

THE FIRST MARTYR Transcript

By Dr. Ron Jones

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Well, the Foxe's Book of Martyrs is a Christian classic. I have a copy of the book in my library, and maybe you do as well. Maybe you have heard of the book. It recounts the lives, the sufferings and even the triumphant deaths of Christian martyrs down through the ages. And it traces the roots of what we would call religious persecution. The author is a guy by the name of John Foxe. He was a 16th century reformer. And he himself was forced to flee the persecution of Queen Mary as she set out to silence people during the Protestant Reformation who had a different theological thought or a different theological idea. Foxe carefully compiled the stories of many martyrs who lost their lives for the sake of Christ during that time in church history. Names like John Wycliffe and John Huss, William Tyndale. Martin Luther was on the receiving end of religious and theological persecution. Thomas Cranmer and many, many others.

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A guy named Tertullian, who lived many centuries before the Protestant Reformation is the one who is noted for saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." And it is. Blood is all over the Bible from the blood sacrifices of the Old Testament that prefigured the coming of Christ to the blood of Jesus from the cross. And then as the early church is getting started in Acts 6 and Acts 7 we have the first drop of blood from the first martyr in the church. Some people say Jesus was the first martyr. I don't like to put Him in that category. He wasn't a martyr. He willingly went to the cross. Let's not forget that. Nobody nailed Him there. Physically, yes, but that was all part of the Father's plan. So let's not put Him in the category of a martyr. But Stephen died for his faith in Jesus Christ. And we'll talk more about that in just a moment here.

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In Acts 6 and 7 Stephen takes center stage. And Stephen is one of the seven deacons that are mentioned in verses 1-7. But before we get to his story, what happened to Stephen is a sobering reminder of some words that Jesus spoke to His disciples on the night before He was crucified where He was in the upper room with them. And He was having a very intimate conversation with them. And in John 15:18 Jesus says to His disciples, "Listen, guys, if the world hates you, just remember that they hated Me before they hated you." Pretty sobering thought there. He goes on a little bit further in chapter 16 and verse 2. And He says, "They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God." Now, put yourself in the place of the apostles and the disciples there. You know, you might be thinking to yourself, as I would, *what have I gotten myself into here? And we went from this enterprise about the Messiah. And we thought He was going to overthrow Rome and all of that. Now You're talking about the world hating us and the world kicking us out of the synagogues and the world killing us because we're one of Your followers?* Well, keep that in mind as we go to Acts 6 and 7, because this is the sobering story that reminds us of what Jesus told His disciples back then.

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Let's pick it up in verse 8 of Acts 6. It says, "And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.' And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

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Well, again, Stephen is one of the seven deacons that were mentioned in Acts 6:1-7. He was among the men who were tasked with the responsibility of overseeing the daily distribution of food to the widows and making sure that the Greek-speaking Jewish widows were included in that. You remember that from our last discussion. And Stephen, you know, gave himself fully to that ministry. But his ministry was larger than that. In fact, verse 8 tells us that, full of grace and power, Stephen was doing great wonders and signs among the people. This is the first time in the book of Acts that anybody outside of the 12 apostles were performing signs and wonders and miracles. Later we'll find that Philip was given that divine enablement as well. And as he went out into Judea and Samaria and the uttermost parts, Philip performed signs and wonders, too. But Stephen ministry was larger than the daily distribution, and God gave him the ability to perform signs and wonders to confirm the message that he carried with him about Jesus Christ and Him crucified and risen from the dead. And as Stephen went around, he would visit the synagogues. Some scholars believe there were as many as 8,000 synagogues in the area at that time. And one of them was a synagogue called the Synagogue of the Freedmen. We believe that these are probably people who were in slavery in Rome at some point and somehow achieved their freedom. They made their way to Jerusalem. They found themselves with a common experience, and they decided to form a faith community and to start a synagogue. And these were kind of the Libertines, the Freedmen. And Stephen would show up there.

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Now, it was common in a synagogue that it was often a small community center as well as a gathering place for followers of faith. The synagogue was kind of in a U shape, and people would sit along the edges. And during their worship service and their worship time anybody could really stand up and say a word from God. And so Stephen would arrive at this particular synagogue, and he would stand up and testify to the risen Christ. And he was so powerful in his grace and delivery that it says here, "They could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking." They didn't agree with him. In fact, they didn't like what he was saying. But they couldn't win the argument either. And it's not to say that Stephen was argumentative. No, he was full of grace, the scripture says. He was able to make the argument for the risen Christ in a gracious kind of way and in a way that nobody could dispute.

