

First Century Graffiti

Acts 8:1-8

Introduction

Recent news reports carried the story of a brand new school in the area being struck by graffiti vandals. Messages, symbols, and slurs that were painted on the new brick and glass will require money and time to remove.

I have read that graffiti has been with human beings about as long as human beings have been in existence. In fact, the word “graffito” means “to scribble or scratch a message”. It was coined by archaeologists to describe the writings and drawings they were able to uncover from buildings in ancient Rome. It seems that graffiti was a way of expression long before it was used on a new school building.

Howard Hendricks, told my seminary class one day, about seeing a very interesting piece of graffiti written on a brick wall in Philadelphia. Someone had written the words, “Humpty Dumpty was pushed.”

In the ancient Roman world, only the important documents and letters were written on the expensive paper of the day, which was papyrus or leather. The messages of everyday life found their way to the plaster walls of public and private buildings throughout the empire. It was actually an acceptable form of communication.

Gary Stanley writes that the subject matter of ancient graffiti included election notices, advertisements, love notes, grocery lists, lewd lyrics, and even religious slogans. The name of Christ appeared on a wall or two.

In our study in the book of Acts of first century Jerusalem, in the first year or two of the first century church, messages written on the walls and walkways

in and around that bustling city would have made positive statements about Christianity. I can imagine messages reading, “I once was blind, but now, I can see, literally!” or “Christ is the final sacrifice!”

The religious leaders were enraged over the threat that Christianity was to established religion. They had even complained that the apostles had filled Jerusalem with their teaching. One graffiti message that we can imagine would have enraged the religious leaders, had it been splashed on a wall near the temple, would be, “Jesus Christ is alive!”

We know, from the book of Acts, that the church in Jerusalem was looked upon with favor by all the people. Even up to the events of chapter 7, the church of Jesus Christ was respected, revered, and popular with the masses . . . too popular.

Suddenly, however, it was over. A church leader named Stephen, was murdered by a mob. Kindness was replaced with cruelty; favor with the people was exchanged for persecution by the people. As the scene opens in Acts, chapter 8, Christianity is now considered “public enemy #1”.

Introducing Saul the Pharisee – The “Grand Inquisitor”

If you will turn with me to Acts, chapter 8, you will discover the words in the middle of verse 1,

. . . And on that day [the day Stephen was martyred] a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem . . .

The graffiti written on the walls now, would be, “Death to the Jesus Followers”.

It would not be long before Christians would be thrown to the lions in the Roman arena. They would be accused of cannibalism, as a result of their observance of communion being misunderstood. Christians would be the ones accused of bringing floods, hurricanes, and other natural disasters.

It would be Christians who were blamed for the great fire that devastated much of Rome, even though history reveals that it was Nero himself who started the fires in order to tax the people and build new and more ornate buildings. History also tells us that Nero would later, impale Christians on tall poles, cover them with tar, and use them as torches to light his gardens parties at night.

In the beginning days of persecution, however, it was not Nero the Christians feared – it was a leading Pharisee named Saul. Saul was a man who had single-handedly taken on the role of supreme inquisitor and grand executioner.

The very first victim, executed in Saul's presence, was named Stephen.

Verse 2 informs us that,

Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him.

According to "Mishnah," a Hebrew term for Jewish Oral Law, it was against the law to publicly grieve over the death of a condemned criminal. These men were so grieved by Stephen's death, that they inadvertently violated the law by their tears.

What about the apostles? The last part of verse 1 tells us that they remained at their post. There was work to be done in Jerusalem, although they risked their lives in staying. Jerusalem was still a mission field and they evidently decided to use the ministry there as the base of operations, at least for awhile.

Notice verse 3.

But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

The word translated "ravaging" is a Greek word that was commonly used for a wild animal tearing up its victim. With violence, Saul ripped families apart – taking mothers, fathers, single men, teenagers, anyone who loyally named the name of Christ. He determined to rip their lives apart.

Turn to chapter 22 of Acts, where Saul, now referred to as Paul, tells his own testimony as he

stands before the Jewish leaders. Look at verses 4 and 5.

I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.

Skip to verses 19 and 20.

And I said, "Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him."

Turn to chapter 26, verses 10 and 11.

And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme [to deny Christ as Lord]; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

It is not hard to imagine how the church deeply feared this man Saul. The last man on earth you would have ever chosen as most likely to become a Christian would have been Saul. We will discuss that later.

