



My Bible School Lessons

Exploring the Word of God

Lesson #25: "Satan's War against the Faithful"

Persecuted for the Word

There has been much religious persecution down through the ages. Many people in their misguided zeal for God have fallen into Satan's trap of trying to force others to worship God their way. Those who engage in this activity are revealing a character, not like the longsuffering Saviour of the world, but like the beast in Revelation.

Being persecuted does not necessarily make one right. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13 said, that without love, even giving one's body to be burned is worthless. Many stories have been told of the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity. It is amazing to realize the depths of degradation to which man will fall while convincing himself that he is working for God. I would like to share with you today some examples of religious persecution where these characteristics of the beast are revealed.

The Beast and the Bible

A tense silence reigned in the little cottage in Quebec. "Sir, you know the door by which you entered my house. Please take the same door and go away quickly!"

Pierre's father, Charles, had studied in the Theological Seminary to prepare himself for the priesthood. A few days before taking his vows, however, he witnessed sickening iniquity in the high quarters of the church. He changed his mind, studied law, and became a notary. Not long after, he married a young woman named Renee and soon little Pierre was born.

At about 4 years of age Pierre moved with his parents to a tiny settlement far to the north. No school had yet been established there, so young Pierre was privileged to have his own mother for his first teacher.

Before leaving the Seminary of Quebec, Charles had received from one of his superiors a beautiful French and Latin Bible. That Bible was the first book, after the A B C's, that Pierre learned to read. In this secluded little home school, Renee selected the chapters which she considered the most interesting for the young developing mind. Little Pierre read them every day with the greatest attention and pleasure. With no trivial, worldly amusements or exciting television programs to distract him, he came to love the Bible. He so much enjoyed several of the chapters, that he read them over and over until he knew them by heart.

By the age of eight or nine he had memorized the history of the creation and fall of man, the deluge, the sacrifice of Isaac, the history of Moses, the plagues of Egypt, the sublime hymn of Moses after crossing the Red Sea, the history of Samson, the most interesting events of the life of David, several Psalms, all the speeches and parables of Christ, and the whole history of the sufferings and death of our Savior as narrated by John.

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Many precious hours were spent by his mother's side reading to her the sublime pages of the divine book. Sometimes she interrupted to see if he understood what he read. When his answers made her sure that he understood, she would often kiss him and press him close to herself as an expression of her joy. How the angels must have loved to listen in to these happy, sacred occasions.

One day Pierre sat by his mother's side reading to her of the sufferings of the Savior. His young heart was so impressed that his voice trembled and he could hardly continue to speak. Renee, feeling his emotion, tried to say something on the love of Jesus for us, but she could not utter a word—her voice was suffocated by her sobs. She leaned her head on Pierre's forehead. The two wept together and their tears mingled on Pierre's cheeks. The Holy Book fell from his hands, as he threw himself into his dear mother's arms.

No human words can express what was felt in that most blessed hour! It was a never to be forgotten hour. Two hearts were perfectly blended at the feet of a dying Savior. There seemed to be a perfume from heaven in those mother's tears which were flowing on her child. It seemed then that there was a celestial harmony in the sound of her voice and in her sobs. More than half a century later Pierre would still remember that solemn hour when Jesus, for the first time, revealed to him something of his suffering and of His love. His heart would leap with joy every time he thought of it.

Their home was several miles from the church, and the roads in rainy weather were very bad. The neighboring farmers, when unable to go to church, would gather at Pierre's home in the evening. Using a table for a platform, Pierre would often repeat the most beautiful parts of the Old and New Testaments. The breathless attention, the amens of the guests, and often the tears of joy which his mother tried in vain to conceal, supported, strengthened and encouraged young Pierre as he spoke before so many people. When his parents saw that he was growing tired, Renee would sing some of the beautiful French hymns with which her memory was filled.

When the weather permitted, Pierre's family along with the other farmers would hitch up their buggies for the ride to church. Arriving early, the farmers would take Pierre into their buggies at the door of the temple and request him to recite some chapter of the Gospel. With rapt attention they listened to the sweet clear voice of the child, giving them the bread which comes from heaven. When the church bells rang, they expressed their regret that they could not hear more.

