

PERSECUTION OF THE APOSTLES BY JEWS

The Church was born on Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem and so the Church there became the mother Church of all the Christian churches. St. Luke described the purity and simple life of this growing Church (Acts 2:46). The Church grew rapidly by the power of the Holy Spirit Who worked through the Apostles. St. Peter had a leading role in that primitive Church as shown in the Holy Book of Acts. Priests and seven deacons helped the Apostles when the number of the believers rapidly increased from three thousand souls to five thousand souls (Acts 4:4). Performing of miracles, preaching with the Holy Gospel and the pure and the holy life of the believers were the growth factors of the Church. The believers under the Apostles' leadership would go to the Temple for prayers while their meetings were held in the believers' houses (Acts 2:46 and 5:42) and were in one accord in partaking of the Holy Communion. Likewise, work of God's hand was very clear and many believers, men and women, were added to the Church every day (Acts 5:14) including Pharisees and Scribes (Acts 6:7). The Lord was the worker in and by them and so the Lord added to the Church everyday those being saved (Acts 2:47).

The results of such success in the service sparked chains of persecutions and sufferings for the Apostles and the believers. Jews utilized every means to persecute the Apostles and the believers such as betrayal and overt plots against the growing Church. History is full of such betrayals against the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 27:20), St. Stephen (Acts 6:9-14), St. Paul (Acts 9:23-25), St. Paul and St. Barnabas in Antioch of Pasadena (Acts 13:50), in Thessalonica (Acts 17:6-8), Iconium (Acts 14:1-6), and Lystra (Acts 14:8-19). Truly, St. Paul described the Jews saying *"Who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins, but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost (1 Thessalonians 2:15 &16).*

The first Jewish group that persecuted our Apostles was the Sadducees (Acts 4:1 and 5:17) mostly because the Apostles' preaching about the Lord Jesus Christ Glorious Resurrection from the dead as they denied resurrection of dead in general. This began after the miracle St. Peter performed for the paralyzed man at the Temple with 40 years of known paralysis. The Apostles continued in the performing of miracles and thus this resulted in imprisonment, however, the Lord's Angels appeared to them, opened a prison's gates and freed them (Acts 5:12-20) where they appeared the morning in the Temple preaching and teaching once again. After that many unbelievers desired to kill them but one of their Rabbi "Gamaliel" said to them (Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men about four hundred joined him. He was slain and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this a man, Judas of Galilee, rose up in the days of the census and drew away many people after him. He also perished and all who obeyed him were dispersed. And now I say to you keep these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this work of men, it will come to nothing. But if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it-lest you even be found to fight against God.) Acts 5:35-39. And so they agreed him and called the Apostles and beat them commanding then they should not speak in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and let them go (Acts 5:40). The Apostles departed with rejoicing because they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name and daily in the Temple and in every house they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ (Acts 5:41-42).

St. Stephen one of the seven deacons was full of the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, faith, power and good deeds. Because of his teaching, Jews stirred up the people, the elders, the scribes and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the Council. He had a great oratory defense in his dialogue in the Synagogue and not one could contradict his wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke,

yet the crowd cited blasphemy and they stoned him (Acts 7:1-60). Therefore, young St. Stephen has the honor of being the first martyr in Christianity.

The first martyr among the Apostles was St. James as denoted in the Holy Book of Acts 12:1 & 2 (Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some of the Church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword). And when he saw that it pleased the Jews he seized and arrested St. Peter and intended to kill him after the Passover (Spring 44 AD) to please the Jews but the Angel of the Lord appeared to St. Peter and saved him (Acts 12: 4 -17). The just punishment of God to Herod was delivered as the Angel of the Lord struck him and he was eaten by worms and died (Acts 12:21-24).

Later in 62 AD, St. James the Just the Bishop of Jerusalem was martyred by stoning. He was acclaimed among the Jews for his holy life and piety. Josephus mentioned that the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple was a just punishment for the Jews because of their killing to this Just Bishop.

These persecutions brought about many blessings as the believers were scattered and went everywhere preaching The Word. St. Philip one of the seven deacons went down to the city of Samaria and preached the Lord Jesus Christ to them (Acts 8:5). After that St. Peter and St. John went to where they prayed and laid their hand on the believers there who received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15-17). St. Philip was led by the Holy Spirit to the desert between Jerusalem and Gaza where he preached and baptized the Ethiopian Eunuch, a minister of Candaca, the Queen of Ethiopia (Acts 8:26-40). After that St. Philip was found at Azotus and passing through he preached to all cities until he came to Caesarea (Acts 8:40). The widespread preaching and teaching by the scattered Christian believers reached Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (Acts 11:19).

However, the greatest of blessings resulting from the Jewish persecutions for the Apostles was the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, St. Paul, in 37 AD from Judaism to Christianity on the road to Damascus to arrest and seize the believers and bring them to Jerusalem. The Lord appeared to Saul and ordered Ananias to go to him whereas Ananias prayed and so St. Paul was converted, became baptized and was filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9: 1-18). According to Church Tradition Ananias was one of the seventy disciples and Bishop of Damascus.

The two most important churches outside Jerusalem during this early time were the Churches of Damascus and Antioch. In Damascus occurred the conversion of St. Paul (Acts 9:1-9) and preaching in Phoenicia (Acts 11:19). Bishop Ananias who baptized St. Paul was among the seventy disciples, a good just Jew and a Bishop of Damascus. Founding of Antioch's Church was a great event at that time where this particular Church became the gate through which Christianity reached all the states of the Roman Empire and at the same time she still maintained her connection with the mother Church in Jerusalem. The Church of Antioch was the first Christian Church for the gentiles and pagans (Acts 11:19-21). The mother Church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch who was joined later by St. Paul where they stayed one year there teaching and preaching (Acts 11:22-26). One of the main features of Antioch's Church was the gifts of the Holy Spirit where she had many prophets (Acts 13:1-3). In Antioch the believers were called Christians for the first time (Acts 11:26).

Some Jews, who came from Judea to Antioch taught that unless every believer was circumcised according to the custom of Moses, they could not be saved. As a result St. Paul and St. Barnabas disputed this teaching and they went up to Jerusalem to ask the Apostles and the elders of the Church there. In Jerusalem the Apostles and brethren gathered together in the first Council around 50-51 AD

under James, the Bishop of Jerusalem's leadership. The Council ended in what St. James said (For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well) Acts 15:1-29. Also, at this Council St. Paul got legality of his apostolicity and his Holy Gospel (Galatians 2:2). Also, St. Paul and St. Barnabas were assigned by the Church to preach to Gentiles while the rest of the Apostles were assigned to preach to the Jews.

Finally, on the 10th of August 70 AD, the Temple and Jerusalem were completely destroyed by the Roman militaries under leadership of Titus, the son of the Roman emperor Vespasian. Josephus described the horrible events that happened during that time where famines were rampant in Jerusalem, mothers ate their own children, more than 2 million Jews were killed and so the Lord Jesus Christ's prophecy about the destruction of the great city and the Temple (Matthew 24) had been fulfilled. The disciples and the believers left the city four years prior to this as the Lord warned them (Matthew 24:15) and so they were saved and the Church grew and the Lord added everyday many believers to the Church.