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So what do you do when you've kind of lost the argument and you don't know what to do? Well, bring on the false witnesses. And that's exactly what they did. They disputed with Stephen. And they said, "If we can't beat him in the argument, then we're just going to fling a bunch of stuff at him and destroy his credibility." And so the scripture says that they instigated men to bring false witnesses and false accusations against Stephen. Some of those false accusations accused him of blasphemy. Other accusations accused him of speaking out against "this holy place," which was probably a reference to the temple, which the Jewish people revered in a very, very pious kind of way. And that he spoke out against the Law of Moses. I mean, I just read all these accusations. And Stephen is on the receiving end of this vicious attack, this vicious, false accusation. They're coming after him. And it sounds a lot like how they came after Jesus, doesn't it? I mean, they brought on the false witnesses. They accused him of blasphemy. They even accused Jesus of saying He was going to tear down this temple and rebuild it three...you know, that kind of thing. They bring a similar accusation against Stephen for speaking such blasphemous words.

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It says in verse 15, "And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face as like the face of an angel." I mean, here is Stephen on the receiving end of all this. And he is arguing his point for the risen Christ. And his face is shining like an angel. They had just accused him of speaking against Moses. But wasn't it Moses who, when he came down from Mount Sinai after having been in the presence of God, didn't Moses's face shine with the shekinah glory? He had to veil his face his face was shining so much. So how ironic that they're accusing Stephen of speaking against the Law of Moses, but his face shined just like Moses's did. And don't think that they didn't make that connection somehow.

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Chapter 7, Stephen is now before the council, this austere prideful group of spiritual leaders who are now going to interrogate him. And as was the custom and as was their law, Stephen had an opportunity to stand up and make his case. And he does that beginning in chapter 7 all the way through about verse 53. And I won't take the time to read it all. I encourage you to do that because it's a fascinating review of Israel's history, but it's also a damning indictment of the national sins of Israel. And you would think that Stephen knows exactly where these men are going. They've brought him before the council. They've accused him just like they accused Jesus. They brought the false witnesses just like they did to Jesus. He knows what their end game is. And you would think that Stephen would take an approach that says I'm sorry and apologizes a little bit just for the sake of self-preservation. But he doesn't do that. And I'm not suggesting that he was antagonistic. I'm not suggesting that his tone was anything other than gracious because, well, the scripture says he was full of grace and the power of the Holy Spirit. But sometimes the truth hurts, doesn't it. Sometimes the truth stings. He uses this opportunity not to preserve himself and his life, but to call the spiritual leaders into account by naming their national sins.

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Let me give you some highlights here. In verses 1-8 of chapter 7, he lands upon their spiritual pride. Their pride as a result of being connected to this guy named Abraham. And he goes all the way back in history, and he talks about Abraham. "Brothers and fathers," verse 2,

“hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’” And he tells this story of father Abraham who was settling into his retirement there in the Ur of Chaldees, which is modern day Iraq. Abraham was a pagan worshipper, and God called him out of that pagan environment to follow Him. He said, “I’m going to make a nation of you, Abraham.” Abraham and Sarah were old, beyond the child-bearing years. And it took faith to believe that. It took faith to leave the comforts of their retirement and to go to a land that, well, the Lord would tell him when they showed up. It’s kind of like, “You jump, and on the way up I’ll tell you how high,” kind of thing. And Abraham sets out in faith. And Stephen talks about the covenant that God made with him and the promised child. He mentions the patriarchs- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and then Joseph. But all of this is to point a finger of blame and to say, “You are so full of spiritual pride, you’re more interested in your physical heritage to Abraham than a personal faith.”

