

ACTS
The First Persecution Acts
4:1-12

The preaching of the gospel by the first century Christians produced persecution of those who claimed to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. This first persecution did not come from the unbelieving pagan world but from the religious leaders in Jerusalem. The church came up against the old Jewish religious establishment, a system which had originally been established by God but had become so corrupt because of legalism and traditionalism that it was scarcely recognizable as the Judaism of the days of Moses and the Prophets. "But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:9).

Persecution was a hidden blessing for the early church. Five times in eleven years the enemy stretched forth his fangs to vex the church at Jerusalem. This chapter records the first of these persecutions which were to grow in intensity through the years.

Persecution, which is a terrible experience, is always good for the church, - for it causes the church to grow in purity and numbers. As Christians, we should never be surprised that when we preach the gospel it encounters persecution, for the Apostle Paul wrote, "And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (II Tim. 3:12). And yet, Paul also wrote, "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place" (II Cor. 2:14). If Christians are to be faithful in proclaiming the gospel in our day, they can always expect to be offensive to a great segment of society. When Christians are faithful, they will experience some physical persecution. Some may offer up the extreme sacrifice and give their lives for Christ, but even in death there shall be triumph. The gospel is offensive to the natural mind and will cause opposition in some.

Dr. James Stewart, professor of theology at Edinburgh University, said, "It is a terrible thing when the church is content to cultivate inoffensiveness."

The background for Acts 4:1-12 is that Peter and John have been instruments in the healing of the Lame Man. He had been a cripple from birth. When Peter said, "In the name of Jesus the Nazarene -- walk!" he immediately had strength come into his ankles and feet and he started walking, jumping, running and leaping all over the temple. He was hugging Peter and John and all this excitement drew a crowd. Peter seized the opportunity and told the unbelieving Jews to repent and turn to Christ. "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away . . ." (Acts 3:19).

ECCLESIASTICAL PERSECUTION Acts 4:1-4

Promoted By Religionists (4:1): "And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees, came upon them, . . ." -- The very first persecution to Christians came from the religious people. Christianity was threatening the religious establishment and their incorrect theology. The political, judicial and religious body in Jerusalem was the Sanhedrin made up of seventy rulers in Israel, and the High Priest acted as the moderator of the group. The Sanhedrin, the power structure in Jerusalem, was made up of elders, scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees and their priestly families. The controlling group of the Sanhedrin was clearly the Sadducees. They were the wealthy, intellectual aristocrats, who wanted to preserve the status quo in Jerusalem, and they were ever ready to collaborate with the Roman authorities to maintain the establishment and keep their comfortable way of life. These Sadducees were rationalists and materialists who denied the supernatural in the Jewish religion. They denied any belief in a bodily resurrection and denied any spirit world, whether angels or demons. "For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all" (Acts 23:8). They also considered the Prophets and the Writings of the Old Testament to be

less authoritative than the words of Moses in the Pentateuch. The Sadducees were not only the first foes of Christianity, they were the fiercest foes of Christ's cause.

These Sadducees are equivalent to our modern day liberals in Christendom. They hold to the ethical teachings of Christ but deny the inspiration of scripture and the supernatural. Even today the greatest opponents to Biblical Christianity are liberal ministers. Liberals encourage Christ to be spoken of as teacher, healer, example and leader but they disdain the whole idea that He is the resurrected Lord, the Savior of all who believe. The greatest antagonism to Christ comes from liberal theologians who will not bow down and call Him Lord and Christ, who exalt their minds above the mind of God revealed in Holy Scripture.

Provoked By Truth (4:2): “Being greatly disturbed (aggravated, angered) because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.” -- The Apostles were merely teaching the ordinary Jew about Christ and His resurrection, and for this alone they were put in jail. The Sadducees had the power to declare who would and who would not be teachers in Jerusalem. The Apostles in their thinking were uneducated and untrained men. “Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). Peter and John had not been sanctioned by the Sanhedrin but they had been sanctioned by God.

The Apostles were not proclaiming the overthrow of the Sanhedrin repression nor rebellion against Roman tyranny, nor were they protesting against slavery, even though at that time one half of the people in the Roman empire were slaves to the other half. They were not preaching against the excessive taxation by the Romans of the Jews. They were not advocating the violent overthrow of the establishment. They were only openly declaring the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and for this they were thrown in jail. This message of Christ was obviously a great threat to the establishment. Why? Christ sets men free from sin and when man is set free on the inside, it is only natural for him to seek for external social, economic and political freedom. Absolutely nothing is more threatening to religious establishments, totalitarianism, dictatorships and tyrannies of this earth than the radical message of the Resurrected Christ. This is why Iron Curtain countries keep the gospel out or repress those who hold it. This is why China today is completely closed to the message of Christ. This is why Mohammedan countries are re-establishing the death penalty to any member of Islam who converts to Christianity. This is why Roman Catholic countries keep the Bible out of the hands of the people. The message of Jesus and His resurrection brings a radical revolution whenever it is preached.

