

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Forty-Second Week - First Day

SAUL PERSECUTES THE BELIEVERS

"Now Saul was consenting to his [Stephen's] death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:1-4).

To receive a man's testimony with implicit reliance, it is necessary to be assured that he himself is sincerely convinced of that which he teaches; and to lay down his life for what he deems the truth is the most certain sign of his sincerity. His death thus brings credit upon the doctrines he taught, as proclaimed by surviving teachers. In this case, the ever active Pharisees were now on the alert. Enraged to find that the death of Stephen had no effect in suppressing the new religion, the Sanhedrim brought into action all the resources it possessed in a most rancorous and general persecution of the infant church, the nature of which may be learned from the conduct of Saul of Tarsus.

There is indeed reason to suppose that Saul himself was at this time a member of the Sanhedrim. Some think that his "consenting" to the death of Stephen implies that he consented when the martyr was condemned. Whether this is so or not, it is thought probable that he was at least afterward elected into the supreme court of judicature, perhaps to repay the zeal he had shown against the new doctrines on that occasion. At a later time he himself says that he not only exercised his powers by a commission from the high priest, but that when the followers of Christ were put to death he gave *his vote* against them. He could only have given his vote as one of the Sanhedrim. It may reasonably be assumed that the commission to go to Damascus would not have been entrusted to anyone who was not a member of that body; and Saul's introduction into that body might have been materially promoted by its president, Gamaliel, whose favorite pupil Saul seems to have been.

An important issue now arises. One requirement for admission to the Sanhedrim was that a man must be a parent, because those whose hearts were softened by the paternal relation were supposed to be more humane and more inclined to mercy than others. Besides, among the Jews it was accounted scarcely reputable for a man to remain unmarried after eighteen years of age,

and marriages were in general very early. If Saul, therefore, belonged to the Sanhedrim, the probability is that he was at this time married and the father of a family. But if so, it would seem that his wife and child, or children, did not long survive, for otherwise it is scarcely possible that no allusion to them would be found in the subsequent narrative or in the Epistles. It is clear, though, that if he ever had a wife, then she was not living when he wrote the First Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:7,8).

Describing the actions of Saul against the Lord's disciples, St. Luke says, "*he made havoc of the church.*" What a strong expression! He ravaged abroad as a tiger hunting for his prey, "*entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.*" Let it be remembered that Luke was afterward an intimate friend and associate of Paul. Therefore these words of Luke are but an echo of the terms that Paul himself used in speaking of this episode. And how widely and prominently his name was connected with this persecution appears from the circumstance that Ananias of Damascus had heard from many of Saul, of how much evil he had done to the saints at Jerusalem. The disciples naturally fled in all directions from this persecution, probably at the insistence of the apostles; but the apostles themselves remained in Jerusalem.

Up until now the Christian society consisted of Jews only, who had hitherto remained in the city of Jerusalem. Those from distant parts who had come on the day of Pentecost had returned home, and there they related some idea of the Christian doctrine, however imperfectly. But the numerous congregation at Jerusalem still yielded obedience to the Sanhedrim in all matters not contrary to what they knew to be God's will, and at the stated hours of prayer they frequented the temple where the apostles taught.

This is where we see the most salutary benefit of the persecution upon the church. Instead of confining the benefits of Christianity to the limits of Jerusalem, the believers went forth prepared and eager to make known the truth in which they believed. By the gifts of the Spirit they labored effectually, and we soon see congregations arising in each of the various regions to which they were dispersed. With this outward expansion there was a corresponding inward expansion. Away from Jerusalem the disciples were freed from the restraints of Judaism and grew to be increasingly conscious that the divine life and salvation was available to all men, among all nations without distinction.

There were splendid results from what at first view seemed so threatening. But if there is any circumstance particularly displaying the supreme majesty of God and his controlling power over the affairs of men, it is when those events which we ignorantly call evil are not only removed without the accumulated horrors, but actually leave behind the most beneficial effects. Then it is that we confess, "the Most High rules in the kingdom of men." Then it is that we gratefully acknowledge, "This is Your hand, and You, Lord, have done it."