

ACTS
The Second Persecution
Acts 5:17-42

Can we be Christians and be totally accepted by the world? Or to put it another way, will the non-Christian world ever totally embrace Christ and His teachings and therefore accept His followers? Or to put it still another way, can the Christian ever go through life free from persecution for His Christian convictions? The Biblical answer is “No!” Christ Himself said the world would hate Christians.

“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also” (Jn. 15:18-20).

Suffering social and physical persecution is part of every Christian's life and this will always be the case because Christians “must obey God rather than men.”

It is not easy to take any kind of persecution for Christ's sake but it is absolutely necessary if we are to grow spiritually in Christ. No Christian likes to be considered odd, strange, different or peculiar. We want to be liked and respected by all but this is never possible, for a true Christian because the world, controlled by Satan, is in opposition to Christ, and the unsaved by nature hate the claims and teachings of Christ. Therefore, Christians will suffer but this is how they grow strong spiritually for Christ. “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philip. 3:10).

SUPERNATURAL DELIVERANCE Acts 5:17-33

Indignation (5:17): “But the high priest rose up, along with all of his associates {that is the sect of the Sadducees}, and they were filled with jealousy; . . .” -- The Sadducees were the leaders in Israel and were also the religious rationalists. They denied many of the supernatural elements in the Jewish religion, and they were jealous of the Apostles' success as they were preaching that Christ was Messiah and, by placing one's faith in Christ who died for sins and rose from the dead, a person could have eternal life. The Sadducees denied the resurrection and all the supernatural. Yet they saw the miracles the Apostles were performing (5:12) and many people were becoming Christians (5:14). This was a threat to the theology and pocketbooks of the wealthy Sadducees who had control of all the finances surrounding the temple sacrifices.

Sadducees are equivalent to our modern day liberal theologians in Christendom. Liberals are tolerant of everything but Biblical truth. When the truth of scripture, especially any supernatural element, is presented they react with indifference or violent emotion. Liberals can tolerate any area of academics except Biblical truth. They will discuss calmly and rationally existentialism, empiricism, rationalism, pragmatism, evolutionism, the views of other religions. Almost anything or any philosophical theory can be discussed until Christ and the Bible are mentioned and then these things are laughed out of court. This merely proves that in the human heart there is a rebellion to the truth of a supernatural Christ. Why do liberals fight so hard against Christ? The truth of Christ convicts and condemns men and Christ demands that men have changed lives to follow Him. Liberal theologians who think man is basically good and autonomous do not want Christ to rule over them.

Incarceration (5:18): “And they laid hands on the apostles, and put them in a public jail.” -- In the first persecution, only John and Peter were arrested. Now all the Apostles are arrested for their faithful preaching of Christ. Why were they put in jail? Because they were preaching a supernatural Christ who gave a supernatural salvation. These truths were like waving a red flag in the face of a bull as far as the Sadducees were concerned.

Emancipation (5:19): “But an angel of the Lord during the night opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, . . .” -- Why does God use an angel to open this prison? Why not an earthquake or something a little more palatable to the rational mind? It seems harder to believe an angel opened the prison. Why? God used an angel as an instrument to supernaturally release the Apostles because the Sadducees did not believe in angels. He used an angel to prove to the Apostles that the doctrine of the Sadducees was wrong. God certainly does have a sense of humor and He just laughs at the rationalistic, antisupernatural and humanistic reasoning of unbelieving people.

God wanted the Apostles to preach Christ and there is no problem for God to get men out of jail. Sometimes, as in the case of the Apostle Paul, God chooses to leave Christians in jail but still the Word is not bound. Unbelieving men cannot stop the Word of God. They cannot stop the power of God. God's Word and God's power are not held by prison walls, gates, bars and chains. Nothing can stop the almighty power of God and if He needs to use supernatural phenomena to get His Word preached, He will! Arresting and threatening Christians will never stop the Word of God from making its impact on this world. The Word of God is not bound!

