

“THE PERSECUTION OF THE TRUTH”  
Hebrews 10:32-39, Revelation 2:8-11, Acts 7:54-8:1a  
August 10 & 11, 2024

Christianity is the world’s most persecuted religion. All over the world, peoples of other religions become offended by those who have put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior. Some other religious groups make it their point to exterminate followers of Jesus because they have been taught that Christians are bad people, and that they deserve brutal treatment.

If a Muslim person professes faith in Jesus Christ, and becomes a Christian, most often their own family will disown them, count them as “dead to them,” beat them and punish them in an effort to get them to give up their new faith in Jesus, and even remove them from their home and community. Those followers of Jesus may also become prey to those who hate Christians enough to hunt them down and kill them. So these new converts will lose jobs, their homes, their families, as well as every possession they own. Many are arrested, tortured and persecuted horribly because they refuse to recant their faith in Jesus Christ.

In many countries, it is “illegal” for Muslims to convert to Christianity. So when that happens, the person has a death warrant put out on them. Many Christians have to leave their city or village and become refugees in other communities or other countries. But these followers of Jesus rarely turn from their faith. In fact, many become determined to return to their own people to take the Gospel of Jesus to them, knowing that they could be killed in the process. Yet they faithfully follow Jesus’ instructions to “*Go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*” (Matthew 28:19-20). And they take Jesus at His word, believing that He is with them, “*even to the end of the age*” (Matt. 28:20).

Christians are persecuted by Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, as well as atheist governmental officials, because they are thought of as presenting lies and a false religion to the people. Christians are considered “infidels” and “enemies of the state” because they will not renounce their faith in Jesus. To many peoples, Jesus is not considered a prophet, nor a “Savior,” but only a man who could do some

amazing things, just like a magician, or a charlatan. They refuse to accept Him as anything but a good man who did good things.

In many countries, the president or dictator promotes himself as the “god” of the people. North Korea’s dictator, Kim Jong Un, considers himself to be a “god,” and will not tolerate any other worship outside of him. China’s “president,” Xi Jinping, will not tolerate any loyalty outside of faith and trust in the Chinese government. People who worship Jesus Christ are thereby horribly persecuted, their churches destroyed, and the pastors and church leaders are arrested or killed.

And even here in the United States, Christians are beginning to be called enemies of the state and are counted as being worthy of extermination by those in the administration. Many Christians are finding themselves arrested or fined or imprisoned for holding on to their faith in Jesus as they follow His truth and live out His teachings. They stand up against the culture, stand firm in the truth of the Scriptures, and work to protect and support those who are being abused by our society. And they are finding themselves taken to court because they will not deny their faith or pander to secular desires.

Even on college campuses, Christians are being persecuted for holding onto and practicing their Christian beliefs. They often find themselves attacked for standing out against cultural whims and demands. They are denied access to opportunities that all other students have, and may even be denied chances to organize events and groups on campus, just because they are Christians.

And we are seeing more and more people rebelling against the Laws of God, turning their hearts away from following Jesus. Their spiritual emptiness is so great they are seeking ANY way to fill the void within them, hardening their hearts against the truth of the Gospel. And sadly, there are even some who are being persuaded by society that Christianity has no lasting value in anyone’s life, so they give up their faith and follow the ways of the world instead.

But when you live with the truth of Jesus Christ in your life, no matter what others do to you, you are living the truth, and naturally, people will become offended if they are not living the truth. They will try to shut you up from exposing their lies because you are living the truth of Jesus Christ. They

will become angry and hate you because you live the truth in Jesus. Whenever a person comes to know Jesus Christ, and begins to live the teachings of Jesus, their life becomes so different than others in the world, and the truth in them is so radically different than the ways of the world. They naturally attract attention because they are so different.

Today, we heard the writer of the Book of Hebrews encourage us to remain steadfast in our faith, to not let the things of this world get in the way of our relationship with Jesus. He says, *“Remember those earlier days after you had received the Light (of Jesus), when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded”* (Hebrews 10:32-35).

Friends, conditions in this world are only going to get worse, for we are in the Last Days before the return of Jesus. While we may put so much confidence in the things of this world, do not let your loyalty shift from Jesus to the world. Don't let the comforts of this world determine the amount of your faith in Jesus. Everything here is temporary, but our faith in Jesus will reward us with an everlasting compensation that will far outweigh anything that we have here on the earth. What we have is to be used for the glory of the Lord, and for the furthering of the Kingdom of God. Don't let the wealth and possessions you are blessed with become your “gods.” They are not worthy to be compared to having Jesus Christ as your Savior.

