



Persecution Leads to the Spread of the Gospel Acts 7:54-8:40

Introduction

When the Synagogue of the Freedmen aroused the people against Stephen (6:12), it was the first indication the church might experience open persecution. Previously, the Jewish religious rulers had been able to do little more than threaten the apostles because they feared the people. The people respected the apostles and were glorifying God because of the miraculous deeds which were accomplished through them. When Peter and John were arrested, the Sanhedrin had released them with only a threat (4:21). When the twelve were arrested, they were released after being beaten and threatened again (5:40).

When Stephen was arrested and taken before the council, the sentiments of the people were stirred and swayed toward the opposition. After Stephen delivered his powerful speech in defense of the gospel and in defiance of the hard-hearted council, there was no longer anything to hold back their rage and rancorous response. Stephen's martyrdom opened the doors for full-blown persecution of the church in Jerusalem. But God used the evil deeds of the council to spread the gospel throughout the world.

Outline of Acts 7:54 - 8:40

- I. Persecution of the Church - Acts 7:54-8:3
- II. Proclamation of the Gospel in Samaria - Acts 8:4-8:25
- III. Proclamation of the Gospel to an Ethiopian Eunuch - Acts 8:26-8:40

I. Persecution of the Church - Acts 7:54-8:4

The event that triggered the open persecution of believers was the stoning of Stephen.

A. Stephen's martyrdom - Acts 7:54-60 and 8:2

After delivering a powerful defense of Jesus Christ before the religious rulers and boldly accusing them of resisting the Holy Spirit, murdering their Messiah, and failing to keep the law, Stephen felt their full fury.

1. Sanhedrin's angry response - 7:54

When they heard these things they were *cut to the heart*, and they *gnashed at him with their teeth*. The Greek word translated "cut" means "to be rent with vexation" (Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words,

W. E. Vine). The gnashing of teeth is a vivid word picture of the viciousness of the Sanhedrin. In the Old Testament, gnashing of teeth is used as a symbol of hostility of the wicked against the righteous in Psalms 35:16; 37:12; 112:10 and Lamentations 2:16.

2. Stephen's vision - 7:55-57

Stephen was unaffected by the rage of the Sanhedrin. He was *full of the Holy Spirit*. His mind was filled with the glory of God as he looked into heaven and said, "*Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!*"

The council must have recalled the words of Jesus when he had stood before them and said, "*Hereafter the Son of Man will sit on the right hand of the power of God*" (Luke 22:69). At that time they had accused Jesus of blasphemy and turned him over to the Roman authorities. Stephen's words proclaimed the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy. This increased their rage.

a. Jesus as the Son of Man - 7:55-56

Jesus often referred to Himself as the "Son of Man", a title which proclaimed Him as the Messiah, according to Old Testament prophecy. *I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed* (Daniel 7:13-14).

b. Jesus "standing at the right hand of God" - 7:55-56

In other passages where Jesus is at the right hand of God (Psalm 110:1; Romans 8:34; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3), He is pictured as sitting, signifying His work is completed. Stephen saw Him *standing*, perhaps as an advocate (as in Job 16:19) for His righteous martyr or to welcome Stephen into His presence as the first Christian martyr.

3. Sanhedrin's reaction - 7:57-58

The religious rulers understood the implications of all that Stephen had said. He had been charged with blasphemy (6:13), and what he had just said was

proof enough for them. They cried out and put their hands over their ears so they would hear no more of it. Then they dragged him outside the city and stoned him. According to the law of Moses, stoning was the punishment for blasphemy (Leviticus 24:16).

The *witnesses* (7:58) were the ones who had testified against Stephen, and although they were the official executioners, the whole crowd joined in the stoning.

4. Stephen's last words - 7:59-60

The last prayers uttered by Stephen show his love for the Jewish people and are reminiscent of our Lord's dying words upon the cross (Luke 23:34 and 46). As Christ committed His spirit to His Father, so Stephen committed his spirit to Christ. As the Lord Jesus asked forgiveness for His executioners, so did Stephen. Then Stephen *fell asleep*.

NOTE: In Christianity, as the believers began to fully understand the doctrine of the resurrection, the word "dead," with its hopeless finality, was often replaced with the more hopeful word "sleep." See John 11:11 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13,15.

5. Stephen's burial - 8:2

The believers buried their martyr with great sorrow.

B. Scattering of believers throughout Judea and Samaria - 8:1 and 4

The words *at that time* in 8:1 are literally "on that day," the day of Stephen's stoning, showing that the persecution of the church was directly related to the killing of Stephen. Jesus had warned His disciples that persecutions would come and told them when persecuted in one city, they were to flee to another (Matthew 10:23). The believers left Jerusalem and were *scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria*. The word "scattered" comes from a Greek word used to refer to sowing seed. The believers were scattered to sow the seeds of the gospel. Only the apostles remained in Jerusalem, the city which had killed the prophets and stoned those who were sent to her (Matthew 23:37).

