

## The (American) Church Needs Persecution

Acts 11:19–12:24

Studies in Acts #15

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I want to follow-up on this morning's sermon on Romans 1:16 and are not being ashamed of the gospel but being confident in it. As we turn again to Acts this evening our text providentially speaks of persecution and suffering for Jesus. I hope over the last year or so you've grown in your faith as we've studied 1 Peter and Revelation and now as we study Acts. I hope you are seeing that our comfortable Christianity is not what our forefathers and foremothers experienced in the first century. I hope you are seeing that Jesus and the apostles talked a lot about persecution.

I just read this afternoon a *Time* magazine article advocating the end of tax exemption for non-profit organizations. Of course he wasn't specifically targeting churches, because that would be an obvious retaliation, so it was couched in generic terms. The moral of the story is it didn't take long for the secularists to move to the next step in their holy crusade against Christianity.

But I want to proclaim to you tonight that this persecution is a good thing. *The (American) Church Needs Persecution*; we as a Christian congregation need to be persecuted! We've seen again and again in Acts that as the kingdom of God advances, the kingdom of Satan counter-attacks using the kings and kingdoms of this world to do his bidding. So note two things tonight:

1. ***We Need to Believe God Permits It***
2. ***We Need to Believe God Uses It***

## **We Need to Believe God Permits It**

First, *we need to believe God permits it*. Our lengthy text begins, **Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen**. This links us back to chapters 7 and especially 8, where a more determined persecution broke out in Jerusalem against the church. And then we read here in chapter 12 that **Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church (12:1)**, that **he killed James the brother of John with the sword (12:2)**, and that **when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also (12:3)**.

Why? Where is God? These are questions we raise. Why would King Jesus send his Spirit and begin to invade the world with his kingdom only to have it assaulted? And where is he when this is happening?

First, I want to remind you that everything happens according to God's will and plan (Eph. 1:11).

Second, suffering in general is promised and described in the Word of God as part of God's plan (Rom. 8:18ff.).

Third, persecution in particular is promised and described as part of God's plan. It is described this way for Jesus (Acts 2:23). It is described this way for us (Acts 14:22; 1 Tim. 3:12; 1 Peter 1:6–9).

Some of the big applications for us as a congregation given the Supreme Court's decision is that we cannot equate Christianity with the State. We cannot equate

Christianity with comfort. We need to repent of our worldliness. We need to take up the cross for the first time and follow the Lord!

## **We Need to Believe God Uses It**

“But how can this be a good thing? I mean, doesn’t Paul say in Romans 1 that this is evidence of God’s wrath being poured out upon our society?” Yes, but we have to keep in mind that God makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel, between the world and his church. While the fire is falling he will shelter us. While the flood comes he will provide and Ark.

So how is this a good thing. The second thing we need to take away tonight is *we need to believe God uses it*. We’re so infected by our prosperity that we can’t imagine God using evil for our good. But he does promise this in Romans 8:28, doesn’t he? Did he do this for Joseph and Israel?

First, God uses persecution to bless us with purification of our faith (1 Peter 1:6–9).

Second, God uses persecution for the sanctification of our lives (1 Peter 2:19; 4:12–19).

Third, God uses persecution for the multiplication of the church. In 8:1 and now here in 11:19 this diaspora or dispersion seems like total chaos but it leads to the growth of the church. This is what the secularist cannot understand! **Those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch (11:19) and then we read the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord (11:21).** Then the church

in Jerusalem hears it, sends Barnabus, and **when he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad** (11:23) and **a great many people were added to the Lord** (11:24). And this led to Barnabus and Paul linking up in ministry to teach many people (11:26). So the gospel spread geographically to the north and culturally among the Hellenists.

And then what do we read after the lengthy account of Herod's persecution in chapter 12? **But the word of God increased and multiplied** (12:24).