In his letter to the churches, called the Book of Revelation, the apostle John wrote to the Church in Smyrna, encouraging them to remain steadfast in their faith, regardless of what may happen to them. You heard him say, *“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown”* (Rev. 2:10).

So John also warns us that persecution is coming. It will try to get us to turn away from our faith

in Jesus. But instead of being afraid about what may happen, however, we are to be joyful to the point that we continue to live for Jesus each day so that those around us might see the value of having Christ Jesus as Lord (see Colossians 2:1-15). Having Jesus as our Savior is so transformational that once we make a wholehearted commitment to Him, we are never the same.

But the John also calls us to be prepared to stand up boldly for Jesus Christ. Jesus told His disciples that a time would come when the leaders of the nations would arrest them and have them stand trial before them because of their faith in Him (Matthew 24:9-14). We will also be persecuted and put to death, but if we stand firm to the end, we will be saved for all eternity. It is at these times of great persecution that our testimony of faith in Jesus will make the greatest impact on those who are around us. And we will have the chance to take the Good News of Jesus to the whole world, if we hold fast in our faith.

And we see how that happened in the life of Stephen as we continue our study of the Book of Acts. He was arrested and given a chance to defend himself before the Sanhedrin, and so he recounts the history of the people of Israel. He reminds them of all that God had done for the people, and how God had established them as a nation, giving them the Temple to worship the Lord God.

But then Stephen says, *“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered Him - you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it”* (Acts 7:51-53).

Upon hearing this, the leaders of temple in the Sanhedrin go absolutely berserk! They refuse to accept responsibility of killing the Messiah, Jesus, even though it was a part of God’s plan for the Salvation of the world. They are so offended that Stephen should accuse them of following the pattern of their forefathers, they lose their cool. Listen to what happens. This is Acts 7:54-8:1a (READ Acts 7:54-8:1a).

This time, Gamaliel did not quiet the Sanhedrin's anger as he had done earlier when Peter and John had appeared before them. At that time, Gamaliel had advised them to "tolerate" the disciples of Jesus, because "*if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God*" (Acts 5:38-39).

But here, listening to Stephen's defense, and then having him judge their lies and unrighteousness, they became "*furious and gnashed their teeth at him*" (7:54). This is an important detail to remember, since the gnashing of teeth is characterized by wicked men acting upon their predatory power.<sup>1</sup> Gnashing of teeth signifies extreme anger and rejection.

Likely you've seen an angry person. You noticed that the muscles of their jaws bulge out as they burn in anger at someone. The gnashing of teeth is that clenching of the jaw due to the extreme anger felt by that individual. And that anger usually explodes out of the person to put the rest of their body into action.

The men of the Sanhedrin were so offended and angered by Stephen's defense and accusation that they abused their power and position, that their teeth became clenched and the level of their anger exploded the thermometer. So there was no declaration of guilt by the high priest. There was no legal action taken through the courts before the Romans. The Sanhedrin had no power to put anyone to death. However, there was immediate rage that set a mob into action, and they illegally reacted to Stephen.

This partly came as they heard Stephen express his vision of seeing "*the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God*" (7:56). This was blasphemy to the Jews, since they believed what God had told Moses, that "*no one can look upon My face and live*" (Exodus 33:20). But even more, Stephen says that he sees Jesus, the Son of Man, "*standing at the right hand of God*" (Acts 7:55-56). This was the very Jesus that they had crucified as a common criminal, now standing at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty! NO WAY! So they "*covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices, [and] they rushed at him...*" (7:57).

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<sup>1</sup> (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985 (15<sup>th</sup> printing)] R-K, pg.672).

Remember, Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, and as the Spirit enabled his human eyes to behold, the heavens were opened and he was given the privilege to see the glory of God. But what is most significant to this account is that Stephen sees Jesus STANDING at the right hand of God. In all of our professions of faith, we recite our belief that Jesus “ascended into heaven and is SEATED at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead” (Apostle’s Creed). So why does Stephen see Jesus standing?

“Stephen sees Jesus in His role as the Son of man; he sees Him as the One who suffered and was vindicated by God (Lk. 9:22) ... but also as the One who will vindicate in God’s presence those who are not ashamed of Jesus and acknowledge their allegiance to Him before men (Lk. 12:8).”<sup>2</sup> Stephen has stood up for Jesus, professing his faith and trust in Him as the Messiah and Lord and Savior, so Jesus stands up for him! Folks, if we stand for Jesus in our lives, Jesus will stand before God for us, too.

Now, it is this profession of faith in Jesus as the crucified, dead, risen and ascended Messiah of God that drives the men of the Sanhedrin to anger and murderous actions. They were far from repenting of their sins and acknowledging what Stephen said was truth. So full of their self-righteous anger, they dragged Stephen out of the city and took illegal action toward him. They began stoning him to death.

