

Followers of the Way

Signs, wonders ... and persecution

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Acts 7:51 - 8:8

That first Pentecost morning, I wonder if the disciples had any idea what lay ahead? Yes, their Saviour had been crucified and they were obviously pretty scared, even after they'd seen Him ascend into heaven. But that first Pentecost morning, they saw and experienced for themselves God's awesome power. Just as Jesus had said, they were clothed with power from on high. So ... did they maybe imagine it was going to be plain sailing from then on? When people heard this amazing message and saw for themselves what God could do, wouldn't they just repent? And would Christ, the King of glory, then return?

We know that those first disciples took their Commission to go out and make disciples of all very seriously. That first morning, blown away by the Spirit, they were transformed, and immediately they began to proclaim the good news of what God had done. Acts 2:36, Peter stood up before the crowd that had gathered to see what was going on and shouted, '... let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, **this Jesus whom you crucified.**'

And as men and women repented and obeyed, they saw extraordinary things. Miracles! From that first morning, when an amazing 3,000 were converted, we read that awe came upon the believers because of the many signs and wonders that they saw. For example, in Acts 3, we learn about the man lame from birth, who entered the temple walking and leaping and praising God, following Peter's command to stand up and walk, *in the name of Jesus Christ.*

What testimonies! It must have been wonderful. But at the same time, almost immediately, the believers discovered that not everyone was ready to accept this new teaching. In fact some were extremely hostile, and they just didn't want to know. Accepting Christ as Lord and Saviour might free people from bondage to sin – it might, as the disciples claimed, restore them to direct relationship with God. But some actually liked things the way they were, and didn't want it to change. Maybe because they enjoyed positions of power, or had great wealth, or were addicted to having things their own way and doing what they wanted, and didn't want to give that up. Or maybe because they followed other gods.

Believers soon discovered, if they didn't already know, that following Christ was never going to be an easy ride, because it confronted people with a choice – and because at heart this was a spiritual battle, with forces hostile to God, despite Christ's victory on the Cross, still battling for control.

So here, in our reading this morning, we find the first believer following in the footsteps of Christ, and dying for his faith. Stephen, one of the first deacons and a powerful man of God – full of grace and power, we're told, who had done great signs and wonders

among the people – is stoned to death, following his fearless defence of the gospel before the High Priest and the Sanhedrin.

Why? Why were the Jews so angry that they'd only be satisfied with the death of this man who, on the face of it, had done no wrong?

Well, let's think about it. He wasn't very diplomatic, was he? He called the proud Jewish leaders, 'you stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and mind, forever opposing the Holy Spirit'. Then he said they'd always been like that, killing the prophets who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, so the fact that they'd betrayed and murdered Jesus wasn't really much of a surprise! In other words, Stephen was openly branding these men – the religious leaders of Israel – as enemies of God, openly opposing the Holy Spirit. Not exactly a lesson in how to win friends and influence people, but when you think about it, it's even worse, because what Stephen was saying, in effect, was that there was no longer any validity to temple worship, built as it was round sacrifice. (v.48) '... the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands', he said. But even worse, with the coming of the Righteous One, long foretold in prophesy, what Stephen was actually saying was that a new period of history had dawned. So sacrifice was redundant.

At a human level, you can maybe understand why they were so challenged and reacted in the way they did. After all, if what Stephen said was true, this wasn't just their livelihoods that were at stake, but in one fell stroke he was demolishing what up to now had been the foundation of their lives. If they accepted what this upstart said ... what were they supposed to do? How would they live?

So the ordered legal proceedings, without warning, turn into a riot. And even now Stephen doesn't help. He could have said, 'Sorry, guys, I didn't mean that quite the way it came out. What I meant was....' But no. Instead, gazing radiantly upwards, he announces that he sees the heavens opened and the glory of God, with Jesus standing at God's right hand. This is important, because to stand on someone's right hand denotes honour and importance, so what Stephen is saying is that this Jesus – who, let's not forget, they crucified – has equal status to the Father within the Godhead. Or, to put it another way, Jesus is One with the Father and, therefore ... He's God.

This is not pouring oil on troubled water, and predictably the crowd erupts in fury, and drag him outside the city wall so that they can stone him. This isn't any part of the legal process, by the way. This is lynching by a rabble, and they lay their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Now I've always thought this was interesting, because why was Saul there, and, given that he was – and the way we know he felt at the time – why didn't he join in? He's described as a young man, which means that he's generally thought to have been somewhere between 20 to 40. So youngish, but definitely not too young to hurl a stone or two, so does the fact that he stands to the side and keeps an eye on the clothes mean that he's the instigator of the riot; an official representative of the Sanhedrin (not very likely, I'd have thought); or maybe just feels himself a bit above actually getting his hands dirty?

We don't know, but he does seem to occupy a rather more exalted position than the mob, and he clearly approves – the text tells us he did. Chapter 8:1 'Saul approved of their killing him.' And the next time we encounter him, in Chapter 9, Saul is once again

breathing threats and murder against the disciples, and has got authorisation from the High Priest to go to Damascus to root out and arrest believers.

There are several things to note here. (1) Jesus Christ, the one and only incarnate Son of God, always produces a reaction, and when we believe and try faithfully to follow Him, then as sure as the sun rises in the morning, we can expect signs and wonders ... and persecution.

(2) When people feel under threat, their first impulse is very often to attack. Those who are threatened by the gospel, will always attack ... or, to put it another way, persecute ... believers. They will do this, first, because Christ forces them to confront the uncomfortable truths in their lives. And, second, because evil, at work in and through the sin that is binding them, fights to assert and maintain control. Let us never lose sight of the fact we are in a spiritual battle. Yes, the battle belongs to the Lord, but as His foot soldiers we can expect two things: first, attack and, second, His God-given strength to resist and triumph ... while we keep faith.

Point (3) In the story of Stephen, Saul is one of the main *persecutors*, whether he actually throws a stone at this point or not. But, at the same time and nevertheless, he is destined to become one of the most influential evangelists the world has ever known. *He's a marked man*. And that tells us something else very profound about persecution: sometimes the ones who cry loudest and are most cruel are actually fighting something deep inside themselves, which they're trying desperately to deny and resist. Very often we cannot tell, but let us always bless those who curse us, and pray for those who persecute us.