

Persecuted

by Miles DeBenedictis

The sermon emphasizes the inevitability of persecution for Christians and the importance of remaining steadfast in faith and bold in witness despite opposition.

Duration: 45:14

Scripture: Matthew 5:10-12, John 15:20, Acts 4:29-31, Acts 5:41-42, Acts 7:54, Acts 12:1-11

Topics: "Persecution", "Faithfulness"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the theme of persecution and opposition faced by the early church in the Book of Acts, highlighting how the power of God through His church attracts resistance from the enemy. It explores the reactions of the church to persecution, illustrating the importance of standing firm in faith and continuing to proclaim the Gospel despite challenges and threats. The sermon encourages believers to rely on God's empowerment and boldness in the face of opposition, rather than succumbing to fear or compromise.

Transcript

This is North County. I've lived here most of my life. When you've lived in a place this long, it becomes a part of you, and memories are formed.

Most of those memories are good. Some are not. It's those memories that cause shame, that remind us that we're sinners, that help us to see our need for salvation, make us thankful for our Savior.

When I think of those memories, I'm reminded of the fact that this county is full of sinners just like me. It's full of people who are lost, people who are dying, people that are blind, in need of salvation. That's why we're here.

That's why God has put us in this place. We're connected to God through the cross, and connected to people throughout our community, seeking to bring them into connection with the cross. We are cross-connected.

If you don't have a Bible, you can raise your hand, and one of the ushers will bring you one. Acts 7, 54. There we read, When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

But Stephen, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven and saw the glory of the Lord and Jesus standing at the right hand of God and said, Behold, I see the heavens open, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Then they cried with a loud voice, and they stopped their ears, and they ran upon him with one accord, and they cast him out of the city, and they stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet whose name was Saul.

And they stoned Stephen as he was calling upon God, saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and he cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he died.

And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time, there was a great persecution against the church, which was at Jerusalem. And they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

And devout men carried Stephen to his burial and made a great lamentation over him. And as for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and hailing men and women, committed them to prison. Father, as we look into your word, we pray for your wisdom.

We pray, God, that you would continue to give us insight, Lord, continue to teach us by your spirit, transform us more and more into your image, that we would reflect your glory in a dark world. God, work in us your church in our day to be witnesses unto you here in this area. Even in the face of difficulty and opposition, we pray that you would shine brightly through us.

We ask in Jesus' name, and all God's people agreed, saying, Amen. You can be seated. Last week in our review of the book of Acts, we considered the effect of God's power in the birth of the church.

We saw in Acts chapter 1 the promise of power. Jesus in verse 8 told his disciples, You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. And then in Acts chapter 2 at the beginning of the chapter, we saw the provision of power as the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost upon the believers.

120 of them gathered there in a room in Jerusalem. And then we saw how that Peter in Acts chapter 2, he preached with power the same Peter who had denied the Lord, denied that he even knew the Lord three times on the night that Jesus was arrested and tried. And then at the end of chapter 2, the byproduct of power as the church was birthed, and the church began to have influence there in Jerusalem.

And then as we finished last week in Acts chapter 6, we saw the partitioning of that power to further leaders within the church. And again, the influence of the church spread even further. Now one of the things that you can be certain of, where the power of God is present, the opposition of the enemy is imminent.

Where the power of God is present, the opposition of the enemy is near at hand. It is a certainty. Throughout the scriptures, we see this to be the case.

The early history of the church is the story of God working by His mighty power through ordinary men and women to do extraordinary exploits for the kingdom of God. And the book of Acts reveals this in just such a marvelous way. God using people just like us to accomplish the task of the kingdom of God.

That is the desire of God. That is the aim of God in His church, to work through us to extend the glory of God to the uttermost parts. And the book of Acts shows this so beautifully.

But the book of Acts also brings to light the hostile resistance of the enemy against the plans and purposes of God. The enemy is always seeking to steal, to kill, to destroy. He is seeking to ruin the work of God.

To come against it. He always comes with opposition against what God is doing. So this being a reality, I am grateful for the word of Christ in Matthew chapter 16.

Turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 16. I referenced this briefly in our study last time. But Matthew chapter 16 is that great passage of scripture where Jesus with His disciples in one of the northernmost reaches of the nation of Israel in an area called Caesarea Philippi where pagan worship was abundant.

