

# Persecution and The Christian

## Acts 8:1-4

### Introduction:

- 1) In His intriguing sermon on the mount, while speaking to His disciples about the blessed state of godly and righteous living, Jesus reveals a most ironic truth about being true disciples and followers of Him, in Matt. 5.10-12: *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*
- 2) It would only be a few years after Jesus' statement that his disciples would experience, firsthand, both the pain **AND** joys of proclaiming the truth and remaining faithful to our risen Savior – Jesus Christ.
- 3) The persecution of which Christ spoke came upon individual Christians because they persisted with boldness in their faith and in their ardent proclamations of the life-changing, and life-saving gospel message!!! Because of this new Way, which demanded adherence to the risen Messiah and no longer to the law of Moses, the church at Jerusalem, still in its infancy, encountered *“a great persecution.”* [Read Acts 7.58-8.4]
- 4) The great challenge which many God-fearing men and women faced through horrific events of persecutions, trials, and tribulations was a test of their commitment and faith to Christ! We too face challenges in which our loyalty to stand in the truth of God's holy word and continuance in firm faithfulness to Christ our Lord is tested.
- 5) Faithful Christians withstood the severe trials of their day and diligently held on to that hope (assurance) of winning the precious crown of life eternal. Let us now consider the matters of the **PERSECUTION AND THE CHRISTIAN** so that we may find encouragement in the positive results of the power of God in the Christian life, though the work of Satan would present such a troublesome and negative situation.

### I. Persecution had it's beginnings with the prophets

- A. The Great Persecution of Acts 8 was not the first introduction of perilous times for God's faithful people. Many of God's own prophets of the Old Testament suffered at the hands of erring people of God.
  1. In Matt. 23.29-32 Jesus scathingly rebukes the scribes and Pharisees (religious leaders) for the corruption of their hearts through various forms of hypocrisy, such actions and attitudes that made them partakers with their forefathers in the guilt of the bloodshed of the prophets.

2. The Hebrew writer spoke candidly of the horrific sufferings that befell some of these godly individuals who, though persecuted, were victorious in their steadfast faith. (Heb. 11.36-40) Why didn't they waver? They were intently focused on obtaining a better resurrection. (Vs. 35)
- B. Why the persecution? To shut up the mouths of the prophets from speaking heart-piercing words of truth.

**II. The next major occurrence of persecution is this "Great Persecution" which was inflicted upon the church by Jewish leaders who continued to reject the truth of the risen Messiah.**

- A. Jesus prophesied, in detail, of this persecution that would result from their hypocrisy and hardened hearts. (Matt. 23.33-37)
- B. First, it was **PETER** and **JOHN** who were threatened and imprisoned after speaking "*with all boldness*" the saving message of Jesus Christ. (Cf. Acts 4.17,18; 5.17,18)
- C. It was not long after that **STEPHEN**, a man full of faith, power, and the Holy Spirit is falsely accused of blasphemy and stoned for the boldness, power, and truth of his message. (Cf. Acts 7.59)
- D. Saul was main leader in this great persecution [Read Acts 8.3].
- E. Later in Acts 12.1-2, King Agrippa harassed some from the church and with his sword, killed the apostle James (the brother of John).
- F. Again, Peter was imprisoned. (Cf. Acts 12.7-11)
- G. We can only imagine Paul's intense description of his sufferings. (2 Cor. 11. 24-28)
- H. To the Jews, Christianity was more than just another sect of their kind, in their minds it was a threat to their faith and practice of the law of Moses. (Read Jn. 16.1-3)

**III. A third occurrence of persecution arose against God's faithful people by Roman authorities which followed in the latter half of the first century, increasingly into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.**

- A. As we learn from the case of Paul before the supreme court of appeal at Rome, there was no fault found in his teachings, and he was set free, able to continue on in his proclamation of the saving Gospel.
- B. But in 64 AD there was a drastic change in the Roman government policy toward Christianity. A great fire broke out and consumed the dwelling places of the Roman citizens. Resentment broke out against the emperor to such a degree that he (Nero) used the Christians as scapegoats in order to redirect the stigma and guilt of arson.
  1. Tacitus, a man who had no regard for Christianity, thinking it to be "hideous and shameful," and "a deadly superstition," gives his testimony of the matter:

*"But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their*

*abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, the founder of that name, was put to death as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, procurator in the reign of Tiberius. But the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time, broke out again not only through Judaea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also, whither all things horrible and disgraceful flow from all quarters as to a common sink, and where they are encouraged. Accordingly, first, those were seized who confessed they were Christians; next, on their information, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much on the charge of setting the city on fire, as of hating the human race. And in their deaths they were made the subject of sport, for they were covered with the skins of wild beasts and were torn to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when day declined were burned to serve for nocturnal lights. Nero offered his own gardens for that spectacle, and exhibited circus games, indiscriminately mingling with the common people dressed as a charioteer, or else standing in his chariot. Whence a feeling of compassion arose toward the sufferers, though guilty and deserving to be made examples of by capital punishment, because they seemed not to be cut off for the public good, but to be victims to the ferocity of one man."*

2. It is to this "fiery trial" (most likely) that Peter refers, in 1 Pet. 4.12-19, and in which he strongly encourages them toward realizing an attitude of joy, appreciating that such circumstances have resulted in fellowship with Christ in His sufferings, through which God is all the more glorified and their salvation finds security. [Read 1 Peter 4.12-19]
  3. Now, just imagine the weight and difficulty of heeding both Paul and Peter's inspired instruction to the Christians during that time to "be subject to the Governing authorities." (Read 1 Pet. 2.13-17)
- C. There were 3 primary misnomers of the Christian lifestyle, referred to as "secret crimes," for which pagans, as well as Pliny (112 AD), the Roman governor of Bithynia thought Christians only to be a "perverse and extravagant superstition." Such shocking charges are as follows.
1. First, atheism – because Christians did not worship the state gods.
  2. Second, Thyestean feasts (cannibalism)—because they partook of the Lord's "body and blood."
  3. Third, Oedipodean intercourse (incest)
  4. Pagans had heard just enough about "eating the body" and "drinking the blood" and of Christian talk about "love" and "love feasts" and of being "brothers and sisters" that they got the wrong idea.
- D. The persecutions, whether by false word or deed, spread even to the churches in Asia, for which John's writing of the book of Revelation was needed in comfort to the faithful Christians who were enduring such horrific sufferings.
1. The church at Smyrna (Rev. 2.10)
  2. At Pergamum, persecution had already resulted in the Martyr of Antipus, a faithful disciple to the end. (2.13)
  3. At Ephesus and Thyatira, Christians were commended for their perseverance. (2.2,3)

4. Attempts were made at the church in Philadelphia to cause members to denounce and deny the name of Christ. (3.8)
  5. John's highly symbolic, yet prophetic writings would serve as a tremendous message of encouragement for those who would remain faithful despite the persecutions, as he notes the future fall of Babylon (Rome) and victory of the saints. (Rev. 14.8; 15.2-3; 17.14; 18.24)
- E. Peter too was martyred, according to Jewish tradition. But, Jesus Himself gave prophetic indication of such a death that would befall him. (Jn. 21.18-19)

Conclusion:

1. Let us not be dismayed at the realized atrocities that faced the church, but be ever encouraged at the diligence and faithfulness exhibited by godly men and women, of whom we can say, they fought the good fight for the crown of life and ran the race without wavering so that we too may have access to the same hope and salvation.
2. I know this lesson was more that of supplying information rather than application. But, it is imperative that we understand the perils that faced the church, the situations that proved to be attempts of Satan to stop the church dead in its tracks, to bring the bold proclamations of Christ's saving gospel to a halt, and to tear individual Christians from their faith.
3. Jesus gave a solid assurance that his church would come to no such end, but that it would stand above any and all forces, even that of Hades: *"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."* (Mt. 16.18)
4. Though we may not face such persecutions in our country today, faithfulness to Christ is not without a cost. But committing your life today in faithful obedience to the gospel of Christ will be more than worth the cost... because heaven is the reward.