

CHAPTER 5

PRESSURE WITHIN AND PERSECUTION WITHOUT

The Gospel Goes Forth in Power

In the last chapter we saw how God prepared and equipped His Church. God had given certain COMMANDMENTS to His believers so that they would know exactly what He wanted them to do (Acts 1:2). As they went forth obeying His Great Commission they had everything that they needed. They had the powerful Word of God. They had the presence and power of God's Spirit. They had the Lord Jesus Christ working with them. They were clad in the full armour of God. They were fully equipped as members of His body.

In this chapter we want to take a careful look at the early Christians as they went forth to do what Christ had told them to do.

Pressure Within!

Within the hearts of the first century believers there was a driving force which propelled them forward. God had lit a fire in the hearts of these men and women and this fire could not be quenched. God's Word was dwelling richly in their hearts (Col. 3:16) and overflowing through their lips so that they could not be silenced. It was as Jeremiah said long ago: "But His Word was in _____ as a burning _____ shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing and I could not stay" (Jeremiah 20:9). Jeremiah also said, "But the LORD is _____ as a Mighty Terrible One: therefore my _____ shall stumble, and they shall not prevail" (Jeremiah 20:11). So it was with the early Christians! Nothing could stop them and nothing could overcome them. God Himself was working mightily in them (see Philippians 2:13).

Persecution Without!

The believers of the first century did not go forth into a world in which everyone loved their message and gladly and joyfully received it. The majority of people hated the message which these believers preached. Jesus Himself had warned His disciples that they would be hated and persecuted (see John 15:18-21; 16:1-3,33; 17:14). But the persecution on the outside

could not overcome the pressure which was on the inside. The fire that was in their hearts was much greater than the fires of persecution which they faced in the world.

Let's go to the book of Acts and see the mighty and powerful way in which God worked in and through the early Christians as they took seriously their Lord's Great Commission:

The Day It All Started

How many disciples were there at the beginning (Acts 1:15)? _____

These believers did not run out and start preaching the gospel immediately. Instead they WAITED (Acts 1:4)! They waited for the Holy Spirit to come, because without Him there is no P _____ (Acts 1:8).

Finally 50 days after the resurrection, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came (see Acts 2:1-4). It was on this day that God came upon His believers in a special way and lit that fire in their hearts!

This important day also marked the first great opportunity to preach the gospel. Thousands of Jews were present in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. Who stood up and preached to these people (Acts 2:14)? _____

Remember, Peter was not preaching before a friendly audience! He was preaching to some of the very people who had crucified Christ less than two months earlier (see Acts 2:22-23,36). What courage Peter had to preach to these people! Peter seemed to be a completely different man from the cowardly Peter who had denied his Lord three times on the night before Jesus died. Did Peter's message go forth in great POWER (Acts 2:36-37)? _____ How many believed and were baptized (Acts 2:41)? _____ God was adding to His Church (compare Acts 2:47)! Through the preaching of the gospel and through the saving work of God the Holy Spirit, the fire was being lit in the hearts of many other people! God was adding to His church daily such as should be saved!

The Miracle and the Message

What great miracle took place in Acts chapter 3 (see verses 1-9)? _____

_____ This mighty miracle caused a great stir among the people. As all the people ran together in amazement and wonder (Acts 3:9-11), Peter had another

wonderful opportunity to preach the Word. Did Peter take advantage of this opportunity (Acts 3:12 and following)? _____ We are told later that many who heard Peter's message B _____ (Acts 4:4). The fire was being lit in more and more hearts!

It is here that we begin to see the PERSECUTION FROM WITHOUT. Were the Jewish leaders very happy about Peter's preaching (Acts 4:1-2)? _____ They were especially disturbed that the Christians were preaching that Jesus was ALIVE (Acts 4:2). As a result Peter and John were arrested (Acts 4:3).

Notice the PRESSURE FROM WITHOUT (Acts 4:18):

"And they called them and _____ them not to _____ at all nor _____ in the Name of Jesus."

Notice the PRESSURE FROM WITHIN (Acts 4:19-20):

"For we cannot but _____ (we must speak) the things which we have _____ and _____."

Which pressure was greater? _____

These authorities had threatened them (verse 17) and commanded them not to speak or preach.

When the believers prayed about this serious matter, what did they request (Acts 4:29)? _____

_____ Was the prayer answered (Acts 4:31)? _____

More Problems and Persecution

The devil's attack from without failed, so he tried to attack the Church from *within* the Church (Acts 5:1-4). The devil knows that God will not work through corrupt hearts. When believers lose their purity they lose their power. God would not let two people with lying hearts hinder the progress of His Church, so the result was that Ananias and Sapphira both dropped dead (Acts 5:5,10). Did the Church continue to grow (Acts 5:14)? _____ As the church grew so did the opposition. This time the A _____ were put into prison (Acts 5:17-18). Did they stay in prison very long (Acts 5:19-20)? _____ The Jewish leaders were shocked to find their prisoners standing in the temple and doing the very thing they did not want them to do! (See Acts 5:25)

Note the PRESSURE FROM WITHOUT (Acts 5:28)!

Note the PRESSURE FROM WITHIN (Acts 5:29)!

Which PRESSURE was greater? _____

These Apostles could not be silenced! The fire in their hearts could not be quenched by the fires of persecution! Finally the enemies of the gospel thought that BODILY PERSECUTION might convince them to stop preaching (Acts 5:40). Did their strategy work (Acts 5:41-42)? _____ Even bodily punishment could not silence them!