As He is seated there with His disciples overlooking this pantheon, if you will, He asks His disciples, Who do men say that I am? And so His disciples were giving Him the critique, if you will. Well, the polling says that some think that you are Elijah. Some think that you are a prophet.

Some think that you maybe are even the Christ. And Jesus says, Who do you say that I am? And in verse 16, Simon Peter answered that question of Jesus. Matthew 16, 16.

And Simon Peter answered and said, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. What a phenomenal statement. You are the Christ.

That means the anointed one. The fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah. The one promised all the way back in Genesis chapter 3. You are the fulfillment of every prophecy of the Old Testament foretelling this coming one of God.

And not only are you the Messiah, you are the very Son of God. You have the very nature of God. We have seen it in the way that you preach, in the way that you work.

We can see that you are God. Now, if that wasn't true and Jesus was just a prophet, He would have stopped Peter, but He doesn't. Look at what Jesus says.

Jesus answered, verse 17, said unto him, Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this unto you, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say unto you that you are Peter.

And upon this rock, not upon Peter, but upon the rock that he just, that statement that he just said, upon this rock will I build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. We have there in verse 18 two wonderful promises from the Lord. First, Jesus promised that He will build His church.

He is the one who establishes it. Secondly, the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. In these two promises, we are comforted by the fact that the establishment and the defense of the church is not our task.

It's the task of the Lord. And any time when we take it upon ourselves to build or to defend God's church, we are working outside of our pay grade. It's not our task.

In much the same way, it is not our task to bring conviction of sin upon people. That is the work of the Holy Spirit of God. He does that, although we like to play Holy Spirit, don't we? And I think there, as you just

look across the spectrum of the church today in the West, you see that there are people who are taking it upon them.

They are the ones that, they're going to build the church. And that's why there are thousands of books on church growth and making it better and bigger and more technologically savvy and all this sort of thing. Because if we don't do that, then we're not going to be in any way reaching the people because they're so into media and so we don't do that.

And so we're being told. There are people who are saying that preaching is so out of date. We don't do that anymore.

Well, we're still doing it. Why? Because God told us to go and proclaim His Word. And the church was birthed in Acts chapter 2 at the proclaiming of God's Word.

But it is the work that God does. I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. So, if we're trying to be the ones that are defending the church, which there have been people throughout history who have decided that it's their job to defend the church.

And when man takes it upon himself to defend the church, he does a terrible job. You can read church history to see that is the case. But, although it is the work of God to build and to defend His church, we need to recognize that opposition against God's work, the work that God is doing in and through His church, is always going to come.

It is implied in what Jesus says in this passage. There will be opposition. The gates of hell will not prevail against it.

It implies that there is opposition that's going to come against the church. It's not going to prevail, but it's going to come against the church. Now, when we read there, the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, the concept, the idea is, and there's many different Bible teachers that have brought this from the text, Adam Clark being one of the great commentators that shows this, the gates of hell mentions the seat of power and organization and planning, that place where strategy is held within the hellish ranks, if you will.

The plans, the devices of the enemy will not prevail against the church, but there will be opposition. Consider the words of Jesus in John chapter 15. John 15 verse 20, there Jesus says to His disciples, remember the word that I said unto you, a servant is not greater than his Lord.

If they persecuted me, they will persecute you. Remember the word that I said unto you, if they persecuted me, they will persecute you. Persecution is the lot of the people of God.

Consider the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew chapter 5, turn back to the book of Matthew again. Matthew 5, we're going to get our finger exercise here this morning.

Matthew chapter 5 verse 10, Jesus says to His disciples, blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men shall revile and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so persecuted they the prophets that were before you.

When people come against you, when they say things falsely because of your witness for Christ, rejoice. How many of you are just in your natural self, find yourself rejoicing when people slander you? We don't

like that. But Jesus says, if they persecuted me, they're going to persecute you.

Know that this is going to happen. But blessed are you when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for My name's sake, for great is your reward in heaven, for so persecuted they the prophets that were before you. Jesus was persecuted for righteousness' sake.

John the Baptist before Him, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Elijah, Elisha, Joseph in the book of Genesis, Noah. Just to name a few, I mean, you look through the scriptures, there are many, many people who experienced persecution for the name of Christ, for the sake of God. Why? Well, Paul tells Timothy, anyone who desires to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

Now, these are not the promises we put on bumper stickers or bookmarks. We don't necessarily like these kind of things. I mean, to be honest with you, it would be a pretty righteous poster.

