



## The Persecution of the Church More Intense than We Know

August 5, 2018

### I. And it begins again

Acts 5:17-42

*<sup>17</sup> Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. <sup>18</sup> They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. <sup>19</sup> But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. <sup>20</sup> "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life."*

*<sup>21</sup> At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.*

*When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. <sup>22</sup> But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, <sup>23</sup> "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." <sup>24</sup> On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.*

*<sup>25</sup> Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." <sup>26</sup> At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.*

*<sup>27</sup> The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. <sup>28</sup> "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."*

<sup>29</sup> Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings!

<sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. <sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

<sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. <sup>34</sup> But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.

<sup>35</sup> Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. <sup>36</sup> Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. <sup>37</sup> After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. <sup>38</sup> Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. <sup>39</sup> But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

<sup>40</sup> His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

<sup>41</sup> The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. <sup>42</sup> Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

## **II. And it began**

Acts 6:8-8:3

<sup>8</sup> Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

<sup>11</sup> Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

<sup>12</sup> So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. <sup>13</sup> They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. <sup>14</sup> For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

<sup>15</sup> All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

7 Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

<sup>2</sup> To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. <sup>3</sup> 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'

<sup>4</sup> "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. <sup>5</sup> He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. <sup>6</sup> God spoke to him in this way: 'For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. <sup>7</sup> But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' <sup>8</sup> Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

<sup>9</sup> "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him <sup>10</sup> and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

<sup>11</sup> "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. <sup>12</sup> When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. <sup>14</sup> After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. <sup>15</sup> Then Jacob went down to Egypt,

where he and our ancestors died.<sup>16</sup> Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

<sup>17</sup> "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased.<sup>18</sup> Then 'a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.'<sup>19</sup> He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

<sup>20</sup> "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family.<sup>21</sup> When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son.<sup>22</sup> Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

<sup>23</sup> "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites.<sup>24</sup> He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian.<sup>25</sup> Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not.<sup>26</sup> The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?'

<sup>27</sup> "But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? <sup>28</sup> Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?'<sup>29</sup> When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

<sup>30</sup> "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai.<sup>31</sup> When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say:<sup>32</sup> 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

<sup>33</sup> "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.<sup>34</sup> I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.'

<sup>35</sup> "This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush.<sup>36</sup> He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders

and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

<sup>37</sup> "This is the Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.'<sup>38</sup> He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

<sup>39</sup> "But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. <sup>40</sup> They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!' <sup>41</sup> That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. <sup>42</sup> But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

"Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel? <sup>43</sup> You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

<sup>44</sup> "Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. <sup>45</sup> After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, <sup>46</sup> who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

<sup>48</sup> "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

<sup>49</sup> "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? <sup>50</sup> Has not my hand made all these things?"

<sup>51</sup> "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! <sup>52</sup> 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— <sup>53</sup> you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

<sup>54</sup> When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the

*glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*

*<sup>57</sup> At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

*<sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.*

*8 And Saul approved of their killing him.*

*On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup> Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.*