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And then he goes from that spiritual pride to a jealousy and a rejection of the leaders that God had sent them in the Old Testament. He says in verse 9, “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh.” He tells them the story of Joseph. And you remember Joseph was one of 12 of Jacob’s son, and he was kind of Jacob’s favorite. And all of Joseph’s brothers grew jealous of Joseph, and they sold him into slavery to that Midianite caravan that took him to Egypt. And Joseph was rejected by his own brothers. He was sold into slavery. Then he was falsely accused of sexual harassment in Potiphar’s house with Potiphar’s wife. He’s thrown into prison. Ah, but what man meant for evil, God meant for good, right? That’s the story of Joseph. And God resurrected him out of the prison and out of the pit. Joseph becomes second in command, a prime minister of Egypt second only to Pharaoh. And God gives Joseph a dream about seven years of famine that are coming. And he wisely stores up seven years’ worth of grain so that when the famine comes, the world literally comes to Joseph’s feet for food, including his own brothers and his father Jacob. The whole point is that Joseph was rejected. He was a rejected deliverer.

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And he goes from Joseph then to Moses, who was also rejected by his own people. Verse 35, “This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.” And Stephen is just kind of, you know, with grace and with great power in the Holy Spirit, naming the national sins of Israel, “your spiritual pride, your jealousy. You rejected every leader God sent to you. You killed the prophets. And, oh, by the way, you killed Jesus, the Son of God,” is the implication here.

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He doesn’t stop there. He goes on to talk about their disobedience and their spiritual debauchery. He goes from Moses into the story about the golden calf. Remember when Moses was up on Mount Sinai? And he gets the Ten Commandments, and he’s coming down the hill. His face is shining with the glory of God, but he hears something down below. A party going on. And it’s all these people who grew weary of waiting for Moses because he’s been up there

for 40 days. You've got to be kidding me. And they throw together all their gold, and they build a golden calf. Moses's brother Aaron participates in it all. He gives credence to it all. And Moses walks into this debased, pagan worship. He takes the Ten Commandments, the tablets, and dashes them against the rock in anger. And Stephen reminds them of this story as an indication of just their pagan disobedience.

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He goes on in verses 44-50 to talk about the temple that started as the tabernacle under Moses in the Old Testament, and then later under Solomon became the temple. And the temple was destroyed, and a second temple was built under Zerubbabel. His whole point in this is to say, "You've turned the temple of God into an idol and have missed the whole understanding that now we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. God doesn't dwell in buildings, but He dwells in our hearts."

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And then finally in verses 51-53 he just pours kerosene on this by telling them how they continually resist the Holy Spirit. Verse 51, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you." Phew, that is a lot to digest. And you would hope that as Stephen delivered this defense that it would bring the religious leaders to a point of repentance, a conviction in their spirit that as they hear this very well-articulated review of their spiritual history and their national sins, that they would say, "You know, you are absolutely right." And they would fall down on their face before God. But they didn't.

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Read on verse 54. "Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he [Stephen], full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he (0:19:00.1) said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep." What a scene. The first drop of blood from the first martyr in the church.

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A lot of things happening in those verses that I just read. As Stephen was done with his defense (0:20:00.1) and the anger, just the seething anger comes at him and they rush at him, he gazes up into heaven and he sees the heavens open. God gives him a vision. And he sees the risen Christ standing at the right hand of the Father. And he says, "Look, look at what I see." He verbalizes that. It makes them even more mad. But do you remember what Jesus said to Pilate? You know, "There will be a day when the Son of Man will come and the Son of Man will be standing at the right hand of the Father." Stephen gets a glimpse of that.

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His words are not full of bitterness toward these people. I mean, here is a man who was full of grace and the Holy Spirit. And on the receiving end of this seething bitterness and anger and this...just all this stuff coming at him, he had the presence of mind and really the presence of the Holy Spirit to say words very much like Jesus said when He was nailed on the cross. “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” He knew it was the end. And he even had the wherewithal to say, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Wow, what a moment there. You want to know what it looks like when somebody is fully submitted to the Holy Spirit and He’s all in with God? Here is how you respond in a moment like that.

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The Bible tells us that those who were throwing stones at him, some of them came up and said, “Hey, I need to take off my jacket so I can throw a little bit harder.” And they laid their coats at the feet of a guy named Saul, who later became the apostle Paul. But before Paul became Paul, he was a 1st century terrorist. He was the Osama Bin Laden of his day. He was carrying around orders from the religious leaders and from Rome to persecute and kill Christians. And the Bible says in chapter 8 and verse 1 that Saul approved of Stephen’s execution. A little bit later when Paul comes to faith in Christ...or rather Saul comes to faith in Christ on the road to Damascus...and we read through the rest of book of Acts the great travel journeys and missionary journeys of the apostle Paul, he never forgot this incident. He never forgot the hardness of his own human heart that would approve the execution of a man like Stephen.