One beautiful spring day in 1818 an ominous event cast a shadow across the beautiful friendship Pierre had with his Saviour through the precious Word of God. Renee was singing one of her favorite hymns as she worked on the mending. Pierre was at the door, playing and talking to a Robin which he had tamed. Suddenly he saw the priest coming near the gate. The sight of him sent an uneasiness through his whole frame. It was his first visit to Pierre's home.

Hastily Pierre ran to the door and whispered, "The Curate is coming!" The last sound was hardly out of his lips when the Rev. Mr. Courtois was at the door, and Charles, shaking hands with him, gave him a welcome.

The conversation was animated and interesting at first. It was a real pleasure to hear him. But suddenly his countenance changed. A dark cloud had come over his mind, and he stopped talking. The silence which followed was tense and strained. It looked like the heavy hour which precedes a storm. At last the priest addressed Charles. "Mr. Chiniquy," he said, "Is it true that you and your child read the Bible?"

"Yes sir," was the quick reply, "My little boy and I read the Bible, and what is still better, he has learned many of its most interesting chapters by heart. If you would enjoy it, Mr. Curate, he will repeat some of them for you."

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"I did not come for that purpose," the priest replied abruptly, "But don't you know that you are forbidden by the holy Council of Trent to read the Bible in French?"

"It makes very little difference to me whether I read the Bible in French, Greek, or Latin," answered Charles, "for I understand these languages equally well."

"But are you ignorant of the fact that you cannot allow your child to read the Bible?" replied the priest.

"My wife directs her own child in the reading of the Bible, and I cannot see that we commit any sin by continuing to do in future what we have done till now in that matter."

"Mr. Chiniquy," rejoined the priest, "you have gone through a whole course of theology. You know the duties of a curate. You know it is my painful duty to come here, get the Bible from you, and burn it."

It was too much for Charles to hear such a sentence in his own house. Quick as lightning he was on his feet. Pierre pressed himself, trembling, near his mother, who trembled also.

At first they feared that a violent scene would occur. Charles' anger at that moment was terrible. Then another fear gripped Pierre's heart. He feared lest the priest should lay his hands on the dear Bible, which was just before him on the table.

Fortunately, Charles subdued himself after the first moment of his anger. He paced the room with a quick step. His lips were pale and trembling. He was muttering between clenched teeth.

The priest closely watched all Charles' movements; his hands convulsively pressed his heavy cane, and his face gave the unmistakable evidence of terror. The pacing suddenly stopped. Charles faced the priest, and said, "Sir, is that all you have to say here?"

"Yes, sir," said the trembling priest.

"Well, sir," added Charles, "You know the door by which you entered my house? Please take the same door and go away quickly."

The priest left immediately. Inexpressible joy flooded over Pierre when he saw that his Bible was safe. He ran to his father's neck, kissed and thanked him for his victory. And to pay him, in his childish way, he jumped up on the large table and recited, in high style, the fight between David and Goliath. In Pierre's mind, his father was the hero like David and the priest was the giant whom the little stone from the brook had stricken down.

Years later Pierre would say, "Thou knowest, O God, that it is to that Bible, read on my mother's knees, that I owe the knowledge of the truth today." That Bible had sent, to his young heart, rays of light which all the sophisms and dark errors of a misguided priesthood could never completely extinguish.

The Man Who Was Executed Twice

The title is exaggerated. No one could be executed twice. Andreas Fischer, however, came as close to it as anyone could.

The first time he was sentenced to death, he actually got as far as feeling the noose tighten around his neck. But at the moment he was supposed to turn slowly, slowly in the wind, the rope broke and he fell safely to the ground and escaped.

The second time, a decade later, he was not so lucky...

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When Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation in the early 1500's, Fischer was a hard-working priest. Luther's tracts on abuses in the church made sense to him, as they did to thousands of other priests and laymen.

Whatever lofty motives may have conceived the practice of using pilgrimages and indulgences to atone for sins, traffic in them became so commercialized as to cause widespread concern. When Luther taught that God did not want self-punishment but repentance, and that anyone who was truly sorry would receive God's forgiveness freely without penance, payment, or pilgrimage, Christians all over Central Europe lined up behind him.

When the church hierarchy wanted to know on what authority a lowly German monk could defy the church, Luther thundered, "By the authority of plain Scripture!" Persecution followed. Priests who taught the "Lutheran heresy" were hanged, sometimes in batches.