Dr. Josif Ton, one of the leaders of the Christian movement in Communist Romania told me a story about one of the many times he was before a Communist interrogator for his Christian faith. Interrogation goes on for hours and for days. This particular time God gave Dr. Ton the words of Christian hymns to run through his mind as they were seeking to brainwash him. He said he remembered the words of hymns that he thought he had forgotten. As he quoted the hymns to himself, God gave him perfect peace and his interrogator became very angry. Finally, the interrogator broke down after eleven days, having a nervous breakdown, and Dr. Ton took a few days rest at the beach. God supernaturally brought the words of these hymns to his mind.

Occupation (5:20): “Go your way, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this life.” -- The angel, commissioned by God, told the Apostles to go back to the temple and continue to preach the same message. The angel told them “to go”, for this has always been the command to Christians: “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” They had just seen an angel and there must have been some curiosity but the angel said, “Go, go, go!” There would be a whole eternity to settle idol curiosity about angels but only one lifetime to spread the gospel. We must use the time God has given us to preach and teach Jesus Christ. The angel also said, “Stand”; that is, they were to stand up for Christ wherever they were and in what ever they were doing. The angel also said, “Speak“. The Apostles were to give a verbal witness. We Christians are always to speak out to others about Christ. What are we to speak? We are to speak “the whole message of this life.” Christians proclaim a life not a creed. Christianity for the Apostles was not just a list of creedal statements but it was a life. Christianity is a vital relationship with Christ based on the facts of Christianity. “We must preach Christ - His deity, His humanity, His death, burial and resurrection; His offices of prophet, priest and king; His substitutionary atonement for sin; His life which He gives to all who trust Him as their personal Lord and Savior. Christians are to preach the “whole message” without compromise. We must not add or subtract from the truth or hold the message of Christ in reserve. If the truth offends the natural minds of unsaved men, so be it. Truth offends because it speaks to the sinful nature of man and tells him his need to be saved. Often when truth is the most offensive, it is the most effective. Christ's timeless message to the church is: “Go, stand up and speak!” Are we doing this?

Consternation (5:21-28)

(1) “And upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak, and began to teach.” -- These were brave men. In obedience, they did what God commanded them to do, trusting God to protect them.

(2) “Now when the high priest and his associates had come they called the Council together and all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent orders to the prison-house for them to be brought. But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported back, saying, ‘We found the prison-house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside.’ Now when the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this. But someone came and reported to them, ‘Behold, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!’” -- Surely God has a sense of humor. The whole Council was ready to try

the Apostles but they were no where to be found. They are told they are back preaching in the temple. These intelligent thinkers must have been scratching their heads and in total confusion over this whole process.

(3) “Then the captain went along with the officers and proceeded to bring them back without violence; (for they were afraid of the people, lest they should be stoned).” -- The Apostles had wide support at this time among the common people and the temple police arrested the Apostles cautiously lest they should be stoned by the people. Notice that the Apostles never resisted arrest and trusted God to take care of them.

(4) “And when they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. And the high priest questioned them, . . .” -- Notice carefully that these clever Sadducees did not ask how the Apostles got out of prison. They knew it was by some supernatural means and they did not want to be embarrassed and have their theology of antisupernaturalism shot full of holes.

(5) “Saying, ‘We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.’” -- The Council, in the first confrontation of the Apostles with the authorities over the healing of the lame man, told the Apostles never to preach the name of Christ again. The Apostles, of course, had to disobey the authorities. They continued to fill the whole city of Jerusalem with their teaching (doctrine). Notice the Apostles were teaching doctrine to the masses - doctrine about the resurrected

Christ who is God, Savior and Messiah. The Apostles were preaching Christ everywhere, for the whole city was filled with their teaching. Are we filling our city with the teachings of Christ? The Council also claimed that the Apostles were trying to charge the Sanhedrin with the death of Jesus, bringing the blood of Christ upon them. Peter and the Apostles did accuse the Sanhedrin and the whole Jewish nation with the death of Christ and they themselves called for Christ's death just a few months before this time.

