rather than Hebrew backgrounds. Remember, Stephen was a Grecian Jew, and it would make sense that Saul would have targeted other Grecian, Jewish Christians as well.

And so the Christians fled. But the apostles stayed.

I came across a story about a young sailor. He was learning to steer a sailing-ship when a gale blew up. The older man who was teaching him gave him but one piece of advice. "Keep her facing it," he said. "Always keep her facing it."<sup>3</sup>

When the winds howled, that's exactly what the apostles did. They kept facing it. Something else happened on that day. Not only did many Christians leave, but...

2. *Some Christians were put in prison.* The prime instigator in this assault against the church was Saul of Tarsus. Authorized by the authority of the Jewish Sanhedrin, Saul began to hunt down the followers of Christ.

Luke says that Saul "began to destroy" the church, as the NIV renders the phrase. The KJV says he "made havoc" of the church. The Greek term denotes brutal cruelty. It means "to destroy," "to ruin," or "to damage." In extra-biblical sources, the word was used to depict the act of destroying a city, or in another place, mangling by a wild beast.

That's what Saul did. In Gestapo-like-fashion, he conducted house searches to locate Christians, and then hauled them away to prison. Merciless warfare. Filled with zeal, Saul began to tear the church apart limb by limb, a crime that would later trouble his soul to the grave.

You ask, "Where was the Lord in all of this? Didn't He know what was happening to His Church?" Indeed, He knew. In fact, He predicted this very scenario the night before His crucifixion.

In John 16:2-4, Jesus said: "They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. <sup>3</sup> They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. <sup>4</sup> I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. I did not tell you this at first because I was with you."

No, Saul didn't catch the Lord off guard. To the contrary, the Lord was in total control of this situation, and used it for good, as we'll see.

When the emperor Valens threatened Eusebuis with confiscation of all his goods, torture, banishment, and even death, the courageous Christian replied, "He needs not fear confiscation, who has nothing to lose; nor banishment, to whom heaven is his country; nor torments, when his body can be destroyed at one blow; nor death, which is the only way to set him at liberty from sin and sorrow."<sup>4</sup>

What's staggering to me is the difference between the Saul we see in Acts 8, and the Saul that appears in the rest of Acts and the New Testament. The Saul of Acts 8 tried to destroy the church with a passion. The Saul of Acts 9 and following devoted his energies to build the church. In Acts 8 he did everything he could to prevent people from

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *Acts*, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Source Unknown.

becoming Christians. After Acts 9 he did everything he could to persuade people to become Christians. The contrast, humanly speaking, is inexplicable.

There's only one way to explain the transformation. *Grace*.

Paul himself later gave this testimony in 1 Timothy 1:12-14, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.<sup>13</sup> Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.<sup>14</sup> The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

O the power of the grace of God! Dear friend, the grace of God can transform the vilest sinner. His grace reaches to the deepest depths, plucks the guilty from the mire of sin and despair, and elevates the person to a heavenly position in Christ.

Marvelous are the ways of the God of grace.

Sometimes God closes doors, like He did in Acts 8. And when He does, it may not make sense to us, but we have a choice to make. How are we going to respond? Notice what the persecuted Christians did in verse 4, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."

That's amazing. They could have whined, retreated, or second-guessed God. But they didn't. They did what the Lord told us to do back in Acts 1:8. They *preached*. And in so doing they discovered that God was orchestrating a second event that day. First, God closed a door. Secondly...

## II. God used adversity to open another door (4-8).

Yes, it was a terrible day. People mourned that day, as verse 2 indicates. And yet, from the perspective of hindsight, it was a strategic day. It was a day of *opposition*, for sure, but it also turned out to be a day of great *opportunity*. For on this day not only did God close a door, but He also opened one. And the scattered Christians walked right through it!

Warren Wiersbe said, "Persecution does to the church what wind does to seed: it scatters it and only produces a greater harvest."<sup>5</sup>

Earlier we observed that on this day the church lost a great preacher, and seemed to be losing ground. But as it is so often with us, they *lost* in order to *gain*.

What did they gain? In verses 4-8 we see two things.

**A. The church gained new preachers (4-5).** In fact, though they lost one preacher—Stephen—on the same day the church gained a whole army of preachers! Guess who these new preachers were?

*1. Ordinary people preached the Word (4).* "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." Did you catch that? Who preached? Those "scattered" did.

James Boice comments that there are different words for "scattered" in the Greek. "One means dispersed so that the item is gone from that point on, like scattering a person's ashes on the ocean's waves. That is not the word used here in verses 1 and 4. The word used here means scattered in order to be planted."<sup>6</sup>

Again, I'm impressed at how these persecuted Christians handled the situation. They might have responded, "Whew! That was a close call. We barely got out of town alive. We'd better do the sensible thing and lie low for awhile. This is no time to let people know you're a Christian."

Wrong. It's the perfect time.

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<sup>5</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Vol. 1*, p. 434.

<sup>6</sup> James Boice, *Acts*, p. 133.

Talk about a natural open door for conversation about the gospel. Just imagine the scenario. You were forced to leave town overnight, and traveled north to Samaria. The next day you find a place to live, and your new neighbor comes to see you.

“Welcome! Where are you from?” he says.

“From Jerusalem,” you reply.

“Jerusalem?” he responds. “Why did you leave Jerusalem to move here?”

“Well,” you return, “it was either move or go to prison. Now, don’t call the police. My wife and I aren’t criminals, nor are our children. Our ‘crime,’ if you want to call it that, is that we believe the Messiah has come, and He offers eternal life to all who will receive Him. His name is Jesus, and He died on a cross for our sins, then conquered the grave, returned to heaven, and is coming again.”

“Really? The Messiah has come? I’d like to hear more.”

And that conversation—or one like it—was repeated over and over again. The text says that God used the persecution to mobilize the entire church to do evangelism. Those scattered preached the Word wherever they went. It wasn’t just the clergy. They all preached. Ordinary people preached the Word. Furthermore...

2. *A new evangelist preached the Word (5)*. “Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there.”

This isn’t Philip the apostle (Matt 10:3; Acts 1:13). This is Philip the deacon. He’s one of the seven men the church selected in Acts 6 to head up its benevolent ministries. He also, like Stephen, was a Hellenist Jew rather than a Hebraic Jew. And like Stephen, he had a passion to make known the good news about Jesus.

In fact, Philip is the first person in the Bible called an “evangelist” (in Acts 21:8). He’s also the only person. Ironically, he was what we call today a “layman.” He wasn’t an apostle. He was a servant. And with Stephen gone, it’s as if Philip said, “I’ll take his place.”

On Sunday, January 8, 1956, on the river banks of the Amazon River in Ecuador, five missionaries were murdered by Auca Indians. News of the savage killing rocked the world. Some said it was a needless waste of life.

Nate Saint, one of the martyrs, had written these words about his motivation for becoming a missionary, “As we weigh the future and seek the will of God, does it seem right that we should hazard our lives for just a few savages? As we ask ourselves this question, we realize that it is not the call of the needy thousands, rather it is the simple intimation of the prophetic Word that there shall be some from every tribe in His presence in the last day and in our hearts we feel that it is pleasing to Him that we should interest ourselves in making an opening into the Auca prison for Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

Elisabeth Elliot, the widow of another of the martyrs, Jim Elliot, shares her perspective: “To the world at large this was a sad waste of five young lives. But God has His plan and purpose in all things. There were those whose lives were changed by what happened on Palm Beach. In Brazil, a group of Indians at a mission station deep in the Mato Grosso, upon hearing the news, dropped to their knees and cried out to God for forgiveness for their own lack of concern for fellow Indians who did not know of Jesus Christ. From Rome, an American official wrote to one of the widows, ‘I knew your husband. He was to me the ideal of what a Christian should be.’ An Air Force Major stationed in England, with many hours of jet flying, immediately began making plans to join the Missionary Aviation Fellowship. A missionary in Africa wrote: ‘Our work will never be the same. We knew two of the men. Their lives have left their mark on ours.’