Produced Imprisonment (4:3): “And they laid hands on them, and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening.” -- As Peter and John were preaching to this huge crowd of people, there was a sudden display of authority by the religious establishment. The temple guard led by the temple chief or police, elbowed their way through the crowd, surrounded Peter and John, arrested them and took them off to jail. The Apostles in no way resisted the authorities because they believed in non-violence in the preaching of the gospel. Since the Sanhedrin never met at night, the trial of the Apostles would have to wait until the next morning. This was the first night spent in jail for the cause of Christ. Perhaps the Sadducees were just using scare tactics on the followers of Jesus to keep them from spreading the news of the resurrection.

The Apostles must have recalled all the teaching Jesus Christ gave to them about persecutions while He was on this earth.

“Remember the word that I said to you . . . If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you . . .” (Jn.15:20).

“These things I have spoken to you, that you may be kept from stumbling. They will make you outcasts from the synagogue; but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God” (Jn. 16:1, 2).

“But be on your guard; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them” (Mk. 13:9).

When the establishment is threatened by Christianity, the authorities get annoyed and irritated. They often strike back by a show of force which only causes true Christians to grow stronger. Persecution is a help instead of a

hindrance to the purity and progress of the true church. Someone has said, “We must bleed to bless.” Augustine said, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.”

Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, went to Rome at age 95 to offer himself as a martyr for Christ.

Five years later he was brought before the proconsul and urged by him to “swear by the fortune of Caesar . . . swear, and I will release thee; reproach Christ.” Polycarp, then about a hundred years old, replied: “Eighty and six year have I served Him, and He never wronged me; how can I blaspheme my King who hath saved me? I am a Christian, and if you desire to learn the Christian doctrine, assign me a day, and hear.” “I have wild beasts,” said the proconsul. “I will expose you to them unless you repent.” “Call them,” replied the martyr, “Our minds are not to be changed from the better to the worse; but it is a good thing to be changed from evil to good.” “I will tame your spirit by fire unless you repent,” said the proconsul. “You threaten me with fire which burns for a moment; but you are ignorant of the future judgment, and the fire of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Do what you please,” answered Polycarp.

As they were about to fasten him to the stake, the old saint said, “Let me, remain as I am, for He who gives me strength to sustain the fire will enable me to remain unmoved.”

Placing his hands behind him, the heroic man then offered a prayer, closing with these words: “O God, I bless Thee that Thou has counted me worthy of this day and this hour, to receive my portion in the number of martyrs, in the cup of Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life both of soul and body, in the incorruption of the Holy Ghost; among whom may I be received before Thee this day as a sacrifice acceptable. Wherefore I praise thee for all things. I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, by the eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ, Thy well-beloved Son . . . Amen.”

The fire was then lighted, but the rising wind swept the flame away from his body in so wonderful a manner that he was finally dispatched by the thrust of the executioner’s sword.

Profit from Crisis (4:4): “But many of those who heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to about five thousand.” -- These unbelieving Jews had heard the message and believed. They did not hear the speculations and theories of men but they heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the Apostles did not defend the gospel but declared it with boldness and men were saved. There were also five thousand saved that day. Some scholars believe this means that there were two thousand saved and this number plus three thousand on the Day of Pentecost totaled five thousand. However, there is no reason not to think there were five thousand saved, and what we see is a rapidly expanding church as the Lord was adding to the body of Christ daily.

This is the last time that numbers of converts are mentioned in the New Testament, but we see there is nothing wrong with taking a count, especially if these are truly converted people. There was great profit from preaching faithfully - five thousand souls were saved, but this blessing was not without crisis. The Apostles suffered for their stand for Jesus Christ.

EXAMINATION BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN Acts 4:5-9

Place of the Trial (4:5): “And it came about on the next day, that their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem.” -- This trial of Peter and John and the Lame Man was conducted in the council chamber which was a special building in the western part of the temple area.

Persons Examining (4:6): “And Annas the High Priest was there and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high priestly descent.” -- For the Sanhedrin to be an official court, there had to be a quorum, consisting of twenty-three members. This was a legal assembly and the Apostles were on trial. There was Annas, who was the honorary high priest and the power behind the Sanhedrin, and the father of Caiaphas. Caiaphas was the official high priest and there was John and Alexander, probably brothers of Caiaphas. This confirms what we know from secular history. This family of high priests intermarried with one another and constituted a ruling class in Jerusalem, controlling the vast wealth of the temple and certain profitable monopolies connected with the sacrifices. So here were the aristocrats who sat in power and authority in the city, who had great political and economic interests

in the city. They were threatened by these Christians who were proclaiming the truth of the resurrection. We now can see it was not only the doctrine with which the Sadducees disagreed with the Apostles but there was also a threat to their plush way of life.