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One Bible teachers and commentator says these words as it relates to Stephen’s stoning. “You wonder what kind of world we live in when good and godly men like Stephen can be murdered by religious bigots. But we have similar problems in our enlightened age today. Taking hostages, bombings that kill or maim innocent people, assassinations, all in the name of politics or religion. The heart of man has not changes, nor can it be changed apart from the grace of God.” And that’s an important thing to remember as we look at Stephen’s life and his death.

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Well, what are some lessons that we can learn from Stephen and lessons that we can learn from church history? Lessons from the martyrs, I call them. I’ve got three of them that I want to share with us this morning. Number one is expect persecution. As followers of Jesus, expect persecution.

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Hold your place here in Acts 6 and 7, and go with me to 1 Peter 4. And the apostle Peter, as he is writing to brothers and sisters in Christ who are following hard after Jesus in the 1st century but doing so at great cost, he talks about the sufferings of Christ. And he says these words in verse 12. “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you.” Do you think it’s strange that the world hates you or hates us because we name the name of Jesus? Jesus told His disciples, “If the world hates you, just remember, they hated me before they hated you. And the point is they really don’t hate you. They hate Me. And they hate you because you’re a follower of Mine.”

That's not going to change. Don't ever think that if you just say it a little kinder or you do this or you...that the world is going to applaud us because we are followers of Jesus. No, everything in the world that is anti-Christ hates Jesus. Just despises Him. And you as a follower of Jesus and I as a follower of Jesus, sometimes we're on the receiving end of that. It's called persecution. It's called a fiery trial that is sent to test us. And Peter just says don't think that's a strange thing that is happening. We're in enemy territory. Do you know that? This world is not our home. We are citizens of heaven. We have dual citizenship. We are citizens of this earth and citizens of this country, but our citizenship is in heaven. We are behind enemy lines on the front lines of spiritual warfare. And the enemy is after us- the world, the flesh, and the devil. So don't think it's strange, but expect persecution. Expect persecution. We may never receive the kind of persecution that threatens our very life, that brings a drop of blood from us like Stephen or other martyrs in church history, but there are other things that we may end up sacrificing because we are followers of Jesus. I just say expect persecution.

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Number two, glory in the sufferings of Christ. Let's read on in 1 Peter 4. Verse 13 he says, "But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." Now, if you and I were writing a sentence, we wouldn't put words like "rejoice" and "be glad" in the same sentence where you find the word "sufferings." That just doesn't seem to go together, does it? But Peter does that. There is a glory in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. It reminds me of what the apostle Paul said in his letter to the Philippians when he said, "I want to know Christ." Paul had such a passion to know Christ, to know Him intimately, to know Him deeply, to know Him better and better every day. And he says, "I want to know him in the power of his resurrection." Amen, right? We all want to know that. We all want to know the power of the resurrected Christ in our life.

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And then he goes on to say something that I wish he didn't say. "And to know him in the fellowship of his sufferings." What does he mean by that? What does Peter mean by glorying in the sufferings of Christ? I don't want to suffer. Do you want to suffer? Of course not. We don't want to sign up for that. But Paul says there is a fellowship. There is an intimacy, an intimacy with Jesus when we suffer in some way like Him. It may not be a drop of blood that falls. Maybe it's mistreatment, misunderstanding, false accusation, and the list goes on and on and on. Being pushed out of a friend group. Maybe not getting the job and the promotion that you would like to get. Why? Because you're a follower of Jesus. And nobody may ever say it that way, but, you know, you're kind of like Rudolph with his big red nose, saying, "I'm a Jesus follower." And you don't get invited to all the reindeer games. You're an outcast because you're a follower of Jesus.

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Again, it may never come to the point where we live where we must give our very lives for Christ. But make no mistake about it, the persecuted church of the 21st century, oh my, friends. Some people estimate that there are more Christians around the globe that are losing their lives for the cause of Christ on the receiving end of religious persecution than ever before. And we've seen some of the heads of our brothers and sisters in Christ being lopped off all because they called themselves Christians. Peter would say, Paul would say there is a glory in

that. There is a fellowship in that. Just like somebody who has been through cancer has a special intimacy with somebody who is now going through it can say, "I've been there before." Or in a military sense, it's a foxhole experience. "You know, we served in this battle together. We were in the foxhole together, and we are brothers and sisters for life, this troop." And so it is when we experience some of the mistreatment and some of the sufferings of Jesus Christ. It's as though Jesus says, "I know exactly how you feel. I've been there. Come in a little bit closer. Let's talk about this." There is an intimacy that we share with Him.

