

"The Persecution"

Acts 8

Introduction: Last week in our study of Acts we watched as Stephen was stoned to death for preaching the Truth of the Word of God. Now as we have considered before, if we had been there and if we were part of the early church, we could have asked many questions. Why would God allow this young man to die when he was so effective in his service? Why would God allow one of His children to suffer and die such a horrible death? Why would God allow such a senseless act to take place? The reason we would ask all of these questions is because we would not know the rest of the story.

Notice Acts 7:58-60

There was a young man, who was there that day and watched Stephen die, his name was Saul. Saul had never in his life watched someone die a death such as this. Stephen was not afraid to die. He was joyful to the last breath. His faith was seen in his words and his surrender. He prayed for the forgiveness of those who were stoning him and those who were approving of his death. What Saul watched that day would never be forgotten, and it would be used by the Holy Spirit to bring Saul to saving faith.

Acts 9:3-5

³ *And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:*

⁴ *And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?*

⁵ *And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.*

The convictions which Jesus confronted him with were those that came upon him as he watched Stephen die.

➤ **The Persecution**

Notice Acts 8:1a

Saul was consenting unto the death of Stephen. This means he approved of his death because he too wanted to see him die. The way he died made Saul very uncomfortable because it was convicting.

Application:

When we as believers experience the abundant life which the Lord desires for us to live then we make the unsaved around us very uncomfortable. Our joy, our love, our forgiveness, our longsuffering, and many other manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit bring conviction upon unsaved people or even believers that are living in the flesh. A believer whose is married to an unbeliever can rub the unbeliever like abrasive sand paper with their Godly lifestyle. Believers who work with unbelievers do the very same thing. That is why believers are often mistreated.

2 Timothy 3:12

¹² Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

Stephen was killed because his words brought great conviction to his listeners and instead of repenting, they chose to kill the person whom they believed to be responsible for their convictions. Saul felt the very same way as those who threw the stones. Let us notice the event that happened as a result of Stephen's preaching.

Notice Acts 8:1b

At this time there was GREAT persecution that came upon the church at Jerusalem, and they were all scattered with the exception of the Apostles. Satan in his fury was attacking the believers and scattering them out from Jerusalem and as he did this the believers were going out of Jerusalem and spreading the Gospel. This is a fulfillment of Jesus Words in Acts 1:8.

Acts 1:8

⁸ But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Notice 8:1 again.

The Word "scattered" is the very word that is used for scattering seeds. This was exactly what was happening. The Seed of the Gospel was being sown out beyond Jerusalem just as Jesus had said.

Application:

Before this the believers had a very good life in Jerusalem. There were people being saved, the numbers were growing, miracles were being performed and the church was doing well over all. Then it all ended because the Lord's will was for the Gospel to be carried out into the world.

There is a valuable lesson in all of this for us to learn. God cares more about the souls of people than He does our comfort. This means that there will be times when our schedules and our plans and our dreams will not come to fruition. God may take us out of a comfortable surrounding and place us in a place that we would never desire to be because there is someone there who needs to hear the Gospel. Let me show you a Biblical example. Paul had desired to go to Rome and walk the streets and preach the Gospel. But instead of going to Rome as a preacher he went to Rome as a prisoner.

Philippians 1:12-18

¹² But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel;

¹³ So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places;

¹⁴ And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will:

¹⁶ The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds:

¹⁷ But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel.

¹⁸ What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.

Paul as a prisoner was able to get inside the palace and share the Gospel with the Elite Praetorian Guard. This would have never happened if he had gone as a preacher. It is important that we notice Paul's spirit in the midst of this. He is not complaining. He is not blaming anyone. He is not questioning God. He is actually rejoicing that the Gospel is being preached.

Our problem in life is that we have come to believe that as believers we deserve an easy life. Then when the winds of change blow we miss that fact that God is working to place us in a different place so that our light will shine in another dark corner of the world. When we fall into questioning and complaining we cause our light to be dimmed.

Notice Acts 8:2

Here we see that devout men carried Stephen to his grave and they made great lamentation over him. They would truly miss Stephen. He was a pillar in the church for the time in which he served. But he had served his purpose and God called him home.