Many people do not come to Christ and accept Him as Savior and bow before Him as Lord because they know Christ does change one's life style and value system and they would rather have a materialistic way of life than the spiritual realities of heaven. So be it, for the only good life materialists will know is this present life. The next life will only be hell for them.

Problem of the Sanhedrin (4:7): “And when they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, ‘By what power, or in what name have you done this?’” -- What a dramatic scene. Perhaps these seventy rulers of Israel were staring at Peter and John as they sat in the middle of the Sanhedrin. Apparently none of the members of the Sanhedrin could deny a miracle had been accomplished. “What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it” (Acts 4:16). This was an embarrassing situation. They did not believe in the supernatural and they could not accredit this miracle to Satan since they did not believe in the spirit world. They were undoubtedly fishing for a rationalistic answer to what appeared to be a clear case of supernatural phenomena. The Sanhedrin, without realizing what they were doing, gave Peter a perfect opportunity to witness for Christ. They said, “By what power, or in what name have you done this?” This was the opportunity Peter was waiting for and he was delighted to tell them.

Peter could have backed out at this point but he was as bold as a lion. When asked to defend his faith, he was ready to give an answer. “But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you . . .” (I Pet. 3:15).

Plea of Peter (4:8, 9): (1) “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers and elders of the people, . . .’” -- Notice first of all that Peter was “filled with the Holy Spirit” in that the Holy Spirit so controlled Peter at that moment that he was able very calmly to give an answer to the Sanhedrin. The filling of the Spirit in this context, as it usually is in the Book of Acts, is related to witnessing for Christ.

There is a special power of the Spirit that God gives to all Christians when they are obedient in their witness for Christ. Notice also how respectful Peter was to the authorities because he knew that government was ordained by God. Christianity teaches respect and obedience for those in power.

“Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution: whether to a king as the one in authority; or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God - that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God” (1 Pet. 2:13-17).

(2) “If we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, . . .” -- Peter questioned whether they were really on trial for healing a man, for who would have someone in court for doing a good deed to mankind? There was something much deeper than a healing which put them on trial, and the Apostles knew this very well.

Notice the boldness of Peter. What a contrast with the cringing, cowardly disciple who denied the Lord and was afraid of a little maid in the high priest's courtyard a few weeks earlier. Perhaps Peter was reminded that when his Lord was before the Sanhedrin the night of his betrayal, Peter was afar off. But not now. He was filled with the Spirit and was bold to speak for Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit takes the resurrected life of Christ and gives it to the Christian, empowering him, encouraging him and strengthening him to live for Christ and to speak out for Christ.

EXPLANATION TO THE SANHEDRIN Acts 4:10-12

The Name (4:9b, 10): “As to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead -- by this name this man stands before you in good health.” -- Holy Spirit boldness caused Peter to say that the Lame Man

was healed by the name and power of Jesus Christ the Nazarene. The Sanhedrin understood the word “Jesus” to mean Savior and “Christ” to mean Messiah and “Nazarene” to be a title for His manhood. They hated this title because they knew it meant that the man Jesus was both Lord and Christ (God and Messiah) and to them this was blasphemy. The Lame Man was exhibit “A” of the power and authority of Jesus Christ. The whole purpose of this assembly was to put Peter and John on trial and ultimately to put Christianity on trial. The purpose of the trial was to intimidate the Apostles and stamp out every vestige of Christianity. However, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, turned the tables and put the Sanhedrin on trial for the death of Messiah. Peter said, “You crucified the Messiah!” What stinging words! The Jews were guilty of the death of the Son of God. The Sanhedrin was on trial and they were guilty.

God can always turn the tables on unbelievers when they are persecuting Christians, and He will, if believers will trust Him to do so. After all, God is in control of and rules over unbelievers.

The Shame (4:11): “He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE VERY CORNERSTONE.” -- Peter quoted from Psalm 118:22 to show that Jesus Christ, the Stone, was rejected by the leaders of Judaism. The “builders” are the leaders of the Jewish religion who had the covenants, the Law and the promises but they rejected the Messiah, the Stone, who then became the cornerstone of the church.

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow- citizen with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:19-20).

