

Acts 6:8) Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. 9) Opposition arose, however, from some members of the Freedmen's Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, and they began to argue with Stephen. 10) But they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking. 11) Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "*We heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God.*" 12) They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; so they came, seized him, and took him to the Sanhedrin. 13) They also presented false witnesses who said, "*This man never stops speaking against this holy place and the law.*" 14) *For we heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us.*" 15) And all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Acts 7:54) When they heard these things, they were enraged and gnashed their teeth at him. 55) Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56) He said, "*Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!*" 57) They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. 58) They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59) While they were stoning Stephen, he called out: "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!*" 60) He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them!*" And after saying this, he died.

Acts 8:1) On that day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria. 2) Devout men buried Stephen and mourned deeply over him. 3) Saul, however, was ravaging the church. He would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison.

Christian persecution – any hostility, experienced from the world, as a result of one's identification with Christ. This can include hostile feelings, attitudes, words, and actions. (Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, *Faith That Endures: The Essential Guide to the Persecuted Church*, p. 114) Persecution is one of those rarely spoken, almost undignified words in Christian vocabulary. And yet, Jesus addressed persecution frequently.

Persecution exposes many types:

- **Hatred** – *“If the world hates you, understand that it hated me before it hated you.” (John 15:18)*
- **Insult** – *“You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. (Matthew 5:11)*
- **Harrassment** – *“But I say to you who listen: Love your enemies, do what is good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” (Luke 6:27-28)*
- **Exclusion** – *“Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you, insult you, and slander your name as evil because of the Son of Man.” (Luke 6:22)*
- **Rejection** – *“Not even his brothers believed in Him [Jesus].” (John 7:5)*
- **Discrimination** – *“The Jews responded to him [Jesus], “Aren’t we right in saying that you’re a Samaritan and have a demon?” (John 8:48)*

The case study of Stephen concludes the first section of the Acts narrative and signals a major turning point in the church’s future. This section ends a series of three trials before the Jewish Sanhedrin. The first trial in Acts 4 ended with a warning. The second trial in Acts 5 concluded with flogging. Stephen’s trial ends in death, and his death instigates extreme and far-reaching persecution.

What does persecution look like?

1. **Persecution is Inevitable**. After his selection as one of the seven spiritual leaders to share leadership with the Apostles in the Jerusalem church, Luke now focused on Stephen in verse 8:

- *“Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however.”* Up to this point in the Christian movement, the favor of the people thwarted opposition any toward Christians. Now the tone changes: the people – the community – those who once favored them, now joined in the resistance. The Sanhedrin Jews expand to include Cyrenian and Egyptian Jews, Cilician and Asian Jews. They argued with Stephen. Unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking, they instigated slanderous lies, and stirred up the people, elders and scribes with false witnesses. But Stephen’s face was *“like the face of an angel.”* Sounds familiar to the amazement of the Sanhedrin in Acts 4 concerning Peter and John: *“they were amazed and recognized that they had been with Jesus.” (Acts 4:13)*

- **Opposition is a universal response against Christianity.** According to the website *Open Doors*, in 2019:

- ✓ 245 million Christians lived in places where they experienced high levels of persecution.
- ✓ 4,305 Christians were killed for their faith.
- ✓ 1,847 churches and other Christian buildings were attacked.
- ✓ 3,150 believers were detained without trial, arrested, sentenced or imprisoned.

Until recent years, these kinds of persecutions existed in places outside America, places like China, Russia, North Korea, Columbia, and Sudan. Now, not a month goes by where we don't hear of a shooting inside a church somewhere in America the Beautiful. What started 20 years ago in 1999, when a gunman entered the Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, TX, on a Wednesday night, killing seven and then himself, has escalated in recent years, including the November 2017 tragedy at First Baptist Church, Southerland Springs, TX – the deadliest church shooting to date: a shooter killed 26 people and wounded 20 others.

