

LESSON EIGHT

THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

A. PERSECUTION FORETOLD:

Scriptural References:

"But he shall receive... with persecutions" (Mark 10:30).

"They shall lay hands on you, and persecute you" (Luke 21:12).

"The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20).

Jesus had warned his disciples that they could expect to be persecuted. This persecution began almost at once with the arrest of Peter and John following the healing of the lame man at the gate beautiful. Five times in eleven years the church at Jerusalem encountered persecution.

1. By the Sadducees, elders, rulers and scribes (Acts 4).
2. By the Sadducees because of the preaching of the resurrection (Acts 5).
3. Stephen's trial and martyrdom (Acts 6).
4. Intense persecution under Saul's leadership (Acts 8:1-3).
5. Persecution instigated by Herod (Acts 12:1-25).

These persecutions were permitted by the Lord and undoubtedly accomplished a definite purpose in the growth of the church. The persecutions were some of the means God used in scattering the church so that the gospel message might be preached everywhere. The persecutions kept the church strong and developed strong faith as the saints prayed and witnessed the power of God manifested to deliver them.

B. EARLY PERSECUTIONS:

The first persecution was directed against Peter and John following the miraculous healing of the lame man. The apostles were thrown into prison over night. When brought before the Council Peter preached a marvelous sermon. Instead of being the accused, he became the accuser. They were threatened with violence and dismissed.

The second persecution was directed against all the apostles (Acts 5:17-42). The religious leaders became indignant and took all the apostles and threw them into prison. God's angel delivered them. The next morning when the council was set for trial, they found the apostles were gone. At that very moment they were in the temple preaching the Words of Life.

In the account of this persecution the student should note the words of Peter (verses 29 & 32): *"We ought to obey God rather than man"* and *"So is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him."* In this latter statement it makes it very clear that obedience is necessary in order to receive the Holy Ghost.

The wisdom of Gamaliel (Paul's teacher) should also be noted. When the council heard Peter they were convicted deeply and began to plan how to kill the apostles. However, Gamaliel gave them splendid advice. *"Let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to naught: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found against God."*

C. THE PERSECUTION BY KING HEROD (Acts 12:1-25):

King Herod brought this fifth persecution upon the church. This Herod was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great who was the king when Jesus was born. He had cultivated the good will of the Jews by observing their customs.

In order to further win the favor of the Jews, Herod had James the brother of John killed. He had the head of James cut off, a similar death to that of John the Baptist. It should be noted that of the apostles, one of these brothers was the first to be killed, the other, John, was the last to die.

When Herod saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter planning to kill him. However, he did not want to kill him until after the rituals of Passover. The church went to earnest prayer and God delivered Peter the night before his planned execution. Although Peter was to be killed the next day, he was not lying awake worrying. He was sleeping. Herod had taken strict precautions. Two chains and four soldiers (two by his side and two at the door held Peter). In spite of this an angel of the Lord delivered Peter.

Peter went to the house where the church was praying. This was the home of Mary, John Mark's mother. Although the church was praying it was difficult to believe that their prayers had been answered. It was so miraculous!

Why did God rescue Peter and allowed James to be slain? We do not know and we must never question the will of God in similar events.

Finally, we should note the horrible death of Herod. The very thing, which he desired, the applause and acclaim of the people brought judgment and death. When the people shouted, "God's voice, not a man's!" Herod accepted this acclaim and died a horrible death. History states that Herod immediately was seized with violent internal pains and he lingered in agony for five days before he finally died.

D. PETER'S DELIVERANCE:

The story of Peter's deliverance is a wonderful illustration of what God does when He delivers a sinner from sin. This passage of Scriptures makes a wonderful text for a gospel message.

1. The sinner's condition is described by Peter's condition in prison bound by chains.
2. A light shone first.
3. Peter was smitten on the side next to the heart - this speaks of conviction.
4. He was told to arise - this he had to do first.
5. Then the chains fell off.
6. The Peter was told:
 - (a) Gird thyself,
 - (b) Bind on thy sandals,
 - (c) Put on thy garment,
 - (d) Follow me.

7. The gate opened on its own accord - the magic of the electric eye is not as new as we might think.
8. Finally, Peter was able to say; "NOW I KNOW."

E. THE FINAL RECORD OF PETER'S MINISTRY:

In Acts 12:17 we read "*And he departed, and went into another place.*" Apart from a brief mention of Peter appearing and speaking at the first church council (Acts 15) the above Scripture completes the record of Peter's ministry. He went into another place but nobody knows where he went.

The Roman Catholic Church claims that he went to Rome but there is no proof for that claim. He simply disappears. He had used the keys and unlocked the door to the Kingdom. This is all we need to know regarding the ministry of Peter.

LESSON EIGHT

SELF HELP TEST

A. State the FIVE periods of persecution of the early church:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

B. Who was Gamaliel?

C. Who was John Mark's mother?

D. Who was Rhoda?

E. How did Herod die?

F. Who was the first apostle to be killed?

G. Who was the speaker of the following quotations?

1. _____ "Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath sent His angel."
2. _____ "Thou art mad."
3. _____ "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
4. _____ "If it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it."
5. _____ "We ought to obey God rather than men."
6. _____ "Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals."