

THE FIRST PERSECUTION

Persecution was the blessing of the apostolic church, and a blessed church she was, for five times in eleven years hands were stretched forth to vex the group in Jerusalem. This chapter introduces us to the first of these persecutions. In each instance, however, the persecution resulted in increased power. This is especially evident in the chapter before us. The year is still 33 A. D. and the scene is Jerusalem.

I. PERSECUTION (4:1-22)

A. THE ~~Imprisonment~~ (4:1-4)

Israel's rejection is complete, for now her leaders arrest ~~the~~ Peter and John for their preaching. And yet it was not simply their preaching that specifically disturbed them, but their preaching of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Naturally this would have enraged the Sadducees who did not believe in resurrection, and this is the reason why the persecution in the book of Acts where resurrection is the keynote of ~~the~~ its messages is chiefly from the Sadducees in contrast to the opposition of the Pharisees in the gospels. earthly life of Christ. Nonetheless, their very actions demonstrated the effect of the preached Word as did the fact that many who heard believed so that the number of believers now totaled 5000. ~~The arrest~~ All precautions were taken for the arrest.

The arrest was made by the captain of the temple in person: he was an officer of high rank, probably identical with the Sagan of the Talmud who ranked next the high-priest. He was also supported by a strong body of the Sadducean high-priestly faction, very possibly by Caiaphas himself or Annas. Rackham, p. 56.

Christ's words are fulfilled: "The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will ~~at~~ keep your's also" (John 15:20).

B. The Preaching (4:5-12)

1. The people (4:5-7). An august assembly heard the words of ~~many~~ Peter on this occasion. Annas the High Priest heads the list. Caiaphas, his son-in-law was also there. He was the Roman-appointed high priest (cf. Jn. 15:24) although Annas would have been in the eyes of a strict Jew the nearest representative of Aaron. Actually according to Jewish law there could only be one high priest living at a time and his office continued until death, but the Romans in order to ^{confuse} scatter allegiance often appointed another while the first was still living. Annas was the deposed high priest; Caiaphas, the governing one. John and Alexander who are mentioned next may have been relatives of the high priest; at least, they were very notable persons. In addition the rulers, elders, and scribes were there, and other relatives of the high priest. This means that the aristocracy of Jerusalem was present, for the high priest and his relatives would have been Sadducees and wealthy people. They were seated in a semi-circle with Peter, John, and the lame man in front of them.

2. The Power (4:8). The rest of the chapter is a natural outcome of the supernatural of verse 8. Peter and John are no longer two unlettered fishermen but are now men filled with the Holy Spirit. This accounts for what follows, for again we have a demonstration of the theme of the book of Acts; i.e., the Spirit of God using the Word of God through the man of God.

3. The Preaching (4:9-12). In 92 words Peter turns the tables on the Sanhedrin and puts them on trial. In this brief message he first calls attention to what was done and points out that the healing of the lame man was not a crime but a good deed (vs. 9). He then declares that the miracle took place in the name of the hated Nazarene (vs. 10), that they were responsible for His crucifixion (vs. 10); that God raised Him from the dead (vs. 10), that the evidence stands before them whole (vs. 10), that their rejection of Christ was predicted in the Word of God (vs. 11 cf. Psa. 118:22), but that if they will

but believe they may have salvation through His name. (vs. 12). Peter surely did not waste words! We could certainly use more shorter sermons today if they would be as pointed as Peter's.

C. The Punishment (4:13-22)

The Sanhedrin was astonished at the boldness of Peter and John, for they were not trained and schooled men. They then connected these two with Jesus possibly remembering their presence in the temple during the last week of Christ's life. Finally they recognize the fact that the miracle was undeniable and hence conclude that they could say nothing against it. The disciples, who had been absent while this conferring was going on, are called back in and charged not to speak in the name of Christ any more. But Peter and John are not ones to bow to the whims of ecclesiastical organizations. There will be no compromise here and so the reply, "we cannot but speak the things which we saw and heard" (vs. 20). In all of this the disciples do not boast or insist on their rights; they simply remain tranquil in the knowledge that they must obey God's will. Though every effort should be made to live peaceably with all men, the work of the Lord is above any man or group of men.

The first persecution is passed; its end is only a threat, for the proof of the message was incontrovertible. The man stood healed and no one could deny it. So must it be today. The church must produce healed men and these will be the greatest argument for Christianity.

II. POWER (4:23-37)

A. Because of Prayer (4:23-31)

1. The Place (4:23)

After being threatened the disciples returned to their own group. Perhaps the believers had been praying for Peter and John while they were in prison.