Application:

When I look at this verse, I am reminded that it is ok for us to mourn when a fellow believer dies. But we do not mourn like the world. We have a hope of seeing our loved ones again if they are saved.

1 Thessalonians 4:13

¹³ But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.

Notice Acts 8:3

Saul went from house to house and made HAVOCK of the church. He went into the homes and literally dragged the believers out and committed them to prison. The word "HAVOCK" means "to ravage" which is the same word to describe how people were torn into pieces who was thrown in the arena with wild animals. The word "HAILED" means "to literally drag." So we can see what kind of a man Saul was before salvation. We need to also know that to commit them to prison was but the first step to death.

Acts 26:9-11

⁹ I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

¹⁰ Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them.

¹¹ And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.

Saul was a terrorist before he was saved. His life is a picture of what the Lord can do with a man who comes to Jesus Christ and surrenders his life over to Him. His life is a picture of how God can save anyone regardless of their past. Saul's life and his conversion is a picture of hope for us who know people who are set against God, they can be forgiven, and they can be used by God to accomplish remarkable things. If they hear the Gospel and surrender to the Spirit's convictions, they too can be forever changed.

Matthew 19:23-26

²³ Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.

²⁴ And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

²⁵ When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?

²⁶ But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.

Notice Acts 8:4

The persecuted were not silenced. It was their faith that brought the persecution therefore you would think they would have been silenced. They instead became very bold to preach the Gospel and as they were scattered. The persecution took away their comfort, but it never took away their hope. This is an amazing testimony from these believers. They did not have the New Testament. They had very little New Testament Truth. They knew that Jesus died for them and that they had eternal life. We have the entire New Testament, and we have freedom of speech therefore we should be even more zealous to share the Gospel than these people were.

➤ **Philip in Samaria**

Notice Acts 8:5

What happens in this verse is amazing! This Philip was one of the first deacons.

Acts 6:3-5a

³ Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.

⁴ But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

⁵ And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip,

This was the first time the Gospel was preached to the Samaritans since Pentecost. Now there was great animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, and I want you to see why.

Notice the words of Whitcomb:

"In 722 BC the northern tribes [Isarel] were conquered by the Assyrians and they were deported. At the same time Gentiles were imported from different areas.

2 Kings 17:24

²⁴ And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel: and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof.

These Gentiles were mixed in with the people of Israel who were still left of the northern tribes, and they entered into mixed marriages. This produced a mixed race of people who were half Jew and half Gentile. They became a tremendous thorn in the side of the Jews after the Babylonian captivity. Governor Zerubbabel and Jeshua returned back to the Holy Land from Babylon with 50,000 loyal Jews in order to reestablish the temple worship in Jerusalem. They set up an altar and planned to rebuild the second temple. The Samaritans came down and said, "Let us help you. We worship God just like you do. We've been worshiping God ever since the Assyrian king brought us here." The orthodox Jews under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua said, in effect, "Thank you, but no thanks! You do not worship God the way we do. Please go away now."

Ezra 4:3

³ But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.

It was a very non-ecumenical response, and it created tremendous animosity and hatred. The Samaritans and others hated the Jews and were terrified at the prospect of a Jewish nation being established right in their midst. So they harassed them and attacked them and maligned them before the king of Meda Persia, and the whole program collapsed for twenty years. Finally Zerubbabel and Jeshua were encouraged and challenged by two prophets, namely Haggai and Zechariah. They were exhorted to get busy and build the temple, and in four short years it was done (in 516 B.C.). From that time on, the Samaritans were hated by the Jews. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans (John 4:9), and no intermarriage was allowed. They would not even eat together. Finally there appeared the

Son of God, and in John chapter 4 He met a woman of Samaria at a well. He told her, "You do not know Whom you worship. Salvation is of the Jews. You are in total ignorance of how to approach the one, true and living God, but the hour is coming and now is when they that worship Him will worship Him in spirit and in truth." He led this dear woman to the Lord and she brought many other Samaritans to Jesus. And they said, "Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard Him ourselves and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world" (John 4:42). Thus the seed was planted in the region of the Samaritans and Philip would water that seed. Samaria was forbidden territory for a Jew, but Philip obeyed the Lord (Acts 1:8). This was a very bold act on the part of Philip."

Conclusion: Next week we will follow with Philip to Samaria.