

THE SECOND PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH (PART I): A PICTURE OF ABUSE ACTS 05:12–25

Introduction

This experience of Peter and John gives a clear picture of persecution.

- I. The reasons for persecution (vv. 12-16).
- II. The persecution (vv. 17-18).
- III. The miraculous deliverance through and from persecution (vv. 19-21).
- IV. The failure of persecution: utter perplexity and frustration (vv. 21-25).

I. *Acts 05:12–16 Reasons for Persecution*

The reasons for persecution are pictured in these verses. Wherever and whenever these things take place among believers, there will be persecution of one sort or another.

1. Signs and wonders and miracles cause persecution. Note: there were *many* miraculous signs and wonders, not just a few. God works miraculous *signs and wonders* among His people to demonstrate clearly and without question. ..
 - “That He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him” (Heb. 11:6).
 - that His Son, Jesus Christ, is alive and still actively at work upon the earth, saving and meeting the needs of men.
 - that it is the people who trust God that God looks after and that possess His authority and power upon earth.

The world does not experience nor understand *miraculous signs and wonders*. The world does not understand how a life can be totally changed by the saving grace of Christ or how a miraculous healing of the body can take place. And what the world does not experience and understand, it often rejects, mocks, abuses and persecutes. Why?

=> Because miracles show the ignorance and inability of man.

=> Because miracles show that there is a Being higher than man — a God to whom man must surrender and obey.

=> Because it disturbs men and reminds them of their great need.

2. The great unity among believers causes persecution. The world fears the unity and binding force of believers who join together. They fear the force, the strength...
 - of their doctrine, worship and discipline
 - of their purpose and mission
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- of what so great a body bound together can do

John 17:21 “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Phil 1:27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.

Eph 2:14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.

3. The holding of public worship by *true* believers causes persecution. The worship and praise of God is the foundational belief of believers. The world often fears...
 - the attraction and pull of sincere and committed worship.
 - the *loyalty and commitment* of sincere worship.
4. Separation from the world and being different causes persecution. The believers of the early church were different: their lifestyle, their commitment to God, their giving all they were and had above their necessities, their fear of God. Their commitment caused them to walk completely separate from the world and from the enjoyable pleasures it offered. The believers were radically different.

Acts 5:13 No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.

2 Cor 6:17-18 “Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.” “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.”

Eph 5:11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

1 John 2:15-16 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world.

Rom 12:1-2 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

5. The commitment to reach out and evangelize the world causes persecution. The world believes there are many ways to reach God. So long as the world’s religions allow men to live as they wish and still give them a sense of security, they are acceptable and considered to be of value. Therefore, the commitment and mission of true believers,

that there is only one way to God, is considered narrow by the world. The world mocks and opposes the idea that Christ is the only Saviour of the world. The world rejects and does its best to erase the message of Christ from off the earth.

John 3:16 *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

John 6:68 *Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”*

John 8:24 *“I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.”*

Acts 4:12 *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”*

1 Cor 2:2 *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

1 Cor 3:11 *For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

6. The reaching out and mobilizing of large crowds causes persecution. The world fears large crowds who are different and separated from it. Even if the crowds mean no harm, even if the crowd is out to help the world, the world fears it. Believers are different in a way the world does not want, that is, different in morality and righteousness, giving and sacrificing — sacrificing even to the point of giving all one is and has.

Acts 4:4 *But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.*

Acts 11:21 *The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.*

Mark 4:31-32 *“It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”*

Isa 9:7 *Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.*

7. The meeting of man’s needs causes persecution. True believers see the world as being in desperate need, both physically and spiritually. Therefore, they give all they *are* and *have* above their own necessities to meet those needs. The world...
 - mocks and ridicules a commitment that demands *all* a person has, feeling that giving some is enough, even if millions of people are still left suffering.

- fears the example of a commitment so deeply made, lest their own consciences (salved by giving some) be convicted.
- dislikes being reminded and told they are *sinful* in their *storing up* and *hoarding*.

Therefore, the world approves of some needs being met by some commitment and some giving. But they reject the demand of Christ, the demand that insists upon total commitment and sacrifice.

Luke 9:23 *Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."*

Mark 10:28 *Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!"*

Luke 14:33 *"In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."*

Note that the people were clamouring to get to Peter, believing if they could just fall under his shadow they would be healed. Note: there is no mention that anyone was actually healed this way. However, the implication is that some people were. If so, the same two ingredients that bring about healing miracles were at work: the Lord's power and the faith of the sick. We must always remember that God cares and loves so much that He always honours a person's faith. If a person had a faith so great that he really believed that Peter's shadow carried the *virtue* and *power* of God, God would most likely heal the person. How wonderful the love and care of God!

Mat 17:20 *He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."*

Mat 18:19 *"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven."*

Mark 9:23 *"'If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."*

Luke 11:9 *"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."*

II. Acts 05:17–18 The Persecution

The persecution itself. Note two points.

1. The persecutors were the religionists and secular leaders of the world (see *Priests*, Acts 4:1; *Temple Guard*, Acts 4:1; *Pharisees*, Acts 23:8; *Sadducees*, Acts 23:8). They were *jealous* (zelou), which means a boiling zeal and envy. They were consumed with a boiling anger and jealousy or envy over the preaching of Jesus. (See Acts 4:2-4. See *Religionists*, Mt. 12:10 for reasons the religionists feared and opposed Jesus so much.)