You will be persecuted. That would be awesome. That would be truer than some of the things you might pick up in some Christian bookstores.

The scriptures make it very, very clear. So, if you are experiencing reviling, people speaking falsely of you, slandering you for the sake of Christ, because of your witness for Christ, well, you're in good company. You're in good company to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ.

Now, let me be very clear. Persecution is normal Christianity. Persecution is normal to Christianity.

What we have experienced here in America in the form of religious liberty and freedom is abnormal to Christian history. But it's normal to us. Because every single one of us who were born in this nation or lived most of our life in this nation, we've experienced that kind of religious liberty.

And so, it's completely normal to us. So, when we hear of people being persecuted in other places, when you get the magazine from Voice of the Martyrs and you find that there are more people being persecuted and killed for their faith in Christ today than there were a thousand years ago or two thousand years ago, it's hard for us to comprehend that because we live in the seat of religious liberty. And anytime anyone seems to imply in any way that we don't have religious liberty in the public space, we have this great outcry within our nation because we have freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

But what is normal to us is abnormal to Christian history. And so, we recognize that we're not experiencing the norm. And it's very likely that there will come a day, perhaps in our lifetimes, some people think that it's right around the corner, perhaps years down the road, where persecution will come to our shores against the church.

And there are some ways in which we are spoken against falsely today. We hear these reports against the church, in the media, in the pop culture, people saying things about Christians. And you know what? We should recognize that that's the case.

These things will happen. Consider Acts chapter 4, if you will. Turn to Acts 4. Where the power of God is in His church, the persecution of His church will be present.

Acts chapter 4. Peter and John, in chapter 3, they had gone up to the temple to pray during the afternoon time of prayer at the ninth hour. And while they were entering the temple precincts, they came upon a man, a lame man, who was born lame. And he was there at the gate called Beautiful, and he was begging.

And when Peter and John came upon this man, before they came into the temple there, Peter looks at him and says, look at me. And so the man fixes his eyes on Peter. Peter says, listen, silver and gold I do not have.

But what I do have, I will give to you in the name of Jesus Christ. He takes him by the hand and this man, who has been lame from birth, stands to his feet and he is healed. And he goes into the temple.

This is the first time in his life he had ever been in the temple, because you are not allowed to go in the temple under the Levitical law if you are lame in that condition. The closest he had ever come was to the gates. And now he goes into the temple, walking and leaping and praising God.

Caused a little bit of a stir. I mean, imagine all the people that would go through that gate day in and day out and they would see this man. And now they see him walking and leaping and praising God.

Now, sure, there were probably some cynics who were saying, that guy was not lame, ever. That was a way for him to make some money. But there he is, healed.

Walking and leaping and praising God. And it causes such a stir that now there are people gathering around Peter James and this man, he is not named in the scriptures, and as they gather around, Peter goes, well, you want to know how this guy was healed? Let me tell you. It wasn't by our power, by our strength, that this man stands before you whole.

It was by the name of Jesus Christ. And so, once again, Peter, empowered by God, preaches the word. And then we come to Acts chapter 4, verse 1. As they spoke unto the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees, they came upon them, being grieved that they taught the people and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead.

They said, listen, Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection from the dead. And so they're furious. How dare you preach this thing we don't believe? We live in a culture today that is furious because we preach things they don't believe.

Does that make what we preach untrue? Here is this lame man made whole, and Peter says, he stands before you whole because Jesus raised from the dead and has power. So they're not happy that they preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead. So, verse 3, they laid hands on them and they put them in hold.

They put them in a prison until the next day for it was near evening. Well, the following day, Peter and John and the man that had been healed stood before the council of priests, including the high priests and other religious leaders, the Sadducees present there. And Peter is equipped with boldness once again by the Spirit of God, and he begins to preach before these individuals when they ask him, so how did this whole thing happen? What is this con job you're doing? And so Peter preaches the gospel.

He preaches the name of Jesus Christ with boldness and power. Verse 12, he says, Acts 4, verse 12, Neither is there salvation in any other name, for there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. Well, the religious leaders didn't necessarily like that.

These are the same religious leaders that just a short time before this had condemned Jesus to die, crucified Him. And so Peter says, you crucified Him, He raised from the dead, and He is the only way of salvation. Well, these religious leaders couldn't have unlearned, ignorant Galileans preaching such things

in Jerusalem, so look at what they did.

