

PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH

Acts 4:1-31

I. The Expression of It. Acts 4:1-22.

1. The Arrest. Acts 4:1-22.

(1) Its promoters.

a. Religionists--"priests."

Religious intolerance was represented by the priest. Here we behold the priests abandoning the constructive work of preaching for the destructive work of persecuting. "The captain of the temple" served under the jurisdiction of the priests. His task was to maintain law and order in the temple.

b. Rationalists--"Sadducees."

They constituted not only the first, but the fiercest foes of Christianity. Jesus warned His disciples to beware of the "Leaven of the Sadducees." It was only natural that the Sadducees should hate the followers of Christ since Christ preached the very doctrine which they repudiated. The Sadducees denied the supernatural, affirmed the freedom of the human will and held in contempt the oral traditions. Being rationalists, they denied every story of the miraculous, and especially the resurrection. To them, this life constituted all there is of existence.

(2) Its provocation.

a. The new instructors.

"Being grieved they (that is, the unlearned, and therefore, ignorant fishermen, representing the very lowest level of society) taught the people." The educated religious leaders of that day refused to teach "Jesus of the resurrection." Moreover, they refused to permit anyone else to do it. They were the only authorized educators; the only ones qualified to instruct in religious matters.

b. The new instruction.

"Preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead." The Sadducees didn't believe that Jesus arose from the dead. They argued that His resurrection from the dead was contrary to reason, to experience, to nature, and to their theology; therefore, it could not be true. New ideas have always been revolutionary. The promoters of new ideas have always been regarded as fools. Einstein and Edison were thought to be insane. The Wright brothers were counted as fools because they thought they could learn to fly like a bird. This explains in part why Christ was rejected by the Jews; He revolutionized the thinking of the day. He gave life a new interpretation; He gave love a new meaning; He gave worship a new place; and He vested service with a new dignity.

Those who preached the resurrection from the dead met with violent anger. To suppress this new doctrine wrath was substituted for arguments. Persecution has always been the method of suppressing new ideas. But killing preachers has never changed their eternal message, just as destroying

watches does not change time by so much as one second. Their strenuous efforts to stop this new doctrine only scattered it, for many believed and went everywhere preaching.

(3) Its period.

"For it was now eventide." They spent their first night away from loved ones behind prison bars. It says, "They laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day." Imagine their feelings! They believed in God; they fearlessly proclaimed the message of salvation through the shed blood of Christ; they depended upon the Holy Spirit for power; and for their compensation, they now lay in a dark and dreary prison. What compensation for their loyalty! What ingratitude from men! What a victory for Satan! What hopes and fears those loved ones must have entertained on their behalf, when they failed to return to their respective homes!

(4) Its product.

a. Suffering for saints.

They were bound, but the Word of God was not bound. They were paying the first price toward a life of power with God. Jesus had foretold that these things would befall them. "These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them." John 16:1-4a. We recall that the Apostle Paul said, "Yea all those who lived godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

b. Salvation for sinners.

"Howbeit many of them that heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand." This incident reminds us of the words of Dr. Jowett, "We must bleed to bless."

In spite of all the opposition five thousand men believed and were added to the church. That was a greater day than Pentecost. What an inspiring sight! Five thousand men confessed Christ in one service. They dared to break away from popular thinking for Christ. They put Christ first in their lives. They were willing to sacrifice all, even life itself, for Christ's sake. They were not actuated by love of ease, for what they did was difficult. They were not moved by desire for personal gain, for it meant they would lose all they had. They were not swept by public sentiment, for it was the most unpopular thing possible. Ease and popularity have never made great Christians.

(5) Its profit.

Some very important lessons are to be learned from this incident. Among them are the following:

a. The unfamiliar is not always to be regarded with disfavor.

Had the people of the first century studied their scriptures more and their religious scholars less, they would have been prepared to welcome the predicted Redeemer. Since they had not familiarized themselves with the Word of God, they were at the mercy of their self-appointed leaders. They had

been so accustomed to listening to men for spiritual light that they had their backs turned to Him, Who is "The Light of the World."