There they report the events which had occurred. Persecution not only brings power but it also brings division, and God is now beginning to mark off those who definitely belong to Him. It was to this group that they returned.

B The Prayer (h:24-30)

When the news was received, the early Christians did not ponder by what scheme or plan or design they might the more cleverly (and usually the less forcibly) carry on their work without offending anyone and especially the authorities. Wonder of wonders they did not even appoint a committee to study the problem! They immediately took the whole matter to God in prayer. It was from Him that they received their answer not from some friend or influential contact with the authorities. God despises that very thing. Remember Asa who relied on the King of Syria instead of the Lord God (2 Chron. 16:7-9)? God rebukes him severely and on the basis of His omniscience and omnipotence. In contrast is the example of Hezekiah who, when threatened by Sennacherib, sought the help of the Lord, not of his contacts (2 Kings 19). The early church also prayed.

A. Address to the Person of God (vs. 24). God is addressed by the infant church as absolute sovereign. It is not the usual word for Lord but the word from which comes the English despot. It is used for the absolute relationship of a master to his slaves (cf. 1 Tim. 6:1,2; Tit. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18). Actually it is because they address Him thus that they can pray the rest of the prayer.

B. Recognition of the power of God (vs. 24b). Their prayer is directed to One whom they recognize as the all-powerful Creator. Surely He can take care of this little matter that had come up.

C. Submission to the plan of God (vs. 25-28). As they prayed the Holy Spirit opened to them the Scriptures (Psa. 2) and reveals to them not only that David was the author but also ~~that~~ something of the meaning of the Psalm.

It is a Psalm that teaches the hatred of the world system for God and His Messiah. Those who prayed realized that this was specifically demonstrated in the death of Christ, the blame for which is assigned not only to the Jews (as Gentiles are prone to say) but also to us Gentiles, and the execution of which was completely predetermined in the plan of God. Here again the Scriptures bring together the sovereignty of God (vs. 28) and the responsibility of man for his actions (vs. 27). It is evident from the remainder of the Psalm that the final demonstration of the world's hatred for Christ will be just prior to His return when the Man of Sin will reign supreme. But then--glorious day--He shall take the reigns of government and rule with a rod of iron. It is no wonder, the disciples seem to say, that now when we preach a risen, glorified Christ the world rulers hate us on account of Him. (cf. Jn. 15:19).

A. Presentation of petitions to God (vs. 29-30). Most of the prayer has been concerned with praising God; now their petitions are presented. First they ask the Lord not to remove the threats but to behold them. This word is used here and Luke 1:25 only and the meaning is "keep thy eye on their threatenings," a thing they knew the Lord would do and yet which they request. Second, they ask for boldness. Isn't that interesting, for they are increase of the asking for the/very thing which brought on the persecution. They only ask the Lord to confirm their message by signs in the physical realm.

B. The Power (4:31)

When they had prayed God answered. *He answered their request for signs by* The outward visible evidence of that was the shaking of the place where they were assembled and their speaking with the boldness for which they had asked. But the inward reason for it was the filling of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost they had been baptised with the Spirit and also filled. Now this filling needdd to be and

was repeated. And so it is in every believer's experience--the filling with the Spirit is an oft-repeated experience--as often as sin comes into the life. (Note Ephesians 5:18 where the present tense further demonstrates this fact.) The Power was sought, the Power was received, and the power was manifest.

B. Because of Purse (4:32-37)

The world says "Money talks!" So it did in the early church, for their power was definitely related to the common life which they shared. It was the best proof of their preaching. This is not Christian communism, ut rather a right view of property. The early church was realizing that all belonged to God and that He directed in the use of all (not merely a tenth) their goods. The sale of property was quite voluntary (vs. 34). The right of possession was not abolished. The community had nothing to do with the money until it had voluntarily been given to the apostles. The distribution was not equally but according to need. Certainly this has no relation to communism. The church also had a right view of charity, for they took care of their own and did not appeal to the community Chest.

One who is especially name d as having an important part in this fellowship of goods is Barnabas. He was a Cypriote, probably unmarried (1 Cor. 9:4-6), evidently wealthy, ~~and~~ one who is designated an apostle, and one whose gift was especially that of exhortation (cf. 11:23).

But most important of all here is the fact that he is an outstanding concrete example of the outworking of the law of love among the early believers.

~~Here~~ Yes, money talks, and here it speaks of the love of Christ ruling in individual hearts and caring for other members of the body of Christ.