

INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history the church of Jesus Christ has faced persecution. For example during the persecution by the Romans in the first three centuries Christians were thrown to wild animals, crucified, turned into human torches and tortured in all the cruel ways that evil men could think off. Thousands of Christians met their death at the hands of the Roman authorities.

However in spite of the persecution faced by the church it was never destroyed? In fact the persecution helped to purify the church and to strengthen it.

In our day certainty here in the west the church rarely faces physical persecution. Satan's attacks have become much subtler usually using the world to entrap us and making us less effective. As we come to chapter four of this book of Acts we read about the persecution that the very early Christians faced. It came from the hands of the Jewish leaders.

1. THE PERSECUTION DISPLAYED (vs. 1-4)

Peter and John were speaking to the people perhaps they were still explaining the miracle of chapter 3 and how the people ought to respond to it. But as they were speaking the temple authorities arrived to arrest them (v 1). The Priests were the people responsible for conducting the normal daily sacrifices at the temple. The captain of the temple guard was the chief of the temple police force, which was composed of Levites.

He was second in rank only to the High Priest and was responsible for maintaining order in the temple grounds.

The Sadducees were one of the four sects that made up first century Judaism (the other three were the Pharisees Essenes and Zealots). Although small in number they were highly influential, they were a dominant religious and political force within Judaism because the High Priests were all Sadducees. They were mainly aristocratic, wealthy landowners.

To protect their political position and wealth they firmly opposed any overt opposition to Rome. This is why they opposed Jesus (John 11:49-50).

These opponents were greatly disturbed (v 2) because the apostles were teaching the people. They had no reputation as teachers and did not receive sanction or had any credentials to do so according to Jewish thinking. They had no rabbinical training and that was intolerable to these religious leaders. But the major source of irritation for these religious leaders was **what** they were teaching.

Peter and John proclaimed "in Jesus the resurrection of the dead" (v 2). The Jewish leaders had executed Jesus and now Peter and John are proclaiming Him as the resurrected Messiah.

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the body or any future rewards or punishments; so to proclaim that Jesus is raised from the dead was particularly offensive to them. If Peter and John were allowed to get away with preaching such things then the Sadducees would be viewed as heretics if the people started to believe that Jesus was resurrected and alive.

So the Jewish authorities seized Peter and John and put them in prison until the next day because by now it was evening and it was too late to convene the Sanhedrin (Jewish court).

But although it is possible to put preachers and Christians in prison God's word cannot be imprisoned and as a result of Peter and John's conversations with the people many who heard the message believed and the number of the men who believed grew to about 5000 (v 4). As is often the case throughout church history persecution of the church is one way that God uses to expand His church.

We must understand that to be faithful to God and his word will lead to some sort of persecution and often that persecution comes from the religious establishment.

It is the liberal church that has often persecuted the evangelical church and we must not expect it to be any different. We have been criticised for our failure to get involved with the local ecumenical movement and that criticism has come from the liberal churches, the religious people in our town who are involved in it.

But we also must understand that God often uses persecution to purify and strengthen his church.

Those who profess faith but do not possess true faith will not hang around a church that is being persecuted. Likewise people with genuine faith will know God's grace with them during times of persecution, they will see God at work strengthening them and enabling them to endure pain and suffering for the cause of Christ. Therefore false believers are scattered and true believers are strengthened through persecution.

It is also through persecution that churches grow and this can be seen in many parts of our world where Christians do face physical and painful persecution. Even if a day does come when we are imprisoned for our faith; remember God's word cannot be imprisoned and therefore we must continue to speak it and proclaim Christ to the people as the opportunity arises.

Even in days like our own when the persecution is more subtle we can learn from these verses that God's word is powerful and therefore it must be spoken and proclaimed even when people in our country do not accept it or want it. For it is God's means of saving sinners and of building his church within our time and culture.

Therefore let us be encouraged to seek to proclaim God's message with renewed zeal. Let us ask God to make us bold so that we will not be easily put off by the minor opposition that we face but let us take courage from Peter and John and seek to witness and speak of Christ whenever possible.