Among the 20 killed was pastor Frank Pomeroy's 14-year old daughter. (Pastor Pomeroy will be one of the featured speaker's at ECON this week.) As this horror puts all of us on notice, the inevitability of Christian persecution *"is now alive and well in America with the purging of Christianity from the government, the muzzling of state officials, employees, and appointees who are Christian, the public attacks on churches and Christian businesses, the media and Hollywood's disparaging of anything Christian in almost every film they make."* (Mark Creech, *The Coming of Persecution for Christian Americans*, Christian Post: July 24, 2019)

Both the Apostles Paul and Peter echo Jesus' warnings to expect persecution.

Listen to Paul:

- ✓ *all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* (2 Timothy 3:12)
- ✓ *So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* (2 Corinthians 12:10)
- ✓ *Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?* (Romans 8:35)

Listen to Peter: *Don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you as if something unusual were happening to you. Instead, rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may also rejoice with great joy when his glory is revealed. If you are ridiculed for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or a meddler. But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in having that name.* (1 Peter 4:12-16)

2. Persecution is Intense. Acts 7 chronicles the third trial before the Sanhedrin. The high priest prosecutor asked, “*Are these things true?*” Stephen’s answer presents the longest of the sermon speeches in Acts. The sermon ends with Stephen’s stinging accusation: “*You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit. As your ancestors did, you do also. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They even killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. You received the law under the direction of angels and yet have not kept it.*” (Acts 7:51-53)

- ***When they heard these things, they were enraged and gnashed their teeth at him. (7:54)*** Luke described their rage with a word meaning “*cut to the heart.*” The gritting and grinding of their teeth pronounced their fury and fuming anger. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven, envisioned the glory of God, and Jesus *standing at the right hand of God!*” Most of the biblical references to Jesus in heaven refer to him seated at the right hand of God. Stephen’s vision pictured Jesus rising from his seat to stand in honor of this first Christian martyr. Is it just possible that when we experience hatred, insults, exclusion, harassment, rejection, or discrimination, that Jesus rises to His feet in honor of our courage and commitment to stand against such persecution?

Stephen’s persecution intensified: *They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him.*

- ***They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. (7:58)*** In order to preserve the sanctity of the “holy city”, they forcefully dragged him outside the city boundaries, where the angry mob pelted him relentlessly and mercilessly with stones – his death not instantaneous, but a slow, agonizing, awful beat down. His dying words sound familiar: “*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!...do not hold this sin against them!*”

- **Persecution is never quiet and peaceful – Persecution is always extreme and punishing.** This is hard truth for us, because we’ve been shielded, for the most part, from the intensity of persecution. Most of us have never and may never experience the intensity of persecution. In his book *The Insanity of God*, former IMB missionary Nik Ripken pondered: “*Perhaps the question should not be: "Why are other persecuted?" Perhaps the better question is: "Why are we not?"* I am personally challenged by these words of Chinese pastor Wang Yi: *We are overdue for persecution. If persecution does not come again, then the church is doomed and done for!*” (YouTube sermon: *Persecution is Overdue*)

3. Persecution is Invasive. Stephen’s gruesome death marked a new beginning for the first century church:

- ***On that day, a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria. (8:1)*** Suddenly the Acts 1:8 challenge “*to be witnesses in Jerusalem*” lurches forward into Judea and Samaria. Christianity’s boundaries now extend into unfamiliar territory. The witness of Stephen ends, but a figure in the shadows now takes center stage. Acts 7:58 introduced him: *And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

- ***Saul, however, was ravaging the church. He would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison. (8:3)*** Stephen’s death was not in vain. Saul would have a close encounter with Jesus in Acts 9, making the invasion of persecution worth it.

- **Every church faces turning points which either move the church backward or propel the church forward.** What will it be for First Baptist Lafayette? Are we willing to forge into an unknown future? Are we willing to risk living on the edge in order to experience revival and spiritual awakening? Time will tell, but I know this:

Persecution is worth it, because Jesus is worth it! Luke the Acts narrator is also Luke the gospel narrator. In a challenging scene, these words of Jesus shout loudly in Luke 9:24-25 – “*For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will save it. For what does it benefit someone if he gains the whole world, and yet loses or forfeits himself?*” When we follow Jesus, we have everything. We don’t follow Jesus to gain the world. Have you lost your life? If you lose your life following Jesus, you will find it. Are you willing to keep on following Jesus even when it leads to persecution?