

### 3 Acts Lesson 3 Handout - All Things Work Together

Stephen's death signals the start of a violent persecution of the Christian community and Hellenist members in particular. But does this episode simply show that the Apostles and disciples have once again reverted to being a bunch of cowards?

A new situation has been created. "Far from diminishing the boldness of the disciples, Stephen's death increased it. Christians were scattered precisely in order to spread the word further afield" (St John Chrysostom, *Hom. on Acts*, 18). This scattering of the disciples is not simply flight from danger. It originates in danger, but they avail of it to serve God and the Gospel. "Flight, so far from implying cowardice, requires often greater courage than not to flee. It is a great trial of heart. Death is an end of all trouble; he who flees is ever expecting death, and dies daily. [...] Exile is full of miseries. The afterconduct of the saints showed they had not fled for fear. [...] How would the Gospel ever have been preached throughout the world, if the apostles had not fled? And, since their time, those, too, who have become martyrs, at first fled; or, if they advanced to meet their persecutors, it was by some secret suggestion of the Divine Spirit. But, above all, while these instances abundantly illustrate the rule of duty in persecution, and the temper of mind necessary in those who observe it, we have that duty itself declared in a plain precept by no other than our Lord: 'When they shall persecute you in this city,' He says, 'flee into another' " (Ven. John Henry Newman, *Historical Sketches*, 2, 7).

Again, St. John Chrysostom offers his insight, "Observe how, in the middle of misfortune, the Christians keep up their preaching instead of neglecting it" (St John Chrysostom, *Hom. on Acts*, 18). Misfortune plays its part in the spread of the Gospel. God's plans always exceed man's calculations and expectations. An apparently mortal blow for the Gospel in fact plays a decisive role in its spread. What comes from God cannot be destroyed; its adversaries in fact contribute to its consolidation and progress. "The religion founded by the mystery of the cross of Christ cannot be destroyed by any form of cruelty. The Church is not diminished by persecutions; on the contrary, they make for its increase. The field of the Lord is clothed in a richer harvest. When the grain which falls dies, it is reborn and multiplied" (St Leo the Great, *Hom. on the feast of St Peter and St Paul*).

The disciples are disconcerted to begin with, but then they begin to have a better understanding of God's providence. They may well have been reminded of Isaiah's words: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (55:8), and of the promises of a heavenly Father, who arranges all events to the benefit of his elect.

The different periods of Church history show certain similarities, and difficulties caused by hidden or overt enemies never create totally new situations. Christians always have good reason to be optimistic—with an optimism based on faith, self-sacrifice and prayer. "Christianity has been too often in what seemed deadly peril that we should fear for it any new trial now. So far is certain; on the other hand, what is uncertain [...] is the particular mode by which, in the event, Providence rescues and saves His elect inheritance. Sometimes our enemy is turned into a friend; sometimes he is despoiled of that special virulence of evil which was so threatening; sometimes he falls to pieces himself; sometimes he does just so much as is beneficial, and then is removed. Commonly the Church has nothing more to do than to go on in her own proper duties, in confidence and peace; to stand still and to see the salvation of God" (Ven. J.H. Newman, *Biglietto Speech*, 1879).

Those who do not know Christ may resist the Gospel, but that resistance makes good Christians spiritually stronger and helps to purify the Church. "The storm of persecution is good. What is the loss? What is already lost cannot be lost. When the tree is not torn up by the roots—and there is no wind or hurricane that can uproot the tree of the Church—only the dry branches fall. And they ... are well fallen" (St Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, 685).<sup>1</sup>

God does have the power to miraculously make lemonade using us lemons.

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<sup>1</sup> [\*The Acts of the Apostles\*](#) (pp. 69–71). (2005). Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.