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So glory in the sufferings of Christ and desire to know Him, even, in the fellowships of His sufferings. Don't despise sufferings for the cause of Christ. Now, if you suffer because you're a jerk for Jesus, okay, you bring it on yourself. And Peter mentions that in 1 Peter 4. He's not talking about being a jerk for Jesus or something else. But just for saying, "I'm a follower of Jesus and here's why," and being able to speak the truth to power and in uncomfortable situations, but doing it with grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit, it may cost us something. And if it does, glory in that, because you get to share in an intimacy with Jesus that maybe you've never been able to share before.

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And then finally, number three, offer yourself to God as a living sacrifice. Now I'm in Romans 12, and let's just stop off there real briefly. Romans 12:1, Paul says, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." What's he talking about here? Well, again, not all of us are ever going to experience the loss of life or be called to be a martyr, a drop of blood that falls from us because we are followers of Jesus. Maybe that will never happen to us. But we are called to, according to Romans 12:1, is to be living sacrifices and to offer ourselves up to Him. To say, "Lord, here I am. Here is the totality of my being and even my body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Use me in any way You can to advance the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, even if it means a drop of blood from my body. But even if it doesn't, I offer myself to You as a living sacrifice. I'm all in, God. I'm all in."

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The problem is most of us play the Christian hokey pokey. We put our right foot in and pull our left foot out. Put our left foot in. We shake it all about. But we've always got one foot in and one foot out, don't we? We're always kind of hedging our bet a little bit. "No, I don't want to speak too loudly about Jesus. It might cost me something out there." And God is looking for people who are all in, living sacrifices, and saying, "Lord, this is the way I worship You today. I call You my Lord and my Savior from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet to the tip of my fingers and toes. I'm all in, a living sacrifice. Use me to advance the cause of Christ and to advance the gospel in this generation."

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Stephen did that. Stephen never hedged his bet. And you know what happened? This is great. Let me just give you a glimpse into chapter 8. It says, "And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." Up

until chapter 8, the early church was a Jewish thing and a Jerusalem thing. And it exploded in growth. But what happened was they kind of got comfortable in Jerusalem. They kind of got comfortable in their faith and comfortable in their meeting in the temple and house to house and in their padded pews and all of that. And they forgot that Jesus said to go make disciples of all nations and that He gave them the strategy- first in Jerusalem, and then Judea, and then Samaria, and then the uttermost parts of the earth. They kind of forgot the latter part of that. And as they grew comfortable where they were, the early church threatened to just stop in Jerusalem.

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So what did God do? He turned up the heat. It was persecution that came to the church, scattered everybody into Jerusalem and Judea and the uttermost parts. He says the apostles stayed back in Jerusalem, but everyone else, scared for their life, scattered to the four corners. And that's how the gospel grew.

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You and I wouldn't even be here today if the persecution hadn't come. And I wonder today...you know, we get a little bit nervous about the hostility against the Christian faith growing in our culture today. But you know what it does? It draws a line in the sand as to those who are true believers and are not. Some people say, well, you know, church attendance is going down across America today. No, I think what's happening is the people who are just really not on board are drifting away. And it's becoming more and more popular to say, "I don't have any faith affiliation." And even those who are closet atheists and agnostics are becoming loud and proud about it. And when the persecution comes, what you're left with are those who are all in. And they've been all in from the beginning. And what happens is the church grows. And it expands. It's persecution that made that happen.

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So my question for us today is this. What are we willing to sacrifice for the cause of Christ? What are we willing to sacrifice to advance the cause of the gospel? Are you all in? Or are you doing the Christian hokey pokey with one foot in and one foot out, hedging your bet and saying, "I'm not quite sure about all this"? Today is the day to just...both feet in and your entire body. And just say, "Lord, here I am as a living sacrifice. I'm not a citizen of this earth. I'm a citizen of heaven. I'm yours. I have decided to follow Jesus. I made that decision a long time ago, and there is no turning back. There is no turning back. Today is the day when I say again I will worship You as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. I am Yours, oh Lord. Just do with me as You will, and I'll leave the results to You." Amen?

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