



# Dealing with Persecution

## Devotional

What does the American church need most? Many rightly say, "We desperately need revival." But how does revival come? Many say that a strong dose of persecution might do the trick.

Persecution has always made the church stronger. It burns impurity out of the church. It drives away the nominal, worldly attenders, and separates the church from the world. It drives the church to prayer. It unites the church in brotherly love. It often causes the church to expand numerically, as seen in China under Communism.

I'm not ready to pray for persecution, because I'm not fond of suffering! I'll leave it to the sovereignty of God, who knows what we need. But we do need to be ready for persecution in case it comes. Our religious freedom in America is on thin ice. It is not inconceivable that we could face imprisonment or have our children taken from us for insisting on the moral teachings of the Bible. So we need to know in advance how to respond to persecution.

I'm speaking here about something that most of us have not experienced firsthand. Sure, I've faced opposition as a pastor; but I've never been imprisoned or beaten or had my property taken away because I am a Christian. But these principles also apply to the subject of how to respond to trials in general. I've encountered many American Christians who do not have an adequate theology of suffering. When trials hit, they rage at God, rather than submit to Him. They think that they have a right to prosperity and good health. So they grow bitter when trials hit.

Our text reveals the response of the early church to persecution. Peter and John had been arrested, put in jail, and then threatened by the Jewish leaders because they had healed a lame man and had preached the resurrection of Jesus Christ to the crowd. This snapshot shows them responding by drawing near to God in prayer. It also shows the care that the church had for its members and their continuing witness to the world. It teaches us to ...

**Respond to persecution by affirming our commitment to God, to His people, and to His work in the world.<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-13-how-respond-persecution-acts-423-35>

# Open it

1. Describe a time when you got picked on when you were younger. Who did it and what did they choose about you to make fun of? How was it resolved?

# Read it

**Acts 4:23-31**

# Explore it

2. What was the first thing Peter and John did after being questioned by the religious leaders?
3. What was the response of the church when they heard about what had happened to their two friends?
4. What two prayer requests did the disciples ask God to answer?
5. What sign did God give them showing that He had heard their prayer?

# Apply it

It is noteworthy that the first thing Peter and John did after being released was to go to their own companions. That group should not be limited to the other apostles, nor expanded to include the entire church (since there was no building where all 5,000 men, plus women and children, could have gathered). It may have been some or all of the original group that met in the upper room (cf. 1:13–15). They reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them and no doubt received comfort and encouragement from the others.<sup>2</sup>

6. What is it about friends and family that causes us to share both good and bad news with them? Who are some of the people who hear of your news first? Why them?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. How might the disciples have responded to the news that Peter and John had been arrested and imprisoned?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. How would their response change after hearing about the boldness that Peter and John showed? What would their boldness have done to the rest of the group?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. The friends of Peter and John were excited to hear every detail about their ministry opportunity. Why is it so important for Christians to tell each other about how God is working in their lives?

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<sup>2</sup> MacArthur, John. Acts 1–12 MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (Kindle Locations 2702–2711). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

10. When has someone's story about God working in their life impacted you in your faith?

### **GOD IS BIGGER**

After debriefing Peter and John, the Jesus people of Jerusalem prayed, laying out their situation before the Lord.

**First, they found Bible verses in Psalm 2:1–2 telling them opposition is normal for people identified with Christ (“God’s Anointed”) in a hostile world.**

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson puts the Psalms passage this way: “Why the big noise, nations? Why the mean plots, peoples? Earth-leaders push for position, demagogues and delegates meet for summit talks, the God-deniers, the Messiah-defiers...”

**Second, they confessed confidence God was in control, working out His plan.**

**Third, they didn’t ask for an easier way or destruction of their enemies.** They prayed for boldness to speak God’s message. They asked for miracles to back up their testimony.<sup>3</sup>

11. Why is it important to turn to the Scriptures when unexpected things come our way? What must we be careful of when we seek to parallel the Scriptures with our own lives?

12. Why does God not only allow but plan for His people to experience persecution? How should this truth impact believers?