The difficulties in the lives of these early believers led to greater opportunity for the spread of the gospel, to the glory of God. What difficulties in your life does God desire to use to His glory?

C. Saul's zeal - 8:3

A *young man named Saul* (7:59), held the clothes of the witnesses as they stoned Stephen (7:58). Afterward, he passionately persecuted the church. Believers were not safe in their own homes as Saul searched them out and put them in prison.

NOTE: Saul is the Hebrew name of Paul, the apostle. He is referred to as Saul until Acts 13:9, when he begins his ministry to the Gentiles.

II. Proclamation of the Gospel in Samaria - Acts 8:5-25

The Samaritans were racial and religious half-breeds in the eyes of the Jews. Their ancestry was tainted with foreign blood (2 Kings 17) and their worship of God was mixed with paganism. For these reasons, the Jews did not associate with the Samaritans. During His earthly ministry, Jesus had traveled through Samaria and stopped to rest at Jacob's well. There he met a Samaritan woman and asked her for a drink of water. When He revealed Himself to her as the Messiah, she witnessed, with much excitement, to everyone in her town (John 4). Perhaps that incident had paved the way for the acceptance of Philip and his ministry in Samaria.

A. Philip's ministry - Acts 8:5-8

Samaria is a region north of Jerusalem. Luke says that Philip (the same Philip as Acts 6:5) went "down" because it is at a lower elevation than Jerusalem. Philip went to one of the cities of Samaria to preach.

1. Preaching Christ - 8:5-6

Philip's message was *Christ*. Specifically he preached about *the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ* (8:12). Jesus' message had been the gospel of the kingdom of God (Matthew 9:25; Luke 8:1) and He had instructed His disciples to preach the gospel of the kingdom to all the world (Matthew 24:14). The name of Christ is inseparably linked to the gospel of the kingdom which proclaims Him as the promised Messiah.

2. Miracles - 8:6-7

Philip performed miracles, casting out unclean spirits and healing those who were paralyzed and lame, just as the apostles did.

3. Rejoicing - 8:8

As the people of the city saw the miracles, they gave their full attention to Philip's preaching. The whole city was filled with great joy.

B. Simon's belief - Acts 8:9-13

1. Sorcery - 8:9-11

Simon was a sorcerer or magician. He may have had the ability to control some aspects of nature and some people by means of demonic power. The people had been

dazzled by Simon and referred to him as "*the great power of God*", the power of God living in a human body.

2. Baptism - 8:12-13

When the people believed Philip, they were baptized. Even Simon followed the crowd, believed, and was baptized. The people had previously believed Simon and followed him, but when Philip came with real miracles and the truth, they saw the difference and followed Philip instead. Having lost his popularity, Simon followed the crowd.

3. Amazement - 8:13

As one who had previously *astonished* the people of his city, Simon was now *amazed* at the miracles and signs which were done by Philip. In fact, he seemed more impressed with the miracles than with Philip's message.

C. Apostles' affirmation - Acts 8:14-25

When the apostles, still in Jerusalem, heard that the people of Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.

1. Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit - 8:14-17

Although Philip had baptized the Samaritan believers in the name of the Lord Jesus, they did not receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John laid hands on them and prayed. At that point, God confirmed the acceptance of the Samaritans into the body of believers.

There are several reasons why it was necessary for the apostles to go to Samaria and validate what had taken place. First, it showed clearly that God was breaking the barriers of religious and racial prejudice and including the Samaritans in the church. Secondly, it gave confirmation to Philip's ministry. Thirdly, it officially confirmed the reception of the Samaritans into the church. Finally, it served to unify the Jewish and Samaritan believers.

2. Simon rebuked by Peter - 8:18-24

When the Samaritan believers received the Holy Spirit, there was an obvious outward demonstration of God's power, possibly a repetition of the speaking in tongues as at Pentecost. When Simon saw it, he offered the apostles money, "*that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit*" (8:19). This again shows that Simon was more interested in miracles than in the message of Christ. Peter's rebuke showed Simon the error of his ways.

a. "*You thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money*" - 8:20

Peter's words show his contempt for the money Simon offered. All that God bestows is a free gift, given by His grace, and can never be purchased with any amount of money.

b. "*Your heart is not right*" - 8:21

As long as Simon's heart was not right, he could have no part in the grace of God.

c. "*Repent*" and "*pray*" - 8:22

Simon needed to turn from the error of his ways and pray for forgiveness. This verse expresses Peter's concern for the condition of Simon's heart. Simon needed to repent in order to be forgiven. God is always willing to forgive those who truly repent. *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9).

d. "*Poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity*" - 8:23

Simon's request to purchase the power of the apostles revealed what was in his heart. Marvin Vincent in Word Studies in the New Testament defines the word *bitterness* as "bitter enmity against God."