2. THE PERSECUTION FACED (vs. 5-13)

We have here the church's reaction to the initial outbreak of persecution. It is full of instruction as there are very clear principles outlined for us as we handle persecution in our time and generation.

It appears that Peter and John offered no resistance during their arrest but they quietly submitted themselves to the will and purpose of God. I don't know if they realised it or not but their arrest gave them an opportunity that they would otherwise not have had to preach the gospel to the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was made up of rulers also sometimes called the Chief Priests for they represented the priests.

The elders were family heads and heads of tribes and the Teachers of the Law were law experts most of whom were Pharisees. They gathered in Jerusalem to hear the case. The Sanhedrin was the ruling body of the Jewish people under the ultimate authority of the Romans and it was also their Supreme Court. It had 71 members including the High Priest. Annas was not the current High Priest having been deposed by the Romans in favour of his Son in Law Caiaphas. However Annas still bore the title of High Priest just as ex presidents of United States are still called President.

Although not officially serving, as High Priest it was likely that Annas was the one with the real power who wielded it behind the scenes.

This court had Peter and John brought before them where they were questioned. They wanted to know “by what power or what name did you do this” (v 7). A name represented authority so the question was who gave you the authority to do this?

The question implied that Peter and John were rebels since the Sanhedrin had not given them authority to act in this way. The question provided an opening for Peter and John to preach the gospel to them.

Peter was not capable of taking such an opportunity, which is why we read that he was filled with the Holy Spirit (v 8). We all need to know the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us if we are going to be able to take the many opportunities that arise to preach and proclaim the gospel. To be filled with the Spirit means to be controlled by Him.

It involves dealing with sin in our lives and submitting daily to the work of the Spirit within us. It involves going God’s way instead of our own selfish way. We are not capable of doing any of those things unless we have the Holy Spirit empowering and enabling us to do so. All that we read in this chapter about Peter and John’s defence depends on the work of the Spirit.

The fact that Peter submitted to God’s word and God’s Spirit meant that when he faced persecution he did not go under but was able to make such a robust defence of his actions. This is the key for us in our relatively easy times.

We need to daily submit to God and allow the Holy Spirit to empower and control us so that when times of difficulty and trials and persecution come upon us we are driven closer to the Lord by our experience rather than further from Him. One reason why the western church seems to struggle with persecution is because of the fact that we are not filled with the Spirit.

Our easy life has made us complacent and selfish so that the Spirit is not in total control of our lives, as He ought to be. We have submitted too often to our sinful and selfish nature rather than to God’s word and his Spirit.

Because Peter knew the filling of the Spirit he was not frightened into silence or compromise. Peter displayed great courage and went on the offensive. You see submission to God by His Spirit is not cowardice and it leads to boldness. Peter starts by pointing out that it is the Sanhedrin that is being unjust for all Peter and John did was to show kindness to a crippled man (vs. 8-9).

What Peter is saying is surely you cannot be accusing me of kindness to a crippled man. But their real question was about authority so Peter tells them that it is by the authority and power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom they crucified but whom God raised from the dead that the man was healed (v 10).

Peter is saying to this group of religious leaders that he is not the enemy of God but they are because they crucified the one that God approved of as his resurrection clearly shows. Peter you see refuses to compromise the gospel by deleting what would offend the Sanhedrin. He presented them with the truth and with the reality of their sin against God and left the outcome with God.

He was courageous in his proclamation and was more concerned for the gospel than he was about his own well being. Now this is a great example for us all. So often we are hindered in speaking the truth of the gospel because of our fear of people. We do not want to offend them, perhaps one reason why we do not face more opposition and persecution is because we are not courageous and bold enough.

But if we are filled with the Spirit we will speak God's truth with great boldness and face people with the fact that they are enemies of God and in need of turning to Him.

One of the most formidable barriers to the Sanhedrin's acceptance of Jesus as Messiah was that he could not prevent Himself from being killed. That concept did not fit into their idea of a Messiah as a political and military deliverer. This is why Peter turns to the Scriptures and quotes Psalm 118:22 and applies it to their rejection of Jesus (v 11). The builders in this context are the spiritual leaders of the nation.