Look at Acts 4, verse 15. But when they had commanded them to go outside of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, What shall we do to these men? For that indeed a notable miracle has been done by them. It's manifest to everyone that dwells in Jerusalem.

We cannot deny it. We can't deny that something powerful has happened here. But we have to mitigate the problem here.

So, lest it spread no further among the people, verse 17, let us straightly threaten them that they speak henceforth no man, no more in this man's name. And so they called them and commanded them not to speak, nor at all to teach in the name of Jesus. Don't talk about this Jesus anymore.

Just stop that. That's bad. We don't want to hear this no more.

Stop mentioning Jesus. We don't see that in our culture today. Nothing like that.

What is it about the name of Jesus that just so infuriates people? Well, again, in Acts chapter 5, time has passed a bit. God is powerfully moving in and among His church again. People are being healed of illnesses, set free from demonic vexation.

So, look at verse 17 of Acts chapter 5. Then the high priest rose up and all they that were with him, which were of the sect of the... what? Sadducees. They're preaching in Jesus the resurrection from the dead and seeing mighty works be done through the power of the raised Christ. They were the high priest, and these with him, they were filled with indignation.

I love that word, indignation. That's why I love the King James Version. It just doesn't say it like that in most other verses.

Indignation. They're ticked off. Not happy.

And they laid their hands on the apostles. Now, not just Peter and John, but they laid their hands on the apostles, the leaders of the church, and they put them in a common prison. Now God, through a mighty act, opens the prison doors during the night and he sets these captive apostles free and he tells them, go back into the temple and preach Christ.

And so they go back into the temple and they preach Christ. Look at verse 25. Acts 5, 25.

The next morning when everybody gets together, they go to look for these guys in the prison cell. They're not there. So, verse 25.

Then came one of them and told them, saying, behold, the men who you put in prison are standing in the temple and they're teaching the people. Then went the captain of the officers and brought them without violence for they feared the people lest they should have been stoned by the people. Now the religious leaders are fearing the people.

And when they brought them, they set them before the council and the high priest asked them, saying, did we not straightly command you that you should not teach in this name? Didn't we tell you to stop this whole thing? And behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. I love that. Why? Jesus said, you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem.

And now, he says, you've filled Jerusalem with this teaching, with this doctrine. Stop it. I mean, you can almost see the priest getting ready to tear his clothes.

Stop it. You can't do this. We've straightly warned you not to preach in his name any longer.

I'm the high priest. Listen. Right? That's what he's doing.

You've filled Jerusalem with your doctrine and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us. You're trying to say that we killed Jesus. Well, you did.

And you were pretty excited about it when you did it. So, what's going on here? Well, Peter once again preaches, this time with the other apostles. Acts 5.29-32 tells us that.

And then verse 33, when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and they took counsel to what? Let's kill them. We warned them once. Kill them.

No strike two. Now, one man, a wise Pharisee by the name of Gamaliel, he says, wait, wait, wait, time out. And he gives them a brief history lesson.

Listen, this kind of thing has happened before. We've had little groups of people rise up. This guy's the Messiah and it died out.

This guy's the Messiah and it died out. Listen, if this is not the work of God, it'll die. Don't push against it.

If it is the work of God, there's nothing we can do to fight against it because we will find ourselves fighting against God. We're going to find ourselves fighting against God. Now, keep that in your minds for next week.

You fight against this, you'll be fighting against God. Gamaliel. Look at Acts 5.40. And to him they consented.

They agreed. So, when they called the apostles, they beat them. They commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus and they let them go.

So, okay Gamaliel, that's probably wisdom. You're older than most of us. We're good with that.

Let's at least beat them up. Alright, rough them up. Bring them in here.

Give them a little swift kick and maybe they'll shut them up. Don't preach in his name. They send them on their road.

So we saw last week in Acts chapter 6 how the power of God within his church was further partitioned after this point among wise, spirit-filled men within the church to be set to the task of ministry in an area of ministry that was lacking there in the opening verses of Acts chapter 6. And one of the men, the first one named in Acts chapter 6 is a guy by the name of Stephen. And Stephen we read in Acts 6 verse 8 was full of faith and power and he did great wonders and miracles among the people. Now let me ask you, do you think Stephen did wonderful works and miracles? Was it him? Who was it? It's the risen Lord.

