



Enduring Persecution

The Lord Jesus had stated that He would build His church upon the "rock" — the foundational truth that He is the Son of the living God. He also remarked that "repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). Thus it was that the church began on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost, AD 30, as recorded in Acts chapter two. 3000 souls were added to the apostles' number, having been immersed in Jesus' name, and the church of Jesus Christ had its beginning in Jerusalem. Shortly thereafter, the number of men became 5000, then the brethren numbered multitudes. But by Acts chapter eight, a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem headed up by one Saul of Tarsus,

and the church was scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. The apostle Paul — the former Saul of Tarsus — described his efforts before Herod Agrippa II and the governor Porcius Festus: "Not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them ... I punished them often in all the synagogues" (Acts 26:10,11). It was clearly a rugged time for the brethren.

- ◆ **Record in Thessalonica** — But Jerusalem was not the only place where persecution occurred against Christians. "For you, brethren," Paul remembers, "became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews" (1 Thessalonians 2:14). [As a side note, it is interesting that Paul would have been the ringleader of "the Jews" who persecuted the churches of Judea.] Some moderns who have never been persecuted will state that the church does better under such privations; the inspired record posits a different perspective. True it is, that the church was driven out of Jerusalem, and that was probably necessary to get them out of their comfort zone. But when Saul of Tarsus turned from maltreating the church and became one of the promulgators of the gospel, then things changed positively for the early brethren, at least for a spell. "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up," is how Luke recorded the respite, "and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase" (Acts 9:31). Clearly, they "enjoyed the peace," and really moved forward with the gospel. For the congregation in Thessalonica, then, to hold onto its purity of doctrine and commitment to the Lord, in the face of the types of pressure exerted by the recalcitrant Jews, is commended by the apostle Paul.

- ◆ **Jews who reject the gospel** — The apostle and the Holy Spirit are not particularly complimentary to those of Israel who reject the gospel and savage the church. Describing the Jews who wreaked havoc among the early church in Judea as well as those who opposed the spread of the gospel among the Gentiles, the apostle writes, "who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out" (1 Thessalonians 2:15). It is interesting how again and again, the Jews are charged with the killing of Jesus, although it was Romans who drove the spikes into the tree. "They are not pleasing to God," the apostle adds, "but hostile to all men."

The church in Thessalonica endured persecution at the hands of the Jews in their region. They held to the doctrines the apostles preached, and kept moving forward in faith, comforted and strengthened by the indwelling Spirit. Paul was therefore very thankful that they received from him and his fellow workers the word of truth, and that the brethren did their part so that the word could continue to perform its positive and edifying work in them. Awesome progress in the face of immense opposition!!

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