Re-introducing the Church – "Public Enemy #1"

Before we go any further in the text, let us step back for a moment and survey the scene. We will do this like a tape that my children used to listen to, where little children were able to grow very small and visit a beehive because of their leader's magnifying glass. When you study God's Word, imagining the scene and how you would respond can bring a much better understanding of passages like these. Now I am not suggesting New Age imaging and all that "mumbo jumbo" stuff that says by mentally picturing your success, you will soon have it. I do not want to

literally go back to the first century, but I do want for us to think through what it must have been like.

Imagine what it must have been like to be a member of this first church on planet earth. You have experienced all the praise, love, favor, and high esteem that Jerusalem could offer. Every person you talk to speaks highly of Christ; there is a testimony on the lips of thousands of people and they are singing His praises. You are part of the miracle. Christianity is one blessing after another; one answered prayer after another; one miracle following another. Your church is exploding with an average growth of around ten thousand people a year. Can you imagine finding a parking space for your donkey? Life has been a two or three year spiritual high; a mountain top experience; a brand new adventure.

Then, suddenly, you become the object of hatred, derision, and suspicion. You soon lose your job and your home. The event that seemed to start it all was the funeral of a beloved church leader.

Why didn't God stop the killing then? Why doesn't He stop it now?

I have an article on the persecution of Christians by the communists in Vietnam. Let me read it to you.

The Eighth Communist Party Congress met in June and vowed to "restore party authority to every facet of Vietnamese life." In May 1996, police burst into a meeting of fourteen leaders of churches among the tribal minorities of the Central Highlands. After severely beating the treasurer of the group, they seized the records of all fifty-three churches in the district (all of them part of the house church movement; or the unregistered church movement). During a six month period, all the pastors of all the churches were called in and were forced to either recant their faith or face severe beatings.

In a separate incident, Ha Seing, a forty-one year old pastor from the Koho tribe, was beaten unconscious with metal pipes by police, who later became worried when he did not revive and called his family to take him to a hospital. He is now in the Vinh Hoa mental hospital, where doctors confirmed that he has significant brain damage as a result of the beating.

As I stated in our last discussion, the current estimate for believers being martyred for their faith in

this century already exceeds every previous century combined.

Are there answers? Can you explain the death of Stephen? Can you explain how God could allow this to happen to one of His faithful ones? Can you answer these questions?!

No, you cannot, except through the lens of history. Time will give the answer for all the scattered Christians and all the broken homes and all the martyr's final words. In this first century period of church history, the answer is soon coming.

Returning to the Command of Christ

Notice what happened in Acts, chapter 8, verse 4.

Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.

Now the word translated "preaching" is the Greek word "euaggelion" which gives us the transliterated word, "evangelizing". That simply means, these men and women, young and old alike, left Jerusalem and went into every town and village, as if they had been sent on a mission. And, the truth was, they were!!

Turn back to Acts, chapter 1, verse 8.

but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.

That is the mission! It is time to expand.

Jerusalem had grown comfortable. Praise from the people and growth was incredible, so why leave for uncharted territory?!

Take a close look at the biblical target for the gospel in verse 8 – it is as big as the world. And, it began in Jerusalem.

Now God is moving the church into the next phase of His great commission. The church at large remained alive and well, only because they were willing to relocate their message and effort.

They could easily have said, "We don't do Samaritan evangelism! Our home is in the city of Jerusalem! We've got the strategy down pat for reaching the Jerusalem "baby boomers". That's our ministry market."

These believers were willing, like salt, to be shaken out of their comfortable saltshaker. They did

not stop their message because God rocked the boat, they simply relocated it.

Now notice verse 5 of chapter 8.

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.

That happens to be a phenomenal statement! Samaria was the last place on earth you would expect an evangelist to go; especially if you were from Jerusalem.

Samaritans, you may remember, were the mixed-breed. They were descendants of Jews who had intermarried with the Assyrians. The Jews in Jerusalem despised them. In fact, the orthodox man would pray every morning and thank God that he had not been born a Samaritan.

It all started when the Jews decided to rebuild and repair their temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans from nearby Samaria, had volunteered to help. After all, they worshipped the same God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. But because of their mixed blood, they were immediately refused. As a result the Samaritans built their own temple, commissioned their own high priest, and worshipped in their own capital city.

Samaria was a city bound by bitterness. And now, here comes a man from Jerusalem. They think, “What does he have for us?”

Verse 5 says,

. . . [he] began proclaiming Christ to them.

Philip did not proclaim Judaism to the Samaritans – they distrusted that. He did not proclaim religion to them – they had their fill of that. Philip preached Christ – what Christ said, what Christ did, Who Christ was, what Christ demands of us, what Christ offers us. He did not preach, “Listen, let me tell you about the wonderful church in Jerusalem. We need one in Samaria just like it. Now let’s elect some deacons and sign up the widows. And, if you’ll start selling your land and bringing me the money, we’ll take care of the needy.”