He was filled with power and God through him is working mightily. And what do we know? When the power of God is working through his church what will always be evident? Opposition. Persecution.

The enemy will always come against that. So the power of God when it is focused through the church persecution always presents itself. So Stephen empowered by God preaches an epic sermon.

Acts chapter 7. Read it later. It's powerful. When his audience heard it, verse 54, we read this at the open of our time together today.

When they heard these things they were cut to the heart. They gnashed at him with their teeth. Verse 57.

Then they cried out with a loud voice and they stopped their ears. You can imagine these guys literally plugging their ears. In reality, we're not listening to this anymore.

Refuse to hear what you have to say. Although they're cut to the heart, they're convicted. They reject the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and they run upon him as one group and they cast him outside of the city of Jerusalem.

They stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen while he was calling upon the Lord saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

He kneeled down. He cried with a loud voice. Lord, lay not this to their charge.

And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And so Stephen becomes the first martyr of the church. It's interesting because when Jesus told his disciples in Acts chapter 1, verse 8, you shall be witnesses unto me.

It's the Greek word martyros, which is where we get the word martyr. He's killed for his faith. He's killed for his profession.

Jesus said, listen, if they persecuted me, they'll persecute you. Rejoice. So persecuted they, the prophets who were before you.

Great is your reward in heaven. Stephen stepped into eternity to a great reward. And then we read in Acts chapter 8, verse 1, Saul, the same Saul who they cast their clothes at his feet in verse 58 of chapter 7, the same Saul was consenting to his death.

He had some sort of power and authority in Jerusalem as a religious leader. Although he was young, he was one of the rising stars in Judaism, this Saul was. And there he stood.

He's not getting his hands dirty. I mean, the religious leaders, they're not going to get their hands dirty. He's just standing there as a Pharisee and he's watching and saying, yep, go right ahead.

Kill him. You sure it's good? We have the legal authority to kill him? Yep. I'm standing here as the one with authority saying, yes, take his life.

And so they killed Stephen. And Saul is consenting unto his death. And at that time, there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem.

So the persecution, the opposition began against Peter and John. When they went up to the temple to pray in Acts chapter 4, it continued against all the apostles in Acts chapter 5. And now it continued against this one Stephen and now it spreads to the entire church. The whole church experiences opposition there in Jerusalem.

And they were all, note this, they were all scattered abroad throughout the region of Judea and Samaria. Now, why is that important? Because Acts 1 verse 8 said, you shall receive power to be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts. Now here in Acts chapter 8 verse 1, this is about six years later, Acts 1 verse 8 is now being fulfilled and notice how God is allowing persecution to fulfill His work.

This is phenomenal and this is important. God allows this persecution because to this point, the gospel, the doctrine of Christ was seated there in Jerusalem. Remember what the chief priest said, you have caused this to spread throughout all Jerusalem, your doctrine.

But now it's already in Jerusalem, it's time to go to Judea and Samaria. But these guys love Jerusalem. Why leave? I'll tell you why I leave.

Persecution. Persecution came against the church and now they were all scattered to Judea and Samaria because they're empowered by God and where the power of God is focused, persecution will arise. Verse 3, Saul made havoc of the church, entering into every house and dragging men and women, committing them to prison.

Now turn over to Acts chapter 12. Acts chapter 12. Again, this is sometime later.

About that time, Herod the king, verse 1, stretched forth his hands to vex certain within the church to come against them and he killed James, the brother of John, with a sword. James and John, remember, sons of thunder, sons of Zebedee, two fishermen who Jesus came to them while they were fishing with their father cleaning their nets. He says, follow me.

They followed him. They left everything. They followed him.

They were probably pretty young when they heeded that call. Now some years later, they've seen the risen Lord ascend into heaven. They've been empowered with power on high.

They've been preaching powerfully the gospel of Christ, the doctrine of Christ throughout the region of Jerusalem. And now the king of that region, Herod, he sets himself against the church. He decides, we've got to deal with this whole thing.

He didn't like what was happening within the church because the church was preaching truth and this guy was a liar and an adulterer and a fool. So the things that the church was saying was not politically correct. And so he set himself to vex the church, disrupt it.

And so he has James, the brother of John, killed. Verse three, because Herod saw that it pleased the Jews, what he had done, they were happy that he was killed. Hey, this pulls well.