3. Simon's response - 8:24

Simon did not pray for himself, but asked Peter to pray for him. He did not ask Peter to pray that he might be forgiven, but that none of the bad things Peter had alluded to would happen to him. Simon was more concerned with escaping judgment than having his heart made right. What about you? How concerned are you with your own heart and the state of your soul? When did you last pray and ask God to point out your sins, give you the grace to overcome them, and keep your heart right before Him?

D. Apostles' continued ministry - Acts 8:25

Before returning to Jerusalem, the apostles preached the word to the new believers. On their way home they preached the gospel as they passed through the villages of Samaria. "Here is the first step in which the church burst its Jewish bonds and moved toward a truly worldwide fellowship" (The Wycliff Bible Commentary, Moody Press). The very first believers, the Jews, had been baptized with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, clear evidence all could see. Now the gospel had spread to the Samaritans, and they too had received the Holy Spirit with outward evidence. Soon the Gentiles would also be welcomed into the fold (Acts 10).

III. Proclamation of the Gospel to an Ethiopian Eunuch - Acts 8:26-40

A. Philip's call - Acts 8:26

Philip had completed his task in Samaria and God now sent an angel to tell him, "*Arise, and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.*"

B. Philip's obedience - Acts 8:27-30

Philip *arose and went*. As the angel instructed, he followed the dry, desert route south toward Gaza. When God calls you to a task, do you get up and go even when it is not easy or pleasurable? Are you a willing and obedient servant like Philip? God uses people like you and me to do His work. He uses faithful men and women who will obey when He calls.

As a result of his obedience, Philip met up with an Ethiopian eunuch who was in charge of the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. The eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home. It appears that he was a proselyte to the Jewish religion. As he sat in his chariot, he was reading aloud, as was the custom of the time, from the prophet Isaiah.

The Holy Spirit encouraged Philip to "*Go near and overtake this chariot.*" The term used means literally to "go and glue yourself to him." Again, Philip obeyed. He heard the eunuch reading from Isaiah 53 and asked if he understood what he was reading.

C. The eunuch's question - Acts 8:31-34

The eunuch replied that he needed someone to explain the Scripture and invited Philip to climb into the chariot and sit with him. After reading the passage from Isaiah 53:7-8, he asked, "*Of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?*"

D. Philip's sermon - Acts 8:35

Philip took Isaiah 53:7-8 as his sermon text and explained how the Lord Jesus Christ perfectly fit the description of the *lamb* (of God - John 1:29) who suffered in silence and was unjustly slain. Jesus had probably applied the very same description of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 when he taught His disciples that He must, "*Suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day*" (Matthew 16:21).

E. The eunuch's conversion - Acts 8:36-40

Philip's preaching must have included a call to be baptized. As the chariot continued down the road,

they came to some water and the eunuch asked to be baptized. Philip's answer was, "*If you believe with all your heart, you may*" (8:37). These words make it clear that faith is not only an understanding with the mind, but a surrender of the heart and will as well. Is your own belief limited to an intellectual understanding of who Christ is and what He has done, or have you surrendered your heart and your will to Him as your Lord? Consider your answer carefully, and be sure.

1. Baptism - 8:36-38

The eunuch confessed Jesus as His Messiah, the Son of God. He then commanded the chariot to stop, went into the water with Philip, and was baptized. The eunuch's conversion was a fulfillment of Psalm 68:31: "*Envoys will come out of Egypt (Ethiopia was located just south of Egypt); Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God.*"

2. Continuing ministry - 8:39-40

As they came out of the water, the Spirit prompted Philip to go immediately to Azotus. The eunuch never saw him again, but God had a plan for each man. God has a plan for you too. Do you go willingly and joyfully as He shows the way?

a. The eunuch - 8:39

The eunuch went on his way rejoicing, and according to ancient historians, he spread the good news of Jesus Christ throughout his country.

b. Philip - 8:40

Philip went to Azotus, the ancient Philistine city of Ashdod, just north of Gaza. He then traveled north evangelizing all the cities until he came to Caesarea and there he settled down (21:8).

Applications

1. What plans does God have for you? Have you allowed Him to touch your heart and turn your will to fulfill His purposes for your life? If not, will you begin to do so now?
2. Do you read and study the Scriptures as the eunuch did? Do you ask questions and search out answers for the things which you do not understand? Never be afraid to ask questions.
3. Are your heart and your motives right toward God? What secret ambitions lie behind your devotion to God and your Christian service?