

**Text: Ac 26.11**

For the next several Sundays, I want to work back through Paul's testimony before Agrippa to highlight some of the themes we rushed past while considering the whole passage.

Today the topic is *persecution*, which I call "the crucial test" in my title:

*The Crucial Test of Genuine Christianity*

Our text is mainly verse 11, but we will begin reading in v. 9:

**Read Ac 26.9-11**

Paul summarizes his attacks on Christianity before he himself became a Christian. The Bible mentions these things without going into specifics. We will use some illustrations from history that will fill in some of those blank spots, but just as with the Scriptures, the details of persecution are not the point.

I am really building this sermon on one word in verse 11,

Ac 26.11 "And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I **tried to** force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

That word is, "tried." Why does Paul say: "tried to force them to blaspheme"?

From this word, I want to show the resiliency of faith in Christ, despite the weakness the faithful may display under pressure.

I don't mean to suggest that we expect imminent persecution of the sort that Saul of Tarsus employed against Christians. I want our message to challenge our self-confidence and show where the real strength of Christian faith lies.

In that source of strength, we can safely put our trust.

**Proposition:** The strength of genuine Christianity rests in Christ, not any man, not even the most faithful of faithful Christians.

## I. The intensity of the crucial test

### A. Definitions: "persecution"

1. "The hatred and affliction that follows the witness and holy life of God's people in a hostile world."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Persecution" in Ronald F. Youngblood, ed., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary: Completely Revised and Updated Edition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995).

2. "Infliction of suffering, injury, or death on others because of their identity or beliefs."<sup>2</sup>
3. "the systemic hunting down of adherents of a particular religion to inflict pain or death upon them; especially to destroy the religion by destroying the adherent or by forcing the adherent to renounce their beliefs."<sup>3</sup>

#### B. Paul's testimony:

1. "many hostile things" (9)
2. "lock up ... in prison" (10)
3. "cast my vote against them" (10) [approved of death sentence]
4. "punished them ... in all the synagogues" (11)
5. "tried to force them to blaspheme" (11)
6. "kept pursuing them even to foreign cities" (11)

We would call this "the systemic [better, systematic] hunting down" of believers.

#### C. Illustrated in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*

Note: John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* is considered generally accurate, but is one-sided, written primarily to condemn the actions of Catholics during Bloody Mary's reign. Protestants also persecuted Catholics, as well as Anabaptists on the Continent, though perhaps not to the same degree as occurred during Mary's reign.

Consequently: I simply want to outline some examples of the recurring application of the crucial test in its intensity (and intensification)

#### 1. Lawrence Saunders

- a. Licensed to preach under King Edward VI
- b. Rose through the English church in various posts into the reign of Mary

<sup>2</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1011.

<sup>3</sup> *Bible Sense Lexicon*, accessed in Logos Bible Software, 5/28/2022.

- c. Preached against the rise of “popish doctrines”<sup>4</sup> under Mary
  - d. Arrested by “the queen’s party”
  - e. Interrupted and arrested in the midst of a sermon
  - f. Imprisoned, ordered to write out his views of transubstantiation, he languished for a year and a quarter
  - g. Taken to Coventry, where he burned at the stake, Feb 8, 1555
2. Robert Samuel
- a. Faithful minister in Bradford, Suffolk
  - b. During the reign of Edward was one of those priests who took a wife
  - c. Under Mary, first ejected from his pulpit, though he continued to disciple believers privately
  - d. Commanded to put away his wife, which he refused
  - e. Imprisoned, chained to a post “in such a manner that the weight of his body was supported by the points of his toes”<sup>5</sup>
  - f. Limited to a starvation diet in prison
  - g. Sent to the flames, August 31, 1555

I don’t want to repeat too many illustrations but give these to show the *dogged pursuit* involved in *persecution*. In Gk, the word for *persecution* means *pursue* in some contexts.

As we consider Paul’s testimony, *dogged pursuit* would characterize it.

## II. The futility of the crucial test

### A. “Tried to force them to blaspheme”

- 1. The objective of the pressure: to get them to renounce Christ

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<sup>4</sup> John Foxe, *Book of Martyrs* (Word Search, 2011) XVI.

