



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

New Testament Survey

Lesson 18 – The Gospel Triumphs over Persecution

The Persecution of Christians

In Lesson 13 we heard Jesus predict persecution for His disciples. He said: **“They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake”** (Luke 21:12). Again, on Maundy Thursday (Lesson 14) Jesus told His disciples: **“They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me”** (John 16:2-3).

Jesus’ words were fulfilled almost immediately. The persecutors were the Jewish leaders – the same ones that had killed Christ. They put Peter and John into prison after the healing of the crippled beggar. Then they threatened them and commanded them not to preach the Gospel of Jesus. Soon all the apostles were put into prison and threatened with death. On that occasion their lives were preserved through the advice of Gamaliel, a famous Jewish teacher of that time.

Then a great persecution came as a consequence of the bold preaching of Stephen, one of the seven deacons chosen by the congregation to distribute food to the poor. When Stephen repeated Jesus’ prophecies of the destruction of the Temple and defended his position by quoting the Scriptures, the Jewish leaders were furious and stoned him to death. The Pharisee Saul, a student of Gamaliel, became the chief persecutor; he was guilty of torturing and killing many Christians. He even traveled as far as Damascus in Syria in his effort to exterminate Christians.

The persecution of Christians has never entirely ceased. The first centuries of the church (50-300 AD) witnessed many persecutions by Jewish authorities and Roman authorities, including the Roman Emperor Diocletian, who made one last effort to destroy Christianity altogether. When the Roman Emperor Constantine himself became a Christian in 312 AD, official persecution came to an end.

The next great period of persecution occurred during the Reformation era, when the Roman Catholic Church itself persecuted those who revived the true teaching of the Gospel: that we are saved alone by faith in Christ, apart from works. Martin Luther himself was declared an outlaw, and many thousands of Christians were put to death by the forces of the church and the state.

Today persecution is taking place in many parts of the world. Christians are being beaten, tortured, and killed officially and unofficially, especially in countries ruled by Muslims or Hindus. Christians in Nigeria, India, Myanmar, and China are in great danger of persecution at the present time. In the United States and some European countries faithful confessional Christians are often ridiculed and blacklisted because of their confession of Christian teachings.

How God Turns Persecution into Good

The persecution of Christians after Stephen's death drove them out of Jerusalem into other areas of Judea and into Samaria. Wherever the Christians were driven, they took the Gospel with them. Thus, persecution led to the spread of the Gospel. The deacon Philip brought God's Word to Samaria. He was then led by the Holy Spirit to a desert road, where he met a man from Ethiopia and brought the Gospel to him. From there he traveled to Azotus and Caesarea. The Gospel also reached such places in Syria as Damascus and Antioch.

The greatest of all triumphs over persecution occurred when the risen Jesus Himself appeared to Saul, the persecutor, and changed him from a violent persecutor into the apostle Paul, the most zealous Christian missionary to the Gentiles. As could be expected, Saul was considered a traitor by the Jews, and he became the chief target of their persecution. But Saul escaped from them and returned for the time being to his hometown of Tarsus.

Today also the Lord uses persecution to spread the Gospel. It often happens that Christianity makes its largest gains when Christians are being persecuted. People see how loyal Christians remain to Jesus Christ even under pressure, and this has a great impact. One Christian from the early centuries said that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church. This has proved to be true in many places, such as China today.

Read the listed passages as you study each of the events below.

Peter testifies again to the Jewish leaders (Acts 5:29-32)

Peter said: **"We ought to obey God rather than men"** (v. 29).

Note: We also are permitted to disobey superiors when they forbid something commanded by God or when they command something forbidden by God.

Peter testified: **"The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins"** (vv. 30-31).

Note: The Apostles always proclaimed the same message: the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the benefits for those who trust in Him: forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation.

Gamaliel advises the Jewish leaders to let the apostles go (5:33-42)

Gamaliel said: **“If this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it”** (vv. 38-39).

The apostles rejoiced **“that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name”** (v. 41).

The Jerusalem congregation elects seven deacons to assist the apostles (6:1-7)

There was a quarrel between the Greek-speaking Jews and the Hebrew-speaking Jews about the food distribution to poor widows.

The twelve said: **“It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables”** (v. 2).

The twelve said: **“Seek out from among you seven men of good reputation”** (v. 3).

They chose Stephen, Philip, and five others.

“The number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” (v. 7).

The Jewish leaders arrest Stephen because of his preaching (6:8-15)

“They were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke” (v. 10).

“They stirred up the people ... and ... seized him, and brought him to the council” (v. 12).

Stephen preaches **Sermon Three** in his own defense (7:1-53)

The Jewish leaders accused Stephen of speaking against Moses and the Temple.

Stephen told the story of Moses from the Scriptures:

The four patriarchs (vv. 1-16), Moses himself (vv. 17-36), the prophecy (vv. 37), resistance (vv. 38-43).

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me ... Him you shall hear” (v. 37).

Stephen told the story of the Temple:

The tabernacle and the Temple (vv. 44-47), resistance (vv. 48-50).

Conclusion: **“You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did ... They killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers”** (vv. 51-52).

Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr (7:54-60) This may have taken place in 32 AD.

“They gnashed at him with their teeth” (v. 54).

Stephen **“saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God”** (v. 55).

They **“stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of ... Saul”** (v. 58).

Stephen said: **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”** and **“Lord, do not charge them with this sin”** (vv. 59-60).

Persecution spreads the Gospel throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1-4)

“Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word” (v. 4).

Deacon Philip has great success in Samaria, converting even Simon the sorcerer (8:5-13)

“They believed Philip as he preached ... the name of Jesus Christ” (v. 12).

“Simon himself also believed and ... was baptized” (v. 13).

The Holy Spirit is given to the Samaritans in some visible way (8:14-17)

“Peter and John ... prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit” (vv. 14-15).

Simon the sorcerer wants to buy the power of the Holy Spirit (8:18-25) (The sin of simony)

Simon **“offered them money”** (v. 18) and said: **“Give me this power also”** (v. 19).

Peter: **“Your money perish with you ... Repent therefore of this your wickedness”** (vv. 20, 22).

Deacon Philip preaches the Gospel to an official from Ethiopia (8:26-40)

“A man of Ethiopia ... , sitting in his chariot ... was reading Isaiah the prophet” (vv. 27-28, Is. 53)

“Philip, ... beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him” (v. 35).

“Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him” (v. 38).

“He went on his way rejoicing” (v. 39).

Note: The Gospel is beginning to go out among non-Jews.

Saul, the persecutor, is converted by the risen Jesus, the one being persecuted (9:1-9)

Saul was heading to Damascus to bring Christians **“bound to Jerusalem”** (v. 2).

The voice of Jesus: **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”** (v. 4).

Saul: **“Who are You, Lord?”** Jesus: **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting”** (v. 5).

Saul: **“Lord, what do You want me to do?”** (v. 6).

“They led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus” (v. 8). He was **“without sight”** (v. 9).

Ananias is led by God to baptize Saul and welcome him as a Christian (9:10-22)

God tells Ananias to go to Saul and restore his eyesight.

Ananias: **“I have heard ... how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem”** (v. 13).

God: **“He is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles”** (v. 15).

Saul received his sight, was baptized, and **“preached the Christ in the synagogues”** (v. 20).

Saul is threatened by the Damascus Jews but escapes (9:23-25)

Saul escapes from the Jews at Jerusalem (9:26-31)

Barnabas introduces Saul to the Christians. Saul preaches Christ and is sent to Tarsus.

Questions

1. When is it right to disobey our superiors in the government and in the church?
2. What good purposes are accomplished by God through persecution?
3. How prevalent is the persecution of Christians in today's world?
4. What did the apostles consider to be their main task in Jerusalem?
5. Why was Stephen put to death by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem?
6. In what way do Stephen's last words remind us of Jesus on the cross?
7. How did the persecution in Jerusalem serve to spread the Gospel?
8. How did God bless the testimony of Deacon Philip?
9. What was the main topic in the sermons preached by Peter, Stephen, and Philip?
10. How did Jesus convince Saul that He had risen from the dead?
11. How did the Jewish leaders treat Saul after he became a follower of Jesus?
12. What is meant by the saying: “The blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church”?