“Pilate said to them, ‘What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?’ They all said, ‘Let Him be crucified!’ And he said, ‘Why, what evil has He done?’ But they kept shouting all the more, saying, ‘Let Him be crucified!’ And when Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the multitude, saying, ‘I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves.’ And all the people answered and said, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’” (Matt. 27:22-25).

However Peter also called for the nation of Israel to repent of this awful deed of the crucifixion of Christ and to be forgiven and cleansed through Christ's blood that was shed.

Obligation (5:29): “But Peter and the apostles answered and said, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’” -- Here is one of the great statements of all scripture: “We must obey God rather than men.” The Apostles clearly understood that their ultimate allegiance belonged to God and not to man. “Must” is an imperative; it is not something we can take or leave in our Christian experience. It is not just knowing the will of God but doing the will of God. Christians must learn to obey God in everything. We must obey God above the State; we must obey God in our personal lives; we must obey God in our local churches. The place of blessing is in obedience to God. We must obey rather than compromise the Word of God to reach numbers of people or to please men.

No one likes to be called fanatical but we must face up to the fact that the masses of Christendom today have obeyed men rather than God. Anyone who stands for Christ is going to be thought of as fanatical.

Proclamation (5:30-33)

(1) “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross (wood, tree).” -- According to the Old Testament law, to be hanged on a tree brought a curse (Deut. 21:23). In other words, by crucifying Christ on a stake of wood, the Jews inflicted the utmost disgrace upon Christ. They disgraced Christ but God exalted Him by raising Him from the dead.

Peter again shows tremendous courage in preaching so boldly to the Sanhedrin who had the power to put him to death. Certainly Peter was not out to win friends and influence people but to be faithful to God in proclaiming Christ.

(2) “He is the one who God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.” -- Jesus Christ is a Prince in that He ascended into heaven and sits at the Father's right hand. He is also a Savior in that He is the only one who can save or deliver people from their sins. Jesus is the Savior who saves from past sin. “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk. 19:10). Who saves from present sins. “Hence also He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb.7:25). Who saves men from future sin. “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” {Philip. 3:20}.

Christ died that He might give repentance to Israel. It is God who grants men repentance through Christ. No man can earn eternal life by his good works. Salvation is a gift from God and this verse clearly teaches that repentance, which is a necessary act sinners must perform to be saved, is also a gift from God. Salvation (every aspect of it) is given and not earned. Salvation cannot be earned by religion, good works, education or culture. Salvation is given by God to all who repent (change their attitude) and trust Christ, and even the repenting and trusting is a gift from God so that no human can boast of salvation. “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:8,9).

(3) “And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.” -- The Apostles were personal witnesses concerning the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. What they were speaking was absolute truth, but men do not come to Christ because of the historicity and accuracy of Christianity alone. There must also be the internal witness of the Holy Spirit who gives men spiritual understanding of Christ, brings them under conviction of sin, draws them to Christ and efficaciously regenerates their souls so they will believe in Christ. This same Holy Spirit comes into the life of all who obey Christ. A person obeys Christ when he keeps Christ's command to believe on Him as God, Savior and Messiah.

(4) “But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and were intending to slay them.” -- The Sanhedrin did not come under conviction for their sin, but they were further hardened and this produced even a greater anger towards Christ and His followers. Their intention was to kill all twelve of the Apostles. Why did they get so mad? They became furious when the truth of Christ was presented to them. Why such violence and enraged fury? Men in their unsaved state have a natural hatred of Christ and the gospel. We must remember that the gospel of Christ not only attracts and re- deems some men but it also enrages others. It is not only that men are sinners and want their own independent way but they are controlled by demonic forces. Our battle as Christians is not just with the forces of sin but ultimately with the forces of hell. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world-forces of this darkness, against spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). It is evil beings who are sitting in positions of power behind the scenes and they are manipulating men, keeping them under control and using them as puppets. Thoughts are being placed in the minds of men who oppose the gospel by invisible evil forces.

When non-Christians oppose our witness to them about Christ, they are only acting naturally and out of control by demonic spirits. Only God can cause an unsaved man to see. Our job as Christians is to make sure that the unsaved receive the gospel and we must pray for them. It is God's task to save souls.