2. There was the persecution itself. They were arrested and jailed. This was an attempt to silence them through...

- restraint
- fright
- shame

Being opposed, actually arrested and jailed by the authorities, would be enough to restrain, frighten and shame many preachers and believers.

Thought 1. The believer knows and has been forewarned that he will suffer persecution.

John 15:20 “Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.”

John 16:1-4 “All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. I did not tell you this at first because I was with you.”

Phil 1:29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.

2 Tim 3:12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

1 John 3:13 “Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.”

1 Pet 4:12-13 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

III. Acts 05:19–21 Deliverance from Persecution

The miraculous deliverance through and from persecution. Peter and John’s situation was serious.

=> It was night.

=> They were behind prison doors.

=> They were doubly imprisoned: guards were also stationed outside the prison doors (v. 23).

=> They were to stand trial the next morning, a trial that could threaten their lives (v. 33).

Note three points.

1. God’s deliverance in this situation was through the miraculous working of an angel. Scripture definitely says angels are “ministering spirits, sent to serve those who will inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14. See *Angels*, Heb. 1:4-14.) The point is this: God cares. He always cares about the troubling situations of His dear children. Therefore, He will do whatever is necessary to deliver His child through trouble (Rom. 8:28).

- a. God sometimes delivers by giving His presence of love, joy, peace and security so the believer can endure and minister while in the trial. Paul is a dynamic example. He spent years in prison, but while there he was always witnessing and ministering (see Ph. 1:12-14).

1 Cor 10:13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Isa 41:10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Heb 2:17-18 For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Heb 4:15-16 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Heb 13:6 So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

- b. God sometimes delivers believers unto Himself, taking them on home to heaven when their ministry on earth is done. Sometimes the believer is to remain in the trial and die as a martyr or as a sufferer in the name of the Lord Jesus. Sometimes there is a need to reach some observer standing there witnessing the trial of the believer. The believer’s hope and faithfulness to the end is used by God to preach volumes to the observers. Through suffering, God proves His glorious love and power for His dear servant.

2 Tim 4:18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Heb 2:14-15 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

- c. God sometimes delivers believers out and away from trouble. They can best serve the Lord by being free of the trial.

2 Cor 1:10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.

2 Pet 2:9 If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.

Psa 91:3 *Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.*

Jer 1:8 *"Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.*

2. God's purpose for Peter and John was for them to "go, stand and...tell the people the full message." The Greek is strong, demanding boldness and courage.

=> "Go": go now, immediately.

=> "Stand": take your stand; stand forth without reservation or hesitation.

=> "Tell"; proclaim, preach, teach — courageously, boldly, without fear.

=> "The full message of this new life"; the whole gospel of salvation; the glorious message of the death and resurrection of Christ; not watering down or changing anything; not holding back; not trying to soften the message to make it more acceptable.

Note a significant fact: difficult assignments usually follow miracles. A heavy responsibility falls upon the man for whom God works a miracle. God frees His servant in order to perform a great work. Miracles perplex the world. God sees to it because He wants them to lead to the conviction and conversion of men.

Acts 1:8 *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Acts 4:20 *"For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."*

2 Tim 1:8 *So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.*

Titus 2:15 *These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.*

1 Pet 3:15 *But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*

3. The disciples obeyed, and they obeyed fully and completely, without hesitation. They obeyed as soon as they could. They arose "at daybreak" and entered the temple and taught.

John 15:10 *"If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love."*

2 Tim 1:7-8 *For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.*

IV. Acts 05:21–25 The Failure of Persecution

The failure of persecution resulted in utter perplexity and frustration. The story of what happened next is an excellent picture of persecution whenever it is launched against Christ and His followers.

1. The persecutors (worldly court) convened to try the disciples.
2. The guards found them missing: they had been delivered out of the persecution. (As pointed out in the previous point, God always delivers His dear child out of the *suffering* of persecution, either *through* or *away* from it.)
3. The persecutors were *puzzled* (*dieporoun*): were perplexed; completely baffled; wondering; questioning; at a loss; thoroughly puzzled. They could not understand how the disciples could be delivered from “the jail securely locked.” They were apprehensive about the growth of the *new movement*.

In the present situation, the authorities probably thought some of the guards had either wilfully released the prisoners or else been careless while on duty.

4. The persecutors made an unbelievable discovery. The disciples had not fled for their lives like other escaped convicts would. They were “standing in the temple courts teaching the people.” They were demonstrating unbelievable behaviour, not acting like other men. They were like a blazing fire on a rampage through a forest, unstoppable. The persecutors had never seen a conviction and hope like the disciples’, a conviction and hope totally different from that of any other man, a conviction and hope...
 - that the resurrection of Jesus Christ had actually happened.
 - that men must believe the resurrection of Jesus Christ and repent to know God and to be saved.
 - that they must proclaim the gospel no matter the persecution.

Thought 1. The behaviour of true believers in persecution will always perplex and dumbfound the persecutors. The true believer’s trust and message of the living Lord cannot be stamped out. The believer has to proclaim and live for his Lord even in the face of persecution.

1 Pet 4:16-19 *However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*

1 Pet 4:12-13 *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

1 Pet 5:10 *And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. ■*