“Off the coast of Italy, an American naval officer was involved in an accident at sea. As he floated alone of a raft, he recalled Jim Elliot’s words (which he had heard in a

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<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor*, p. 176.

news report): ‘When it comes time to die, make sure that all you have to do is die.’ He prayed that he might be saved, knowing that he had more to do than die. He was not ready. God answered his prayer, and he was rescued. In Des Moines, Iowa, an eighteen-year-old boy prayed for a week in his room, then announced to his parents: ‘I’m turning my life over completely to the Lord. I want to take the place of one of those five.’<sup>8</sup>

So, too, when Stephen died, Philip—and a whole host of ordinary people like him—said, ‘I’ll take his place. Here I am, Lord. Would You use me, please?’ And so, what seemed like a loss turned out to be a gain. The church lost one preacher, but gained a host of others.

When a soldier goes down the replacements step forward. A few years ago ABWE missionary Roni Bowers was shot down over the Amazon River. She died, but God used that to raise up others who said, ‘We’ll take her place.’

So the church gained new preachers in Acts 8. But that’s not all.

**B. The church gained new ground (6-8).** “When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. <sup>7</sup> With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. <sup>8</sup> So there was great joy in that city.”

Answer this. Where did Philip preach? Luke says he went to a city in *Samaria* (5). And where did scattered Christians preach? Verse 4 says they preached wherever they went. And verse 1 indicates that the “wherever” included Samaria. Yes, *Samaria*.

May I remind you again of the Commander-in-Chief’s final marching orders? *You will be My witnesses*, He said. Where? Only in Jerusalem? No. He said to start in Jerusalem, and then to go to *Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth*.

In Acts 8 the Sovereign Lord said, “It’s time to go to Samaria.”

Don’t miss the significance. Until now, the church had been reaching people *like themselves*. But in Acts 8 God said, “The time has come to start reaching people *not like you*.” And so the church crossed the tracks. It was a whole new ball game. And apparently it took something as drastic as persecution to get the church into the game.

It was only forty miles from Jerusalem to Samaria, but the social gap was as wide as the sea. There was deep-seated prejudice, to the point of outright hatred, between the Jews and the Samaritans. Remember what the woman at the well said to Jesus in John 4:9, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” And the next records, “For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.”

The animosity went back centuries. In the eighth century B.C., the northern tribes of Israel were taken from their land. For instance, the Assyrian king Sargon II claims to have deported 27,290 people from the city of Samaria itself. After the Assyrians removed the Jews from the land, they repopulated the area with non-Jews from other countries they’d conquered. These “Gentiles” settled down in Israel, and eventually inter-married with the Jews that didn’t go into captivity. The offspring of these marriages were the *Samaritans*.

To the Jews the Samaritans were considered “half-breeds.” The Jewish rabbis said, “Let no man eat the bread of the Cuthites (the Samaritans) for he who eats their bread is as he who eats swine’s flesh.” There was a popular Jewish prayer in those days that said, “And, Lord, do not remember the Samaritans in the resurrection.”<sup>9</sup>

It’s one thing to tell your neighbor about Christ—and that’s good. It’s another thing to leave your comfort zone and reach out to people who are *different* from you—and that’s Christianity. On this particular day in Acts 8, the church may have lost some

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>9</sup> Taken from Kent Hughes, p. 111.

ground in Jerusalem, but it gained brand new ground for Christ in Samaria. As a result of the closed door, and the new open door, three things happened to the Samaritans.

1. *The Samaritans heard about Christ (6)*. Luke says the crowds “heard” Philip and “paid attention” to what he said. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. Philip no doubt told them the bad news and the good news. The bad news—they were sinners facing the wrath of God. The good news—Jesus the Messiah came to save sinners from God’s wrath, and He did so by dying as a substitute on the Cross and then rising from the dead. There is no greater news to tell. Whoever will call upon the Lord will be saved.

2. *The Samaritans saw the power of Christ (7)*. “With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed.” The signs Philip performed authenticated him as a true messenger of God (Acts 2:43).

3. *The Samaritans experienced the joy of Christ (8)*. Luke reports that there was “great joy” in the city.

Let this sink in, brothers and sisters. Christ came for the world. He came to save people like us. But He also came to save people *unlike* us. And He intends to use us to reach them.

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India.