But it is curious that when a stoning was to take place according to the Mishnah, the one being stoned was required to be stripped of all of their clothing. But here, it is the very ones who are doing the stoning that remove their robes in order to complete their gruesome actions easier. They are going against not only the Roman law, but their own religious laws, too. Their anger is so great they throw off all restraint and begin extinguishing the voice that has spoken the truth. I’m not sure if anyone would have been able to restrain them at that point. Their murderous rage drove them to the very limit of their reality.

The “*witnesses*,” (or more properly stated participants in the stoning of Stephen), though filled with rage at Stephen, were careful to lay down their robes that they might be protected from theft. We

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<sup>2</sup> (I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts Of The Apostles*, [Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980] pg. 149)

are told, “*Meanwhile, the “witnesses” laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul” (7:58).*

This is the very first time we hear of the mention of Saul. He probably was a part of the Cilician synagogue, and as a Pharisee, was among Stephen’s opponents. And while not participating in the stoning of Stephen, he gave full approval of the action of the Sanhedrin. He had heard Stephen’s defense, and had likely become just as offended by his rebuke of the leaders of the Temple. As a young man, he may not have yet had the authority to actually participate in the stoning, but he willingly watched over the coats and robes of those who did the stoning.

But stoning is not as quick a death as a bullet to the head or a knife to the throat. While the stones pummeled his body, Stephen again looks toward heaven. Howard Marshall states it like this: “Stephen’s last words were a prayer for himself, and for his executioners. Like Jesus, he surrendered his spirit up; but whereas the dying Jesus committed Himself to God in the words of Psalm 31:5, Stephen committed himself the Jesus whom he had seen in his vision. It is a striking example of a form of words originally applicable to the Father being addressed to the Son, and shows how the early Christians placed Jesus on the same level as the Father.

“Then Stephen prayed for pardon for his executioners, again echoing the words of Jesus (Luke 23:24); his words stand in striking contrast to his attitude of denunciation in his speech, and illustrate how the Christian, while denouncing sin and disobedience to God in order to lead his hearers to repentance, must also have pastoral concern for them, and pray that they may be forgiven. So saying, he fell asleep (cf. 1 Thess. 4:14f.), the first Christian to die for the sake of Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

Stephen’s love for the people continued to show, even when they were persecuting him to death. His rebuke and his faith were of one mind, to expose the truth of Jesus Christ to the leaders of the Temple. Stephen so desperately wanted them to know Jesus as their Christ, and he sought God’s forgiveness of them so that they might have one more chance to receive Jesus. However, the plan of Salvation for the world was shifting from the Jews, to the Gentiles. While God’s first intention was that

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<sup>3</sup> (I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts Of The Apostles*, [Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980] pg. 150)

His people, the Jews, would become the bearers of the Light of Jesus into the world, the rejection of Jesus as the Christ by the leaders of the Temple sealed their fates as ones who rejected the Messiah. So as the Holy Spirit began moving in that direction, it was Stephen and the others of the 7 Greek followers of Jesus who became the first Gentile presenters of the Gospel of Jesus to the world. And Stephen gave his life for the sake of the people, desperately wanting them to come to know Jesus, too.

You'll hear more about Saul in the next few months, but I want to point out one last thing for you today to be careful to understand. Saul was there giving approval to Stephen's death. But he never forgot the incident, because much later in his life, he would become very similar to Stephen to all those he spoke to. Whenever he went to a new town or city, Saul would always go first to the Jewish Temple to proclaim Jesus, and when they rejected his testimony, only then would he go to the Gentiles. But he had a heart for his own people, and went so far as to say, *"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised!"* (Romans 9:2-5).

Stephen loved his people, even to the point of death, that they might receive Jesus as their Savior and Messiah and King. We should be the same. Live the truth of Jesus Christ today and always.

Let's pray. Father, thank You for Jesus Christ, who has given us new life. Thank You for the hope we have in Him. Thank You for those who have gone before us who have put their faith in Jesus and have lived as witnesses for us. Thank You for all those today who are living for Jesus, even though they are persecuted, oppressed, abandoned, and even destroyed. Thank You, Jesus, for standing up for them in the presence of God the Father, acknowledging that they have stood up for You. Give us the courage to live our lives in that same way, bringing glory and honor to You in all we do and say. Guide our hearts by Your Holy Spirit, that we also may be Your witnesses to our world of the Salvation of Jesus, that they may all come to know Him as their Savior. This I pray in Jesus' great and powerful Name. AMEN.