

**Returning to Joy During and After Tribulation by Way of Faith
based on Acts 7: 54-8: 8, David Jahnke, 10/29/17**

So as we have moved through the book of Acts, a clear pattern has emerged. Time and again, followers of Jesus go back to where Jesus got into trouble and keep preaching, teaching and healing hurting people. These poor and regular people stood up to the authorities on behalf of other poor and regular people. They worshiped together with their Jewish brothers and sisters and invited them back to their homes to break bread and learn more about this man Jesus.

And all of this brought two things to Jerusalem: 1. tremendous joy to everyone who witnessed it and 2. second, faith in God and Jesus. People really had a sense that God was at work and they wanted to be a part of it. But then something else unexpected happened. And this time it was not something good, at least not at first.

After thousands of people joined the church in its early years, there came a point where the authorities in Jerusalem decided not to accept this sect any longer. And serious persecutions began. The deacon Stephen was killed. And a man named Saul started rounding up followers of Jesus and putting them in prison. When this happened, thousands of believers took flight. All of this must have really thrown them for a loop. Because all of the joy and goodness led to a fervent expectation that the Kingdom of God would be consummated soon. And then all of this starts happening.

So I got to thinking about how good my life is. And because of this and because of my faith in God and my religious experience, I tend to look for (and therefore generally see) the best in others and the best in life. So I was really thrown for a loop after experiencing ugly injustice in the form of deceit and attempts at exploitation earlier this week.

It all started with a car accident about 10 days ago. It was bad enough and our van old enough that we figured it was totalled and we started looking online for good deals on a new vehicle. There were very good prices at a dealership in Queens so Hailey and I decided to take a train and subway ride up there. We were met by a nice salesman with whom we enjoyed good conversation over the course of three test drives. We settled on an SUV and when we sat down to start negotiating, we had the internet price from which we figured we would work our way down somewhat. As soon as we mentioned the internet price, they said that the ad also included information about a \$2500 down payment in addition to the

sale price. I was like, “Where?” and they said it was in the fine print on their computer. When we checked our own computer later on, the fine print, in fact, said that the sales price included everything except title, taxes and registration. So this was lie #1.

As we got up to leave, we thanked Duane for a pleasant afternoon. He really was a nice guy trying to make his way in the world. And the immoral business practice was all from the top. We had multiple lower level salesmen help and even provide warnings with his body language. I feel terrible that they cannot find jobs at businesses they can feel good about. And part of our being there according to God’s providence which I firmly believe because by the end of the day everyone knew that I was a pastor; one reason we were there was to implicitly encourage these salesmen to look elsewhere for work and to otherwise bring God’s judgment upon the higher up people.

So we were saying good-bye to Duane when a salesman one level up told us they wanted to earn our business. I said the only way that would happen was if we started negotiating at the actual advertised sale price. He said that they could give us that price. I said we were expecting lower and after a few minutes, the big boss man came over and we agreed to terms orally. Two and a half hours later and after a few polite complaints, I told Duane that we had to go in 15 minutes. That got them moving...

When we got in the back room, they had slipped a \$3000 extended warranty into the final papers and there was a sudden uncertainty about the price. All of this was the beginning of the end. I was not afraid to express the injustice of all the lost time, deceit and confusion to the big boss man and in the presence of other customers as well, which probably was another reason we were meant to be there that day.

I got to thinking about all of the people who got ripped off at this place. It was in a poor part of the city so a lot of their customers are under-educated and under-privileged. And they are getting manipulated and deceived day after day. So I wrote emails to both the Better Business Bureau and Consumer Affairs. My online reviews will continue in the days ahead.

This spread of the truth was another important outcome of our long ordeal (which was really not that bad, especially compared to what so many out there and perhaps some of you are going through. The added stress of this week got me thinking about how hard it must be for poor people who have the constant stressors of poverty, crime and other injustices around them.)

But for me, the Word of God spread through this experience; and it can spread through every trial, big and small. That is what happened when the early church was scattered through persecutions. People kept preaching and teaching the truth about Jesus, despite being mistreated for it. And while we tend to complain about how much time people spend online, the free spread of information-- my writing the truth about my experience on review boards and many others doing the same-- this is all a part of God's wonderful plan for the world.

I was reminded of something Dr. King once said, quoting 19th century preaching named Theodore Parker: "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." The free and vast spread of information via the internet means knowledge and truth abound in our age and that means more and more justice is coming to the earth. I think I mentioned that when I was in Nicaragua, lots of very poor people somehow had phones with the internet. Wonderful big things are happening as knowledge which has always been so costly, now you do not have to pay much for a lot of it and this empowers the poor and the oppressed.

So since God's Word spreads through persecution, we should look for how that might happen when we are feeling mistreated. Ask yourself, "How is God at work? What important truths does God want me to spread? Am I to surprise someone with mercy and love?" These were the things that came to me as I looked back at my experience. And that is how I returned to joy.

We also need to re-gather with the people of God in order to hear God's Word and discern the Spirit. That was what happened as the people were forced out of Judea. They listened to Philip preach God's Word and with him, they persisted in acts of healing. The Samaritans saw and heard wonderful news and great joy filled the land.

So after Monday's debacle, I was not in the mood for much of anything extra. But I could just could not escape the Union County Inter-Faith prayer service at St. Helen's. And thank God for that. The gospel of God's grace and love were preached through a catholic priest to the inter-faith crowd. And the gospel of God's peace and mercy were preached and prayed for by all of the clergy who spoke-- Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist as well as various Christian traditions. Just as Philip preached to the quote-unquote heretics in Samaria and lives were changed and transformed, that was my feeling about that Tuesday night. My faith and joy returned.

So remember that God is at work in and through your hard days. It feels terrible as it is happening but look for moments of grace. They may come to you; and they certainly can come through you. And when it is all over, do not let your weariness keep you from seeking the people of God, the Word of God, and prayer and theological reflection. All of those things will help you see, hear and feel the Spirit and return to joy.