There is a Jewish tradition, which probably all in the Sanhedrin knew about, concerning the cornerstone of the temple built by Solomon. During the building of the temple, a great rock was quarried out and shaped by the masons. You remember how the temple was built in silence so there was no sound of hammer or saw or chisel. They hewed out the rocks from a quarry which was made into Solomon's stables a far distance from the temple site and then moved them to the site. There was this one rock sent up but the builders could not find a place for it. It did not seem to meet any of the blueprints so they left it aside. It sat there for a long time, perhaps for years, for it took seven years to build the temple. After a long time, someone pushed it over the edge and it rolled down the valley of the Kidron and was lost in the bushes. When the time came to put in the cornerstone, the great square rock which held everything in place, they sent word for the cornerstone to be sent up. The quarry men sent back word that it had already been sent up some time before. They looked around for it, and no one could find it. Then somebody remembered the great rock which had been pushed over the edge. Down they went to the valley of Kidron and found it in the bushes. With great effort, they raised it again and brought it to the top and fitted it into place. It fit perfectly. This was the cornerstone of the temple.

Peter was saying to these Jews that Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone between the Apostles of the New Testament and the Prophets of the Old Testament. Christ is the Messiah who bridges the gap between Judaism and Christianity. Christ is the missing piece in the puzzle between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Jesus is the stone that the Jews rejected. To the everlasting shame of the Jews, they deliberately rejected the Stone of God's own choosing.

Peter was such a bold man to speak to the Sanhedrin this way, knowing that they had the power to put him to death. We are not told but perhaps some of the seventy who heard this message of Peter were saved that day. If not, at least Peter had a negative effect of condemning the Sanhedrin by the gospel message.

“For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things?” (II Cor. 2:15, 16).

The Claim (4:12): “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved.” -- Peter made it perfectly clear to these leaders in Jerusalem, who were very religious, that salvation is found only in Christ, and if they persisted in their rejection of Jesus Christ,

they would not be saved and bring eternal damnation to themselves. The Jewish leaders were trusting their good works, their religion, their tradition, their power and their wealth to save them but Peter said salvation is only in Christ.

This claim of Peter's is very startling and most certainly radical and intolerant. There is no other salvation in any other religious or political person or organization. Peter, being a good Jew, knew that Jehovah said, "You shall have no other gods before Me." He also knew the claim of Christ who said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

What are the implications of Peter's statement? Salvation is not in Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, Mahatma Gandhi, Rama-Krishna, Allah, Zen or the Virgin Mary. Salvation is only in Christ who said, "I am the light of the world and he who follows Me shall not walk in darkness" (Jn.8:12). Christ also said, "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved" (Jn.10:9).

Enlightened Christians do not say that there is no ethical and moral teaching in other religions which may have value to those who follow these religions. Great religious leaders have uttered some fine moral teachings and precepts which have helped people. What Christians do say is that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation and all other religions and religious leaders cannot take a person to heaven because all religions and religious leaders cannot take a person to heaven because all religions are based on works and not on grace. In the final analysis, Christians are intolerant of other religions because true Christians are committed to Christ as the only way of salvation.

The liberal wing of Christendom (the modern day Sadducees) claim that those who believe in the Biblical position of Christianity are too bigoted and narrow-minded. Yet no Christian can be more intolerant than Christ who said, "No man comes unto the Father but through Me" (Jn. 14:6), or the Apostle Peter who said, "There is no other name by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12), or the Apostle Paul who said, "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and man, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim.2:5), or the Apostle John who said, "He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (1 Jn. 5:12). Peter was no more intolerant than Christ and the other Apostles. To Peter it was either Christ or chaos, heaven or hell, justification or judgment. Salvation was clear cut and a black and white issue. Many modern day religionists claim if a man is sincere, regardless of his religion, he will go to heaven when he dies. Nothing could be further from the truth of the Bible! One must be touched by God's grace and receive Christ as personal Lord and Savior before he can go to heaven.

CONCLUSION

Jesus Christ is the Eternal God who is able to save sinners. He is adequate to meet a person's deepest spiritual needs. Jesus Christ can do what no other person can do -- He saves! There is salvation in Christ. His salvation is adequate for all who come to Him. Not one person who sees he is a sinner, separated from God and under God's wrath, and honestly seeks Christ by faith shall be turned aside. Christ never says to any soul longing for salvation, "Go away; you are not one of the elect!" The very fact that a sinner desires to come to Christ is evidence that God is drawing him to Christ. All sinners who come are welcomed by Christ, who is adequate for all if all will lay hold of Him by faith.

You say you are too sinful to come to Christ. The Bible says Christ saves sinners. If He saved Peter the denier of Christ, and Thomas the doubter and Paul the persecutor of Christians who claimed to be the greatest of sinners. He can surely save you. Christ is ready and waiting for you to come to Him for salvation. Won't you put your trust in Him. Acknowledge you are a sinner and believe that Christ died for you an unworthy wretch. Place your faith in Christ and you shall be saved, "for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."