

The Church – The Persecution of the Church Jn. 15:18-21

Thesis: To better understand the faithfulness of the early church in the face of severe persecution.

Introduction:

- A. Jesus had warned His apostles that persecutions were coming.
 - 1. Jn. 15:18-21
 - 2. Jn. 16:1-4

- B. In the book of Acts, we read of the persecution of the early church.
 - 1. These persecutions were extremely severe; many times resulting in death.
 - 2. However, with the persecutions, we also read of the faithfulness of the church.

- C. In this lesson, we will notice the persecutions that the early church faced and notice the faithfulness of the church during these persecutions.

I. The early church was severely persecuted.

A. Acts 3-4 – Peter and John are arrested for preaching Jesus as the Christ.

- 1. Notice the persecution.
 - a. Peter and John had healed a lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple (3:1-10).
 - b. As the multitudes gathered, Peter took advantage of the opportunity and preached the word of God to them (3:11-26).
 - c. The Sadducees and the priests of the temple were displeased with Peter and John, and sent and had them arrested (4:1-4).
 - d. Upon being questioned, Peter tells the rulers of the people that salvation comes only through Christ (4:5-12).
 - e. The council threatens Peter and John and tells them not to preach in the name of Jesus anymore (4:13-18, esp. 15-18).
- 2. Notice the reaction of the apostles.
 - a. Acts 4:19-20 - But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. {20} For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.”
 - b. Acts 4:23-31 – Peter and John go to their companions and pray for boldness to continue preaching in the name of Jesus.

B. Acts 5:12-42 – The apostles are arrested, freed by God, rearrested, and beaten for preaching Jesus as the Christ.

- 1. Notice the persecution.
 - a. Great miracles were done by the apostles; and many believed because of the signs (5:12-16).

- b. The high priest, along with others, rose up and arrested the apostles (5:17-18).
 - c. An angel of the Lord releases the apostles and tells them to go to the temple to preach “all the word of this life” (5:19-21).
 - d. The apostles are once again arrested and brought before the council (5:22-32).
 - e. Gamaliel warns the people to be careful of what they do to the apostles because they do not want to be found guilty of fighting against God (5:33-39, esp. 38-39).
 - f. The apostles are beaten and then released (5:40).
2. Notice the reaction of the apostles.
 - a. When the angel of the Lord releases them, they go to the temple and begin to preach (5:21).
 - b. When confronted again by the council, notice their response (5:29).
 - c. Notice also their reaction after they were beaten (5:41-42).

C. Acts 6-7 – Stephen is killed because of his faith in Christ.

1. Notice the persecution.
 - a. Stephen was a man who was “full of faith and power,” and he “did great wonders and signs among the people” (6:8).
 - b. Some from the Synagogue of the Freedmen disputed with Stephen and set up false witnesses against him (6:9-15).
 - c. After giving his response to these false allegations (7:2-53), the people stoned him (7:54-60).
2. Notice the reaction of Stephen.
 - a. In his response, Stephen preaches the Christ to them (7:2-53).
 - b. Even when they stoned him with stones, Stephen prayed for their forgiveness (7:60).

D. Acts 8:1-3 – Saul, later named Paul, “made havoc of the church.”

1. Notice the persecution.
 - a. Saul was consenting to the death of Stephen, and continued to persecute the church (8:1-3).
 - b. Saul also went to Damascus with a letter from the high priest so that he could arrest the Christians (9:1-2).
 - c. Saul even had reputation of one who strongly persecuted the church (9:13-14).
2. Notice the reaction of the church.
 - a. Acts 8:4 - Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.
 - b. The early church did not allow the persecutions of Saul to stop their work.

E. Paul was consistently persecuted throughout his work.

1. Notice the persecution.
 - a. It is interesting that after Paul became a Christian, he was persecuted just as he persecuted the church (9:20-30).

- b. We read of the persecutions of Paul on numerous occasions throughout the book of Acts.
 - 1) Acts 9:23-25 – The Jews in Damascus tried to kill Paul.
 - 2) Acts 14:1-7 – The people of Iconium tried to stone Paul and Barnabas.
 - 3) Acts 14:19-20 – The Jews from Antioch stoned Paul in Lystra.
 - c. II Cor. 11:22-33 (Paul recounts some of his persecutions) - Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. {23} Are they ministers of Christ?-- I speak as a fool-- I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. {24} From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. {25} Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; {26} in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; {27} in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—{28} besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. {29} Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? {30} If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. {31} The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. {32} In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; {33} but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.
2. Notice the reaction of Paul.
- a. Even with all the persecutions that Paul faced, he continuously preached the gospel.
 - b. He never wavered from his faith, even saying that he was ready to die for Christ.
 - 1) Phil. 1:21 - For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.
 - 2) II Tim. 4:6-8 - For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. {7} I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. {8} Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

F. While this is not an exhaustive list of the persecutions of the church, it does give us an idea of the troubles that they faced.

II. Today, we must remain faithful to God.

- A. Jesus warns us of the necessity of remaining faithful.
 - 1. **Rev. 2:10b** - Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.
 - 2. It is only those who remain faithful that will obtain this crown.
- B. While we may not be in fear of losing our life because of persecutions, we will, in some way, be persecuted.
 - 1. We may lose some life-long friends.
 - 2. We may have to choose between family and God.
 - 3. We may be made fun of because of what we believe.
 - 4. **II Tim. 3:12** - Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.
- C. Are you faithful?