NATURAL DELIVERANCE Acts 5:34-42

Moderation (5:34-39)

(1) “But a certain Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time.” -- Gamaliel was a famous teacher in Israel and was a teacher of the Apostle Paul before he was converted to Christ. While Gamaliel was a wise man, he was a formalist. He was a theological opportunist. He was a moderate who believed in straddling the fence, an advocate of the middle of the road policy. Little did the Apostles know that God would use the moderate, Gamaliel, to get them delivered out of the hands of the Sanhedrin. God used a natural deliverance under His divine providence to free the Apostles from the Council.

(2) “And he said to them, ‘Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. For sometime ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be some body; and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. And he was slain; and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After this man Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away some people after him, he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. And so in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action should be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.’” -- Gamaliel's reasoning was that if this Christian movement is of man it will ultimately collapse. If it is of God, it will survive, and, if opposed by the Jews, the Jews will be fighting against God. Gamaliel's advice was not to join the Christians but to leave them alone, and above all don't persecute them or kill them for this will just give them more reason to push their movement.

Gamaliel was an unbeliever and he too was controlled by evil forces. Yet God overruled in Gamaliel's life and caused him to make a decision which would be favorable to the Apostles. All evil forces are subject to the sovereign workings of God. This incident of Gamaliel shows how God uses the very forces opposed to the gospel to fight against themselves and restrain themselves and ultimately to help the cause of Christ.

About ten years ago the Christian youth leaders in Communist Yugoslavia wanted to meet together to discuss strategy for reaching their country for Christ. They had been trying for months to get a permit from the government for this meeting. Finally, they just gathered together without a permit, trusting God to take care of them. About two hundred leaders and youth showed up for this meeting. On the second day, the commissioner and the police showed up at the rally and told the Christians in charge of the rally they had to stop the meeting or be put in jail. A wise Christian leader told these Communists, “Sir, just last night I was telling these young people how wonderful it was to live in a country where Christians are permitted to gather like this. Now, Sir, if you wish to tell them the meeting is stopped, you go in and tell them yourself.” The commissioner knew this would cause a great complaint, so fearing the people and the political consequences, he left them alone. These Christian youth leaders have met every year since that time. God used natural means in His divine providence to let these Christian leaders meet together.

Retribution (5:40): “And they took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them to speak no more in the name of Jesus; and then released them.” -- They took Gamaliel's advice not to kill the Apostles but they did flog them with thirty-nine lashes to the back and sent them on their way.

Adulation (5:41,42)

(1) “So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.” -- The Apostles did not quit. They did not compromise. They did not stop preaching when persecuted. They counted themselves blessed to suffer dishonor for Christ. Part of being a Christian is sharing in Christ's sufferings. “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philip. 3:10). Each Christian has been sovereignly given faith to believe in Christ and part of his walk is to suffer for Christ. “For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Philip. 1:29). Suffering for the gospel is an intricate part of our Christian experience. It is not something unusual or reserved for a few; it is for all.

(2) “And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.” -- Nothing could stop the early Christians from proclaiming Christ. Men and devils have not been able to overthrow Christianity for nineteen hundred years which is living proof that Christianity is of God and not merely a religion of men.

Note also that the early Christians met in a large group in the temple and small groups in the homes. It appears that these meetings were evangelistic in nature because they were “teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

CONCLUSION

Saved. Christian, the early church had three basic keys that made them effective and the same keys are available to

us today. They had a principle: “We must obey God rather than men.” They had a practice: “We are witnesses“; they had a changed life which caused them to speak boldly for Christ. They had a power: “The Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him“; this power cannot be obtained in a university or in a seminary, or in a book about the Holy Spirit or in a creed. This power of the Holy Spirit is only for those who obey and submit to His power.

Unsaved. Are you a non-Christian? We have learned it is God who gives faith. It is also God who gives repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Perhaps God will be gracious and grant you faith this day. How will you know He has done this? When you trust Christ as your Savior and Lord by an act of your will, that is the evidence that God has worked saving grace in your life. Believe that Jesus is Prince and Savior, and you shall be saved.