No! Philip preached Christ. In any culture, in any language – the message is Christ.

A century ago, Spurgeon preached in London and said, “We have a great need, ah but we have a great Christ.”

Have you come to realize, my friend, that you have an insatiable need? You may try to fill that hunger with things and relationships and career and

stuff, but you will be as Isaiah said, in chapter 57, verse 20, “. . . like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest . . .”. You cannot rest until you find your rest in Christ.

Continue to verses 6 and 7 of Acts, chapter 8.

The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed.

Disease and demons fled before Philip, just as they had fled before the presence of Jesus Christ Himself. In other words, this man of God authenticated that his message was indeed from God, by revealing the power of God.

The authenticating credentials of a man of God were supernatural signs. Eventually, as the New Testament came to completion, the credentials of a true messenger from God were no longer supernatural deeds, but scriptural doctrine.

We will look, in our next discussion in fact, at a false leader who was astonishing the people of Samaria with great power.

Notice verse 12.

But when they believed Philip . . .

(His signs and wonders?? No!),

. . . preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.

Samaria was a city of bitterness, and yet, when the gospel came in, we are told in verse 8,

So there was much rejoicing in that city.

The city of bitterness had become the city of blessing.

Application – Three Lessons From First Century Believers

Let us apply three lessons from these first century believers to our own lives.

Bend whenever God stretches your faith

1. The first lesson is to bend whenever God stretches your faith.

Jews from the Jerusalem church would have never dreamed of a Samaritan revival, yet the gospel came to Samaria because people were willing to change, flex, adapt, risk. They could have pined away for the good ole' days of Jerusalem, but instead, they were willing to bend. The reason we are still reading about the early Christians in Jerusalem is because they did not close up shop and wave surrender.

At this moment, God may have you at a challenging crossroads. You may be pressed on every side; have unanswered questions; have reverses, changes. Do not ever forget that the God of this biblical history, is the God of your future.

God allowed the lives of the Jerusalem Christians to be torn apart; radically changed; turned upside down – for a purpose we are able to discover only a few verses later. For them, it represented months and years. And there is an incredible expansion of the gospel because they bent in order to conform to His will.

Bloom wherever God plants your feet

2. The second lesson that we can learn from these first century Christians is to bloom wherever God plants your feet.

You may remember the little word “scattered,” that we found in this text a couple of times. It is the same word that James uses in chapter 1, as he is writing to the scattered tribes of Israel. It is a farmer’s term that refers to the way a farmer would stick his hand into his pouch, grab a handful of seed, and fling it out. The wind would then carry that seed wherever it blew. That was one kind of planting. However, the word can also refer to the farmer who, on his knees, takes his spade, turns over the soil, reaches into his sack and pulls out one seed, and then, plants that seed and carefully covers it with the soil.

God is not careless in His placement. God was not careless with you when He relocated you. God is not careless with His children – He carefully plants each seed in the soil. That is the meaning of the word used in this text!

We should say, like Stephen and Philip and thousands of Jewish believers who have left all that they call dear to say to their Savior, “Here am I, Lord, bury me. Choose the field, the soil, the conditions, the surroundings, Lord, I’m Your seed! Here am I, plant

me . . . and may I bring forth spiritual fruit for Your glory.”

Believe wholeheartedly that God guards your future

3. The third lesson is to believe wholeheartedly that God guards your future.

You might say, “I’d love to believe that, but how can it be? You don’t know my circumstances!”

Are your circumstances any worse than these in Acts, chapter 8? They packed whatever they could carry on their backs and hurriedly slipped out into the night toward an entirely unknown future.

God was at work in the lives of His people then and now, whether you can see it or not!

Listen to this account of God’s providence in the life of a Jewish believer who, during World War II, experienced the same kind of agony that the Jews in Jerusalem must have experienced during the reign of Saul. Both accounts were times when families were ripped apart.

Marcel Sternberger was a methodical man of nearly fifty, with bushy white hair, guileless brown eyes, and the bouncing enthusiasm of a dancer from his native Hungary. He always took the 9:09 Long Island Railroad train from his suburban home to Woodside, New York, where he caught a subway into the city.

On the morning of January 10, 1948, Sternberger boarded the 9:09 as usual. En route, he suddenly decided to visit Laszlo Victor, a Hungarian friend who lived in Brooklyn and was ill. Accordingly, at Ozone Park, Sternberger changed to the subway for Brooklyn, went to his friend’s house, and stayed until mid-afternoon. He then boarded a Manhattan-bound subway for his Fifth Avenue office.