This killing Christians thing, it pulls really, really well. So what should we do? Well, hey, take out that key guy, get Peter. So he proceeded even further to take Peter also.

And then were the days of unleavened bread. So this is during the time of the Passover. And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him, intending that after the Passover, after that time, to bring him forth to the people.

So he says, all right, so here's what we're going to do. You guys go get Peter. We know where he's at.

Bring him in. Put him in prison. When we're done, we'll bring him before the people and we'll really please the Jews with this one.

We're going to get rid of this Peter guy. The same guy who preached on the day of Pentecost, the same guy who stood up to the chief priest there during Acts chapter four and Acts chapter five, the ringleader. Take him out.

Get him. And this will really bode well for us. Well, you read through the remainder of chapter 12 in the middle of the night.

Peter's sleeping in prison. He's got a ton of Roman soldiers keeping guard over him. They're concerned that maybe someone might try and take him out of the prison.

Well, there he is. He's sleeping and an angel comes and kind of wakes him up. Hey, wake up.

Let's go. Peter wakes up. He's kind of drowsy.

The doors of the prison open. He walks right out. The church is praying.

They're interceding. They're fasting for Peter in Acts chapter 12 and he comes to the house and he knocks on the door. A young girl comes out.

She opens the door. She sees that it's Peter. She's so amazed that it's Peter.

She closes the door and goes back in and says, Peter's at the door. They go, oh, come on. You're crazy.

It's not Peter. It's just Peter's angel. He's not here.

He's in prison. You know he's in prison. So he just stands outside.

Finally they come. Whoa, it's Peter. Miraculously released from prison.

The next section of the passage tells us that Herod, on one of the days he stands up to proclaim himself so great down in Caesarea by the sea and judgment comes upon him and he dies. The scriptures say he was eaten with worms. Pretty gnarly.

Judgment of God upon him. So we see the power of God. You shall receive power.

You're going to be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the uttermost parts of the earth. And where power is focused from God, persecution will present itself. It will arise.

And so we see that Peter and John in Acts chapter 4 are brought before the council and they're sternly warned. Don't speak about Jesus. Then the apostles in chapter 5, don't speak about Jesus.

We really mean this. Let us show you how much we mean this. Boom, boom, boom.

Beat him up a little bit. That didn't work. Acts chapter 7, Stephen is brought before a group of these leaders in Jerusalem.

He's stoned and killed. They cast their clothes at the feet of a man named Saul who begins to make havoc against the church. In Acts chapter 8, he actually effectively causes God's work to be fulfilled by his persecution.

The church is spread into Judea and Samaria. It's like if you pour water on a fire of oil, and you pour water. Don't do that. And so the church begins to be scattered.

And then ultimately, James is killed in Acts chapter 12, and Peter is taken and put in prison. Ultimately, they want to kill him as well in Acts chapter 12. And you continue through the book of Acts and you see the same persecution arise against God and the work of God through his church at every age.

And then go and pick up the book, Fox's Book of Martyrs, and read through the Christian history about these different individuals and how they were martyred and how they were put to death. Some of them were stoned. Some of them had their heads cut off.

Some of them were crucified like Peter ultimately met his death being crucified upside down. The apostle John, they tried to kill him. They put him into a French fryer.

They tried to boil him in oil, and it didn't quite work. And so they just banished him to the island of Patmos where he received the vision that we call the Apocalypse, the revelation of Jesus Christ. Some were burned at the stake.

Some were thrown to wild beasts, to animals, to be devoured and killed. Where the power of God is evident in his church, persecution will arise. This has been the case for 2,000 years of Christian history.

This is still the case in many places throughout the world. We just live under the shelter of religious liberty in America. But persecution always begins verbally before it moves, even as we see in the passage here in the Book of Acts, before it moves into the area where it is physically coming against the church.

And we are living in a time where we're beginning to see the verbal assault against the church in America, against Christians. You foolish science deniers. Did any of you guys see the video I posted on Facebook a few weeks ago from Bill Nye, the science guy? What he had to say about Christian teaching of creation and how just, how idiotic it is.

You guys are holding us back from progress. Us are holding back the world from progress because we believe in a God who created the earth. And they believed that there was nothing and then there was a boom of nothing and then something came out of nothing from nowhere.