Although they rejected Jesus God made him the very corner stone on which his church is built through his resurrection and exaltation. Do you see what Peter is doing? He is saying to these Jewish leaders you rejected Jesus but God gave him the place of pre-eminence therefore it is you who are the enemy of God not us. They were the ones leading the people astray not Peter and John. It's never easy to confront people with their true position before God but if the gospel is ever going to make an impact upon people then they have to understand that they are sinners and in opposition to God.

Before the good news of the gospel is spoken we must present the bad news, we have to face people with the reality of their sin and rebellion otherwise the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection will have no real significance to them.

But Peter goes further than simply pointing out the Sanhedrin's rebellion against God; he calls upon them to repent. Verse 12 amounts to a direct invitation to repent and embrace Jesus Christ as Saviour. Peter has pointed out that the crippled man was healed by the power of Jesus Christ but now he goes further by declaring that salvation cannot be found in anyone else except Jesus.

The word "saved" (v 12) is a form of the same verb used in verse 9 to describe the healing of the crippled man (healed v 9). Peter is saying that not only was Jesus the source of Physical healing but he is also the only source of spiritual healing. Deliverance from the devastating effects of sin comes only through Jesus Christ. Peter did not invent that truth he is stating what Jesus said on previous occasions (John 14:6 & John 10:7-8). Now the exclusive claims of true Christianity goes against our religiously pluralistic society.

There is nothing that people today resent more than to claim that Jesus Christ is the only way and that Christianity is the only true faith. We preach an exclusive Christ in an increasingly inclusive age. As a result of that truth we are often accused of being narrow minded, even intolerant. Many paths it is said lead to God, how dare we insist that there is only one and the path we preach is the right one?

However in reality there are only two religious paths, the broad path of religion, which is works based and leads to hell and the narrow path of faith in Jesus Christ that leads to heaven. Everyone including religious people is on either one or the other. Sadly these members of the Sanhedrin and all who followed them were on the broad road that would lead them to hell.

Peter's gospel presentation failed to soften the hard hearts of the Sanhedrin yet it was not without effect. The Sanhedrin was impressed with the courage of Peter and John (v 13). They were amazed that unschooled (that means uneducated in the rabbinical school) and ordinary men (in the sense that they were not professional theologians) could argue so effectively from the Scriptures.

These two rugged Galilean fishermen powerfully and successfully argued their case before the elite Jewish Supreme Court and that was astonishing to these theologically trained educated men.

Then they realised that Peter and John had been with Jesus, they had received their training from him. What made them come to this realisation? Perhaps it was the fact that Peter and John were doing what Jesus did for Jesus had boldly faced the Jewish leaders with this same truth. He too had no formal rabbinical training yet no one could handle the Old Testament Scriptures like Him.

Jesus had performed many miracles and the main reason Peter and John are on trial is because of the healing of the crippled man.

So the attempt made by the Sanhedrin to suppress the apostles teaching had given Peter and John a priceless opportunity, which they seized with both hands. They boldly proclaimed the gospel to the highest officials of their nation.

The persecution did not hinder them from proclaiming the gospel nor did it silence them instead it gave them increased opportunities which both Peter and John were glad to take. The only way to handle opposition to the gospel is to continue proclaiming it.

We do not know what the future will hold for us. Perhaps we will face increasing opposition to the gospel either personally or as a church. Perhaps as a result we will be given opportunities to proclaim Christ to people that we would not otherwise be able to reach. Whatever the year may bring we need to daily submit to the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and seek to be filled and controlled by Him.

But we also need to do what Jesus did. We must confront people with their sin and rebellion and point them to our Saviour as the way of salvation. We also must have fellowship with our Saviour, so that we can receive our training from Him through the Scriptures and we must seek to live like Him. It would be wonderful if we lived so close to the Lord that people who may not agree with the message could at least say that we have been with Jesus because we speak as he spoke and did what He did.

May God enable us by his grace to live for Him in our day and generation? May He give us many opportunities to proclaim this wonderful gospel message to many more people this year even if that involves us having to face times of persecution?

Amen