Now, Marcel tells his story.

The car was crowded, and there seemed to be no chance of a seat. But just as I entered, a man sitting by the door suddenly jumped up to leave, and I slipped into the empty place. I’ve been living in New York long enough not to start conversations with strangers. But, being a photographer, I have the peculiar habit of analyzing people’s faces, and I was struck by the features of the passenger on my left. He was probably in his late thirties, and when he glanced up, his eyes seemed to have a hurt expression in them. He was reading a Hungarian newspaper, and something

prompted me to say in Hungarian, “I hope you don’t mind if I glance at your paper.”

The man seemed surprised to be addressed in his native language. But he answered politely, “You may.”

During the half hour ride to town, we had quite a conversation. He said his name was Bela Paskin. A law student when World War II started, he had been put into a German labor battalion and sent to the Ukraine. Later he was captured by the Russians and put to work burying the German dead. After the war, he covered hundreds of miles on foot until he reached his home in Debratzin, a large city in eastern Hungary. I myself knew Debratzin quite well, and we talked about it for a while.

Then he told me the rest of his story. When he went to the apartment once occupied by his father, mother, brothers, and sisters, he found strangers living there. Then he went upstairs to the apartment that he and his wife once had. It also was occupied by strangers. None of them had ever heard of his family. As he was leaving, full of sadness, a boy ran after him, calling, “Uncle Paskin, Uncle Paskin.”

The child was the son of some old neighbors of his and he went to the boy’s home to talk with the boy’s parents. “Your whole family is dead,” they told him, “the Nazis took them and your wife to Auschwitz.”

Auschwitz was one of the worst Nazi concentration camps. Paskin gave up all hope. A few days later, too heartsick to remain any longer in Hungary, he set out again on foot, stealing across border after border, until he managed to immigrate to the United States in October 1947, just three months before I met him on the subway.

All the time he had been talking, I kept thinking about a young woman whom I had met recently at the home of friends who had also been from “Debratzin”. She had been sent to Auschwitz; from there she had been transferred to work in a German munitions factory. Her relatives had been killed in the gas chambers. Later, she was liberated by the Americans and was brought to America in the first boatload of displaced persons in 1946.

Her story had moved me so much that I had written down her address and phone number, intending to invite her to meet my family and thus, help relieve the terrible emptiness in her life. It seemed impossible that there could be any connection between these two

people, but as I neared my station, I fumbled anxiously in my address book. I asked in what I hoped was a casual voice, “Was your wife’s name Marya?”

He turned pale. “Yes!” he answered. “How did you know?”

He looked as if he were about to faint. I said, “Let’s get off the train.”

I took him by the arm at the next station and led him to a phone booth. He stood there like a man in a trance while I dialed her phone number. It seemed hours before Marya answered. When I heard her voice at last, I told her who I was and asked her to describe her husband. She seemed surprised at the question, but gave me a description. Then I asked her where she had lived in Debratzin, and she told me the address. Asking her to hold the line, I turned to Paskin and said, “Did you and your wife live on such-and-such a street?”

“Yes!” Bela exclaimed.

He was trembling. “Try to be calm,” I urged him. “Something miraculous is about to happen to you. Here, take this telephone and talk to your wife!”

Seeing that he was so overwhelmed that he couldn’t talk coherently, I took the receiver from his shaking hands. “Stay where you are,” I told Marya, “I am sending your husband to you.”

At first I thought I had better accompany Paskin, lest the man should faint from excitement, but I decided that this was a moment in which no strangers should intrude. Putting Paskin into a taxicab, I directed the driver to take him to Marya’s address, paid the fare, and said goodbye.

Bela Paskin’s reunion with his wife was a moment so poignant, so electric, that afterward neither he nor Marya could recall much of the details. Marya told me, “I remember only that when I left the phone, I walked to the mirror like in a dream to see if maybe my hair had turned gray. The next thing I know, a taxi stops in front of the house, and it is my husband who comes toward me. Details I cannot remember; only this I know – that I was happy for the first time in many years . . . Even now it is difficult to believe that it happened. We have both suffered so much.”

“But,” Bela adds, “God has brought us together.”

No matter what life holds for you at any given moment; no matter what the consensus of popular opinion may be about the Lord we know as Savior,

one thing is certain – graffiti on a wall is not the last
word; God has the last word. Will you believe Him;

will you follow Him; will you trust Him for your
yesterday and today and tomorrow?

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/26/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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