<sup>5</sup> Foxe XVI.

2. The verb is “to compel” (but in the imperfect — linear action — tense)
  - a. “I punished them ... and compelled *them* to blaspheme” (ΚΙΥ)
  - b. Other versions tend to translate “tried to compel” in some form or other – because of the imperfect tense

“a habitual impf. with the sense of ‘I was attempting to force’”
  - c. Implication is that though he *could* imprison, punish, pursue, and even kill, he *could not* force blasphemy
- B. An objective paralleled in later experience: the famous correspondence between Pliny the Younger and Trajan

From a faculty document at Georgetown University: “Pliny the Younger was governor of Pontus/Bithynia from 111-113 AD. We have a whole set of exchanges of his letters with the emperor Trajan on a variety of administrative political matters. These two letters are the most famous, in which P. encounters Christianity for the first time.”<sup>6</sup>

1. Pliny writes to Trajan, confessing his uncertainty as to procedure and outlining what he has done
2. When some were denounced as Christians, he interrogated on several occasions, and if they persisted, he executed them
3. Those who were Romans in this “folly,” he ordered sent to Rome
4. When accusations spread, he devised a simple test:

“An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ — none of which those who are really

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<sup>6</sup> “Pliny and Trajan on the Christians,” accessed May 28, 2022, <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html>.

Christians, it is said, can be forced to do — these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

5. Notice: “none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do”

At the crucial test, the Christians would not blaspheme

### C. One further example from Mary’s England: Archbishop Cranmer

1. Elevated to the post of Archbishop under Henry VIII (played a role in the dispute between Henry and the Pope over Henry’s wife)
2. Supported the Protestant reforms and divisions with Rome under Henry
3. Served under Edward, promoting Protestant reforms
4. Supported Lady Jane Grey rather than Mary as the successor to Edward
5. Charged with treason, imprisoned for three years, induced to recant some of his views:

“Cranmer repudiated all Lutheran and Zwinglian theology, fully accepted Catholic theology including papal supremacy and transubstantiation, and stated that there was no salvation outside the Catholic Church. He announced his joy at returning to the Catholic faith, asked for and received sacramental absolution, and participated in the mass.”<sup>8</sup>

6. Contrary to canon law, Mary determined to make an example of him by execution anyway

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<sup>7</sup> “Pliny and Trajan on the Christians.”

<sup>8</sup> “Thomas Cranmer,” in *Wikipedia*, May 16, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Thomas\\_Cranmer](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Thomas_Cranmer).

7. Last public recantation arranged, but deviated from the prepared document:

‘He renounced the recantations that he had written or signed with his own hand since his degradation and he stated that, in consequence, his hand would be punished by being burnt first. He then said, ‘And as for the pope, I refuse him, as Christ's enemy, and Antichrist with all his false doctrine.’”<sup>9</sup>

8. Burned the same day, on March 21, 1556, holding his right hand in the flames

### III. The insight from the crucial test

- A. Unbelief can be so enraged against God as to take drastic measures to try to suppress Christianity

1. Paul was “furiously enraged” acc. to our text
2. “ἐμμαίνομαι to be filled with such anger that one appears to be mad”<sup>10</sup>
3. Yet for all the oppression, all one can do is *try* “to force them to blaspheme”

Now apply this to yourself. Do you think you could endure the crucial test, the pursuit, the persecution, the pressure?

- B. What is it that preserves the confession of Christ?

1. Not personal stamina or commitment
2. Not human courage

Cranmer, and no doubt others, wavered and were broken to one degree or another

<sup>9</sup> “Thomas Cranmer.”

<sup>10</sup> ἐμμαίνομαι, in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

### 3. Rather it is the sustaining power of Christ holds believers in the faith

Rm 10.13 for “WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD **WILL BE SAVED.**”

Jn 6.38-40 “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. <sup>39</sup> “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup> “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.”

Jn 10.27-30 “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; <sup>28</sup> and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. <sup>29</sup> “My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father’s hand. <sup>30</sup> “I and the Father are one.”

#### Conclusion:

**Proposition:** The strength of genuine Christianity rests in Christ, not any man, not even the most faithful of faithful Christians.