So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu." That usher's prejudice not only betrayed Jesus but also turned a person away from trusting Him as Savior.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, look at Philip. God used Philip to build a bridge into an unreached and despised people group. In fact, He used the message Philip preached to reconcile people groups who for centuries couldn’t stand each other, and made them brothers. Such is the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today we need more people like Philip. We need “bridge builders,” people “who will carry the Gospel into pioneer territory and dare to challenge ancient prejudices,” as Warren Wiersbe put it.

The Sovereign Lord will reach His people. He died for them, people from every nation, language, and tribe. And He has commanded us to go reach them with the gospel. Start in Jerusalem, He said. And He opened doors, so that happened. Then He closed doors, because He didn’t want them staying in Jerusalem. He used persecution to take them to Judea and Samaria and eventually to the rest of the world with the saving message of His Son.

What doors are in your life, my friend? In Acts 8, God closed a door. He also opened another. He’s doing the same thing today in our lives.

So let’s think about some implications.

Implications: We can learn some vital lessons about God from this...I’ll mention three.

1. *We learn what God is like*. In Acts 8 God puts three of His attributes on display for us. He want us to know there are three things true of Him.

•He is sovereign. Nothing ever takes Him by surprise. Not ISIS. Not Al-Qaeda. Not a North Korean dictator. Not Ebola. Not cancer. Not an economic downturn. Not

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<sup>10</sup> *Our Daily Bread*, March 6, 1994.

one thing. The Lord who gave us the great commission is in absolute control. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matt 28:18).”

- He is wise. He never “wings” it. He’s never unsure of what to do. He’s never caught off guard. He never resorts to Plan B. He always operates by a plan which He designed and determined to accomplish in eternity past.

- He is good. He always has His children’s best interest in mind. Always. Whether we feel like it or not. Whether we understand what He’s up to or not. Whether governments are hostile or not. God is always sovereign, wise, and good.

2. *We learn how God works.* This is so important to see. Our God uses trials to help His children grow up. And one of the trials He uses is *unintended transitions*.

Unintended on our part, that is. We don’t like changes. We like the comfortable, the familiar, the safe, the secure.

But God is taking us somewhere, individually and as a church. On a mission. Which necessitates transitions at times.

That’s what we see happening to the church in Acts 8. God is taking the church through a transition. If Acts 1-7 presents the First Church in its infancy, and if Acts 13-28 presents the Church as a mature, functioning adult reaching the world for Christ, then Acts 8-12 presents the Church in its adolescence. It’s a phase of *transition*.

William LaSor explains, “Transition is a necessary part of growth or development... An individual Christian usually begins with a faith that is pretty much turned inward. He thinks of his own ‘salvation.’ Then he comes to think of those who are close to him. Usually it takes an educational process, through speakers, Bible study, reading, and other experiences, to give him a ‘world-view’ of the gospel. Many Christians never come fully to this stage. What is true of individuals is also true of churches.”<sup>11</sup>

Fellow Christian, this is how God works. His intent is to reach the lost and then “grow them up” into Christlikeness. And He knows how to do it, and what it takes to do it, including at times suffering, and specifically persecution.

3. *We learn what God wants.* Simply put...

- He takes His mission seriously. And...

- He wants us to do the same. If we do, we’ll never look at a closed door, nor an open door, the same way again.

So how should we respond when suffering strikes? How should we pray for our brothers and sisters around the world, and even for ourselves as we face God-ordained hardship, whatever form it takes?

By praying this question. *Sovereign Lord, how do you want to use this (whatever this is) to accomplish Your sovereign, wise, and good plan? How do you want to use this to bring the message of Christ to lost people, and to help Your people grow into Your Son’s likeness, all to Your glory? We want what You want. Please give us the strength we need to endure as You accomplish Your good plan.*

The Scriptures have so much to say about endurance...

*1 Corinthians 4:12-13* “When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we **endure** it; <sup>13</sup> when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.”

*2 Timothy 2:3* “**Endure** hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”

*2 Timothy 2:10* “Therefore I **endure** everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.”

*1 Peter 2:20-21* “But if you suffer for doing good and you **endure** it, this is commendable before God. <sup>21</sup> To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”

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<sup>11</sup> William LaSor, *Church Alive*, pp. 111-112.