William Barclay says:

They had the conviction of the futility of man’s rebellion. The word translated “rage” (Psalm 2:1) is used of the neighing of spirited horses. They may trample and toss their heads; in the end they will have to accept the discipline of the reins. Men may make their defiant gestures against God; in the end God must prevail.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Girard, Robert C.. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 1134-1139). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

13. There is no talk about sticking it to the religious leaders or seeking revenge for what they did to Peter and John. Why are we so quick to get angry and seek revenge against those who stand opposed to Christ and His work?

What did the disciples understand about persecution that enabled them to focus on the right things instead of revenge?

Jeremiah chapter 32 contains a rather striking parallel to our text. Here Jeremiah is thrown into jail by Zedekiah, king of Judah, for prophesying that Jerusalem and Israel would fall to the Babylonians. The people of Israel were instructed not to resist this (32:1–6). In response to all that happened, Jeremiah prayed, beginning with these words:

*“Ah Lord God! Behold, Thou hast made the heavens and the earth by Thy great power and by Thine outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for Thee, ...”* (Jeremiah 32:17).

The key phrase, based on the fact that God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth is this: **“Nothing is too difficult for Thee.”** To Jeremiah and to the other Old Testament saints who found assurance in the fact that God is the Creator, the bottom line was simply that He who could create all things could also control them.

Here he was predicting the downfall of Jerusalem, just as the apostles would do centuries later. And just as the king was persecuting Jeremiah, so the political and religious authorities were persecuting the apostles. And just as Jeremiah prayed to the Creator of the heavens and the earth, so did the early church.<sup>5</sup>

14. What happens when a church sees their God as really big and the temporal issues of life as very small in comparison? How can this mindset combat the most anxious and worrisome hearts?

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<sup>5</sup> Sermon by Bob Deffinbaugh found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/8-first-opposition-acts-41-31>

## EQUAL TO THE TASK

Phillips Brooks says:

"Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks."<sup>6</sup>

15. Why do many Christians have the tendency to pray more that God would rescue them from the difficult times and circumstances than asking for boldness so that they can use their circumstances to proclaim God's truth?

16. What ministry or outreach opportunity has you afraid of moving forward in faith? In what specific ways would a God-given boldness change your approach to this opportunity?

**The effect of the prayer was remarkable.** The room in which the disciples were gathered shook as if an earthquake was taking place. This was one of the signs which indicated a theophany in the Old Testament (Exodus 19:18; Isaiah 6:4), and it would have been regarded as indicating a divine response to prayer. The point is, then, that God signified that He was present and would answer the prayer.<sup>7</sup>

17. How can prayer serve to alleviate our fears and anxieties and embolden our witness for Christ?

18. Outside of God shaking the foundations, how do we know that He hears and will answer our prayers? In what ways does God manifest His power today?

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<sup>6</sup> Commentary on the Book of Acts by Paul Apple found @ <http://bibleoutlines.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/acts.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Marshall, I. Howard. Acts: 5 (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) (pp. 113-114). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

After the church prays, God awesomely answers (v. 31). Peter and John were shaken by the Sanhedrin, but Almighty God shook the church and gave them boldness as a result. They were again filled with the Spirit and continued to speak the gospel with boldness.

We live in a world where our brothers, who live only hours away from us by plane, are being killed for their faith in Jesus. Yet we so often worry ourselves with trivial things and become paralyzed by fear at the thought of sharing the gospel here in our land of freedoms. This should make us ask, Why are we not seeing a move of the Spirit like we see here in Acts? Could it be that we've grown more concerned about our social standing or reputations than about Christ and His mission? Are we more interested in accumulating new toys and gadgets than in seeing the mercy of Christ being powerfully proclaimed to and embraced by our neighbors?<sup>8</sup>

19. What things are keeping you from being more bold in your witness for Christ?

20. What can the church or your small group be doing to encourage and equip you to be the witness God is calling you to be?

**Take time to ask God to stretch you and your witness. Ask Him to fill you with His power and show you how you can take His light to a lost world.**

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<sup>8</sup> Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Location 1757). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

Note: This study guide was compiled and questions written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. [www.villagebible.org/smallgroup](http://www.villagebible.org/smallgroup)