Or, if you nail down the ringleader of them all, Dawkins, he finally admits at the end of that great video that Ben Stein put out, he admits at the end of it, well maybe the earth was seeded by aliens. That's the best you can do, but we're holding them back from progress. So then, how should the church react? How should the church respond to such persecution from the enemy? Now, what I'm about to say is in no way meant to politicize a sermon.

It's meant purely as an illustration. Please understand that. Purely as an illustration.

Whether you're on the right or the left, whatever. This last week, we have seen further escalation of violence in the Middle East. It's just the same story, same song, different tune, right? Continues.

It seems like the never-ending story. Now on the 11th anniversary of September 11th, the terrorist attacks of 2001, just this last Tuesday, we saw riots at US embassies in Libya and in Egypt. And the apparent fuel of these riots is a YouTube video that depicts Muhammad in a negative light.

That that's, that's what has done it. That's what caused all this incendiary violence in the Middle East. A YouTube video.

Now, pardon me if I seem a little condescending. I just think, really? I think these people were violent before YouTube. Maybe.

Last time I checked, YouTube was not quite as big on September 11th, 2001. So, our embassy in Cairo, as these things were starting to boil over in Egypt, just this last week, our embassy in Cairo, as a gambit, if you will, they released a statement to those who were starting to boil over with their anger, their animosity. And they could tell, this is not good for us.

We got this little walled compound here, but it doesn't look good for us, so we need to do something. So, they, they threw out a statement. And basically, the statement, you read it, it basically was saying, listen, we're sorry, we didn't mean to upset you.

You can't hold us accountable for the idiot people in America who say things that they shouldn't say. We're sorry. That's basically what they were saying.

Well, the play didn't work. The attack was on, and by day's end, there were four Americans that were dead in Libya, and the American flag had been removed from the compound there, the embassy in Cairo, and a black flag had been raised in its place with the inscription, there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. The following, a couple days later, Secretary of State of the United States of America released this statement.

Again, this is not meant to politicize. It's just an illustration. The United States deplores any intentional effort to denigrate the religious beliefs of others.

Our commitment to religious tolerance goes back to the very beginning of our nation. But let me be clear, there is never any justification for violent acts of this kind. So essentially what the Secretary of State on behalf of the administration, our foreign policy stance was, we're really sorry that we have people in America that say things about Islam.

They shouldn't say those things. Even though they have free speech, they shouldn't say that kind of stuff. It's bad.

We don't think that's right. But it's not right that you did what you did either. That may be one way to deal with opposition.

When the enemy comes in, the bully, Satan is a bully. He has no ultimate power against God. He's not the equal opposite of God.

He comes in to intimidate. And he's pretty effective at intimidation. And so, a Christian says, God, I want you to enable me with your power to be bold to preach your word.

I want you to enable me with your power to be bold to just be a Christian in my workplace. And the second you do it, when God empowers you, you can be certain that the enemy is going to come against you with opposition. And so you step out in the power of God.

And the enemy comes at you with opposition. Whatever it may look like. It may look like physical opposition.

It may just be verbal opposition. Whatever it is, he'll come against you. And what he wants you to do is to do what our foreign policy advisors did this last week.

I'm sorry. I won't do that again. I'm sorry.

Close that. I won't do it. I'm sorry.

That's what he wants. To keep you quiet. To keep you anonymous.

He wants you to keep your mouth shut. Why? Because Jesus said go and preach the gospel to all creatures. Luke chapter 24.

Jesus said go into all the world and make disciples. Teaching them to observe everything that I commanded you. Matthew chapter 28.

Wait in Jerusalem until you receive power from on high but then you're going to be empowered to be witnesses of me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth. And then when you're empowered go. And we say yes.

Oh wait, whoa, whoa, whoa. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend.

I didn't. I'm sorry. We have to be so much nicer.

I want you to just look quickly as we close at the response of God working through his church in the book of Acts to the persecution that we've considered. The enemy brings opposition in Acts chapter 4 against Peter and John. They're brought before the religious leaders of Jerusalem.

These two unlearned and ignorant men before the intimidation board. All the guys with all the letters behind their names. They stand up and they say listen, you guys are a bunch of idiots from Galilee.

Who do you think you are coming down here to Jerusalem and preaching these things? Well, you're right. We're not very smart but we've seen the risen Lord. We've been empowered from the spirit of God, the one who created all things seen and unseen.

So we're going to keep preaching. Don't speak in his name any longer. Stop this.

Their response, Acts 4, 19.

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