The First Martyr

In Acts chapter 7 we have Stephen's powerful message which he preached to the Jews (note especially verses 51-53). Did these Jews really want to hear what Stephen had to say (Acts 7:57)? _____ The only solution they had was this: TO SILENCE THE MESSAGE WE MUST SILENCE THE MESSENGER! A dead Stephen will never preach again! Were they successful in putting Stephen to death (Acts 7:58-60)? _____ They killed Stephen, but they could not kill the Word of God. They put the Gospel preacher to death, but they could not put the Gospel to death.

The enemies of the Gospel did not realize that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Even though Stephen died, the seed of the Word of God was planted in the heart of a young man whose name was _____ (Acts 7:58). He heard Stephen's message and the seed was planted. Later God would light a fire in this man's heart, and Stephen's message would be carried on by the greatest preacher the world has ever known--THE APOSTLE PAUL.

Scattered Everywhere

Jesus had told His believers to "go into ALL THE W _____" (Mark 16:15) and to "teach ALL _____" (Matthew 28:19). Up to this point in time the believers had stayed in the Jerusalem area because God had told them to go to the Jews first (Acts 1:8; Luke 24:47; Rom. 1:16).

How would God get His believers to spread out and scatter into the regions beyond? God used the PRESSURE FROM WITHOUT to do this! Because of the great persecution under Saul, the believers were all _____ abroad (Acts 8:1). What did these believers do everywhere they went (Acts 8:4)? _____ The persecution helped to get the gospel where it was supposed to go. Even the Samaritans heard the gospel message (Acts 8:5,14)! Even an African heard the gospel message (see Acts 8:26 and the verses following)! The gospel was beginning to go far and wide.

The Great Persecutor Becomes the Great Apostle

In Acts chapter 9 we learn about the time when God lit a fire in the heart of Saul of Tarsus. What did Saul do shortly after he was saved (Acts 9:20)? _____

The mighty persecutor became a mighty preacher! See Galatians 1:23. The Jews immediately started to persecute him (Acts 9:23-25)! The persecutor was now being persecuted!

The Gospel Goes to the Gentiles

In Acts chapter 10 the gospel message went to the Gentiles (non-Jewish people) for the first time. Peter again was the man who had the opportunity to open the door of the gospel to these people (Acts 10:34 and following). God was beginning to light the fire in the hearts of Gentiles!

More Persecution

In Acts chapter 12 we find more pressure from WITHOUT. What happened to James (Acts 12:1-2)? _____ What happened to Peter (Acts 12:3-4)? _____ Since there was an increase in the *pressure from without*, the believers decided that they should also increase the *pressure from within*, so they came to God in prayer (Acts 12:5). Did God answer this prayer? _____ Even though the persecution seemed to increase, did the Word of God grow and increase also (Acts 12:24)? _____

The Missionary Journeys of Paul

From chapter 13 in the book of Acts and following we learn about the three great missionary Journeys of the Apostle Paul:

| | |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| First Missionary Journey: | Acts chapters 13-14 |
| Second Missionary Journey: | Acts 15:36-18:22 |
| Third Missionary Journey: | Acts 18:23-21:14 |

We should notice three things about these Missionary Journeys:

- 1) **NOTICE THE PERSECUTION** (*the pressure from without*)

| | | |
|---------------|--|------------|
| Acts 13:45,50 | | Acts 17:5 |
| Acts 14:2,19 | | Acts 18:12 |
| Acts 16:22-24 | | |

- 2) **NOTICE THE PREACHING** (nothing could silence Paul and his companions)

| | |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|
| Acts 13:5 | |
| Acts 14:7 | <i>The fire could not be put out!</i> |
| Acts 17:2 | |
| Acts 18:4 | |

3) ***NOTICE THE POWER*** (the results which God accomplished!)

Acts 13:48-49

Acts 14:1

Acts 16:5,14,34 The fire was being lit in the

Acts 17:12,34 hearts of many others!

Acts 18:8

Acts 19:18-20

In the later chapters of the book of Acts we see Paul being a witness before the Jews (see Acts chapter 22 and see especially verses 22-23 where we learn that the Jews were not very happy about the message Paul gave to them) and then as a prisoner we see Paul bringing the gospel message before kings and rulers:

Ananias the Jewish High Priest (Acts 23:1 and following)

Before Felix the governor (Acts 24)

Before Festus the new governor (Acts 25)

Before Agrippa the King (Acts 26)

Before Caesar the Emperor (Acts 28)

What About You?

As you think about your own life, is there any kind of PRESSURE FROM WITHIN? Is God working in you and through you in a powerful way (Philippians 2:13)? Has God lit a fire in your heart that cannot be quenched? Has God filled your heart with a message that overflows through your lips to others to the point where it cannot be silenced? Are you able to say what Paul said in Romans 1:16?

REMEMBER,

- 1) The early church was a HOLY SPIRIT CHURCH. The believers depended completely upon the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. They were controlled by the Spirit.
- 2) The early church was a PRAYING CHURCH. They knew that their power came from heaven and nowhere else.
- 3) The early church was a WITNESSING CHURCH. They were not ashamed of their LIVING SAVIOUR and they were proud to tell others about Him even if it meant great persecution.

Are you a Holy Spirit filled (Ephesians 5:18), praying and witnessing believer? If not, how can you become this kind of a believer?