
Persecution in the Early Church

from *Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, by Conybeare and Howson.

The death of St. Stephen is a bright passage in the earliest history of the church. Where in the annals of the world can we find so perfect an image of a pure and blessed saint as that which is drawn in the concluding verses of the seventh chapter of the Acts of the Apostles? And the brightness which invests the scene of the martyr's last moments is the more impressive from its contrast with all that has preceded it since the crucifixion of Christ. The first apostle who died was a traitor. The first disciples of the Christian apostles whose deaths are recorded were liars and hypocrites. The kingdom of the Son of Man was founded in darkness and gloom. But a heavenly light reappeared with the martyrdom of St. Stephen. The revelation of such a character at the moment of death was the strongest of all evidences, and the highest of all encouragements. Nothing could more confidently assert the divine power of the new religion; nothing could prophesy more surely the certainty of its final victory.

To us who have the experience of many centuries of Christian history, and who can look back through a long series of martyrdoms to this which was the beginning and example of the rest, these thoughts are easy and obvious; but to the friends and associates of the murdered saint, such feelings of cheerful and confident assurance were perhaps more difficult. Though Christ was indeed risen from the dead, His disciples could hardly yet be able to realize the full triumph of the Cross over death. Even many years afterwards Paul the Apostle wrote to the Thessalonians concerning those who had "fallen asleep" (1 Thess. 4:13) more peaceably than Stephen, that they ought not to sorrow for them as those without hope; and now, at the very beginning of the Gospel, the grief of the Christians must have been great indeed, when the corpse of their champion and their brother lay at the feet of Saul the murderer. Yet, amidst the consternation of some and the fury of others, friends of the martyr

were found,¹ who gave him all the melancholy honors of a Jewish funeral, and carefully buried him, as Joseph buried his father, "with great and sore lamentation." (Gen. 1:10)

After the death and burial of Stephen the persecution still raged in Jerusalem. That temporary protection which had been extended to the rising sect by such men as Gamaliel was now at an end. Pharisees and Sadducees, priests and people, alike indulged the most violent and ungovernable fury. It does not seem that any check was laid upon them by the Roman authorities. Either the procurator was absent from the city or he was unwilling to connive at what seemed to him an ordinary religious quarrel.

The eminent and active agent in this persecution was Saul. There are strong grounds for believing that if he was not a member of the Sanhedrin at the time of St. Stephen's death, he was elected into that powerful senate soon after, possibly as a reward for the zeal he had shown against the heretic. He himself says that in Jerusalem he not only exercised the power of imprisonment by commission from the High Priests, but also, when the Christians were put to death, gave his vote against them.² From this expression it is natural to infer that he was a member of that supreme court of judicature.

¹ Acts 8:2. Probably they were Hellenistic Jews impressed in favor of Christianity. It seems hardly likely that they were avowed Christians. There is nothing in the expression itself to determine the point.

² The word "voice" in the AV should be read "vote." Acts 26:10. If this inference is well founded, and if the qualification for a member of the Sanhedrin mentioned in the last chapter was a necessary qualification, Saul must have been a married man and the father of a family. If so it is probably that his wife and children did not long survive; for otherwise, some notice of them would have occurred in the subsequent narrative, or some allusion to them in the Epistles. And we know that if ever he had a wife she was not living when he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7). It was customary among the Jews to marry at an early age. Baron Bunsen has expressed his belief in the tradition that St. Paul was a widower.

However this might be, his zeal in conducting the persecution was unbounded. We cannot help observing how frequently strong expressions concerning his share in the injustice and cruelty now perpetrated are multiplied in the Scriptures. In St. Luke's narrative, in St. Paul's own speeches, in his earlier and later epistles, the subject recurs again and again. He "made havoc of the Church," invading the sanctuaries of domestic life, "entering into every house;" (Acts 8:3; see 9:2) and those whom he thus tore from their homes he "committed to prison;" or, in his own words at a later period, when he had recognized as God's people those whom he now imagined to be His enemies, "thinking that he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ... in Jerusalem ... he shut up many of the saints in prison. (Acts 26:9,10; cf. 22:3)

And not only did men thus suffer at his hands, but women also, a fact three times repeated as a great aggravation of his cruelty (Acts 8:3; 9:2; 22:4). These persecuted people were scourged "in many synagogues." (Acts 26:10) Nor was Stephen the only one who suffered death, as we may infer from the apostle's own confession.³ And what was worse than scourging or than death itself, he used every effort to make them blaspheme that holy name whereby they were called.⁴ His fame as an inquisitor was notorious far and wide. Even at Damascus Ananias had heard (Acts 9:13) "how much evil he had done to Christ's saints at Jerusalem." He was known there (Acts 9:21) as "he that destroyed them which called on this Name in Jerusalem." It was not without reason that in the deep repentance of his later years, he remembered how he had "persecuted the Church of God and wasted it," (Gal. 1:13; cf Phil. 3:6) how he had been a "blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious,"

³ "I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women (Acts 22:4), and when they were put to death I gave my vote against them (Acts 26:10)."

⁴ Acts 26:11. It is not said that he succeeded in causing any to blaspheme. It may be necessary to explain to some readers that the Greek imperfect merely denotes that the attempt was made; so in Gal. 1:23, alluded to at the end of this chapter.

(1 Tim. 1:13), and that he felt he was "not meet to be called an Apostle," because he "had persecuted the Church of God."⁵

From such cruelty, and such efforts to make them deny that Name which they honored about all names, the disciples naturally fled. In consequence of "the persecution against the Church at Jerusalem, they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria." The Apostles only remained (Acts 8:1). But this dispersion led to great results. The moment of lower depression was the very time of the church's first missionary triumph. "They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word." (Acts 8:4; 11:19-21) First the Samaritans and then the Gentiles received that Gospel which the Jews attempted to destroy. Thus did the providence of God begin to accomplish, by unconscious instruments, the prophecy and command which had been given, "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me, both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

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For information about regular Bible studies, write:

Warren Doud

1705 Aggie Lane, Austin, Texas 78757

E-Mail: wdoud@gracenotes.info

URL: <http://www.gracenotes.info>

⁵ 1 Cor. 15:9. It should be observed that in all these passages from the Epistles the same word for "persecution" is used.