- b. Everyone has a right to be instructed in the things of God. The Bible is the highest source of information about the here and the hereafter.
- c. Rationalism is a poor substitute for regeneration.
- d. Persecution is a help instead of a hindrance to the purity and progress of a church. It results in multiplying and fortifying the disciples.

2. The Trial. Acts 4:5-9.

(1) The examination. Acts 4:5-9.

- a. The place.
The trial took place at Jerusalem and before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin assembled immediately outside the Beautiful Gate of the Temple in the Basilica.

- b. Persons examining.
The ancient Sanhedrin was composed of the rulers, that is, the priests and the officials; the elders, the heads of the chief families in Israel; the scribes, the interpreters of the law and teachers of the people. It consisted of 71 members, 23 of whom formed a quorum.

The Sadducees were in the saddle. During the lifetime of our Lord, the Pharisees constituted His principal enemies. After His death and resurrection, the Sadducees took over. The Pharisees were the orthodox religious group of their day. The Sadducees were the materialists or modernists. The latter especially rejected the resurrection. Considering all the wealth and wisdom, the dignity and decorum, the grandeur and glory, it was a great and unusual assembly. There these examiners sat in a semi-circle, with the president in the center—all ready for those to be tried.

- c. Persons examined. verse 7.
Peter and John, both poor fishermen, were placed on trial. What a contrast there was between the accused and the accusers! They were not only greatly outnumbered, but they were also outclassed. There they sat in ordinary clothes, whereas their enemies were adorned in beautiful robes indicating both dignity and authority. Their education along academic lines was exceedingly limited; their examiners, to the contrary, represented the brains of the nation.
- d. The problem.
"By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?" It was the custom of that day for all to appear before them for permission to speak or to teach along religious lines. To their way of thinking, therefore, the healing of the lame man was wrong because it was not done through any authority granted by them. To them, it was wrong because they had not been consulted. They inquired, "By what power" have such as you--unlearned and contemptible men--done this? They used the same method as all highbrows. But it should be learned that abuse is never an argument.
- e. The plea. verses 8-9.

Although they were on trial for a good deed, when given a chance to witness for Christ, Peter showed tact, wisdom, and courage. They all detected at once that they were dealing with a man competent to defend his position.

They realized that he was not going to be the pushover they had anticipated. Although they did not know it, the secret of his success as a speaker was the indwelling and infilling Holy Spirit, the One whose very existence they had denied.

(2) The explanation.

a. The name. Verse 10.

How could any man put so much meaning within the compass of a single sentence? The answer came straight from the shoulder. Could they take it? The whole purpose of this assembly was to intimidate the apostles and to stamp out every vestige of Christianity. They were determined to put an end to the new movement. Peter did not claim the honor of having healed the lame man, nor did he claim this for the church. It was no other than Jesus Christ Who made the man whole.

Notice the stinging words in the uncompromising preaching of Peter, as he said, "Whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead." Now for the first time, they find themselves on trial--guilty of the death of the Son of God. They had brought Peter and John to trial. Now alas! The tables are turned. They, instead of the apostles, are on trial.

b. The shame. Verse 11.

Christ was God's selection of the chief cornerstone in His spiritual sculpture. Instead of the Jews accepting Him as such, they cast Him out. "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." To the everlasting shame of the Jews, they deliberately rejected the Stone of God's own choosing.

c. The claim. Verse 12.

With these words, the defense rests its case. The modernists of our day, like the Sadducees of that day, claimed that we who believe in the evangelical position are too dogmatic and intolerant. To Simon Peter, it was either Christ or chaos, heaven or hell, justification through faith or judgment. Many religionists today claim if a man is sincere he will go to heaven when he dies. Nothing could be further from the truth. One must be born again in order to go to heaven. One is either saved by Christ or he is not saved.