Many of Luther's followers became deep Bible students. Some began to notice Mark 16:16, which says "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." They reasoned that if baptism were to be of any use, a person should receive it when he was old enough to understand it, and not when he was an infant. They called on people to study the Bible for themselves, make a mature decision for the Lord, and then kneel and have water poured over their heads; and they called the procedure "believer's baptism." These people were called Anabaptists.

Church leaders feared that if everyone were not automatically enrolled in a church at birth, society would collapse. Anabaptists, in consequence, were severely persecuted. Many were drowned, in mock imitation of believer's baptism. Some had holes burned through their cheeks. Others were burned at the stake or barbequed beside hot fires. Still others were laid in open coffins too small for them. Soldiers pounded them in with their hobnailed boots.

Kindly Providence persuaded isolated princes in heavily forested areas of Moravia, Austria, and nearby lands to provide asylum for the Anabaptists, and the fortunate ones fled there.

Two Anabaptists were led by Bible study to a particularly perilous conclusion. Both were former priests who had sacrificed the priesthood to become, first Lutherans, and then Anabaptists. One of these was Oswald Glait. The other was Andreas Fischer.

Around 1527 Glait and Fischer were astonished to read in the Bible that the weekly day God wanted men to keep holy was not Sunday, the first day of the week, but Saturday, the seventh day. When they began to teach this, theologians were sent to persuade them to abandon what they called the "Jewish Sabbath."

Glait and Fischer replied that the Bible calls the seventh day "the sabbath of *the Lord thy God*" (Exodus 20:8-11), not the '*Jewish*' Sabbath. They showed from the Bible that the Sabbath was given at Creation to our first parents as a blessing for the entire human race (Genesis 2:1-3). They quoted Christ: "The Sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27), not merely for Jews.

The theologians contended that Jesus brought the Sabbath to an end. In return Glait and Fischer quoted Christ again: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law. . . Till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17, 18, R.S.V.).

When the theologians suggested that the apostles abolished the Sabbath after Christ's death, Glait and Fischer quoted the apostle James: "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). They quoted the apostle Paul: By faith "we establish (not destroy) the law" (Romans 3:31); and the apostle John, Those who have "the faith of Jesus," "keep (not break) the

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commandments of God" (Revelation 14:12). When the theologians asked Glait and Fischer to submit to the church's judgment, they replied that their consciences were captive to the Word of God.

It was a dangerous stand. A person who took it could scarcely hope to live out his natural life. In 1529 Mr. and Mrs. Andreas Fischer, as Sabbatarian Anabaptists, were sentenced to death—she by drowning, he by hanging. Mrs. Fischer was drowned, but, as we saw above, while her husband was being hanged, he fell to the ground and escaped.

Not forever, unfortunately. After a dangerous decade of bravely traveling to share the Sabbath and fortify the faithful, Fischer was seized by the soldiers of some wretched robber knight, dragged into his castle, and executed—successfully this time—by being hurled from the top of a wall.

Oswald Glait, incidentally, survived many adventures in a similar ministry. In 1545, however, he was captured and imprisoned in Vienna. After a year and six weeks he was awakened at midnight by the clatter of soldiers in the hall outside his cell. The door burst open, and by the light of the soldiers' torches he read in their faces his impending fate. He was led through the silent city to the banks of the Danube and thrown in.

As the soldiers heard his splash, little did they realize that the Sabbath for which he gave his life would live on for centuries in Germany, burst into life in Great Britain, be transferred to the American colonies, and in the twentieth century capture the hearts of millions of people all around the world.

During the Dark Ages, millions of Christians lost their lives for the crime of reading the Bible and following its teachings as they understood them. Many more lost their homes and were exiled and imprisoned. It appeared that the characteristics of the beast had taken control of the minds of the majority of those claiming to be following the Lamb of God. Satan had worked gradually, insidiously, to infiltrate and gain control of the one thing on earth that was most precious to Jesus, His Church. He had, while undetected by most, undermined the principles of love and fidelity to God and His commandments.

It is so easy for us to lose sight of Jesus and to begin to try to control others, not just in matters of religion but in many different ways. How glad I am that God is able to help us overcome these "beastly" characteristics. His warning against worshipping the beast encompasses more than not becoming like the beast however. He tells us especially not to worship that power on earth that will seek to take away the free choice God gave to man and that He died to preserve for us. He warns us against worshipping that power that sets itself up in the place of God and claims privileges that only God has.