

9. The Church under Persecution

Acts 8:1-8

While Stephen was being killed by stoning, a young man named Saul was present and approved of his execution. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.

But Saul began to destroy the church, and, entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and put them to prison. But those who were scattered went about preaching the Word wherever they went.

Philip (one of the seven deacons appointed previously) went down to Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.

INTRODUCTION: (Ask a pre-story question to discuss in pairs or as a group.)

- Can you think of a time in your life or the life of a friend where someone intended to do evil to you but God worked it out for good?

THE STORY: Tell the story and learn it together as a group through many repetitions.

POST-STORY DISCUSSION: Lead a discussion guided by these questions:

OUTLINE VERSION (for teacher to use when teaching)

Details: What happened? To see what truths we can learn.

- What effect did the stoning of Stephen have on the early church in Jerusalem? How was this a major turning point in the history of the church?
- What happened to the believers when this great persecution arose?
- What is significant about the places where the believers went? Where have you heard the phrase “Judea and Samaria” before? What is God doing?
- What happened to Stephen's body? Who took care of it? What does this show us?
- How do we see the persecution becoming more severe? What was Saul doing?

- **Was this to be the end of Christ's church? What great thing happened as a result of Saul's persecution? Who was contributing to the spread of the church. What do we learn about the believers that promoted the growth of the church?**
- **What does this show us about God? What promise is he fulfilling?**
- **Where did Philip go to travel? What happened there? What exactly did he preach? What story does this remind you of?**
- **Miracles?- Are miracles still needed today to authenticate the gospels or now does the scripture testify to itself?**
 - We see miraculous things being done in parts of the world where the Gospel is breaking in for the first time. Ex. Many Muslims
- **What was the mood in the city as these great things were happening? What does this show us?**

Summary: What do we learn here from the early church? What commandments or examples to follow (act, speak, believe) are found in this story? Which ones still apply to us today?

- **Trust in God's sovereign plan.**
- **Trust that God will fulfill his Great Commission** and to use us in the process. **Step out in faith.**
- **Preach the Gospel.**
- **Be joyful, even in suffering,** as God does his work and fulfills his purposes in us.
- **Lament for the brokenness of the world** and the suffering and death of those we love.
- **Believe that the Gospel is truly for all people,** tribes, and nations.

General Application: (discuss with whole group)

- **What are some current setbacks that churches and believers are dealing with today? How might God use some of these to fulfill his kingdom purposes?**
- **How can leaders in the church be encouraged to keep the Gospel and the Word the highest priority that forms the foundation for the rest of ministry?**

Personal Application:

- **What is there to lament in your life today? How can this story encourage you? Can you pray and trust God that he is working through what you might see as "setbacks" in order to grow your faith and trust him in deeper ways?**
- **How can you be encouraged by this story to preach the true gospel of Jesus Christ and keep that as the heartbeat of the church? What would it look like to be full of joy in the setbacks or in the persecution that comes sometimes with preaching the true gospel?**

FULL VERSION (for teacher to use for study in preparation)

Let's look at the details that we observe describing what happened in the story in order to see what truths we can learn.

- **What effect did the stoning of Stephen have on the early church in Jerusalem? How was this a major turning point in the history of the church?**
 - A great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem, the place where the Holy Spirit empowered the believers and the great growth of the church began. While there had been some persecution before, it became very severe starting at this time.
 - Because the execution of Stephen was approved of, it seems that all restraint was removed from those who wanted to destroy the church.
 - Perhaps because there were now thousands of believers, the Jewish leadership felt more threatened than ever and decided to act. Persecution of believers became something that many approved of.

- **What happened to the believers when this great persecution arose?**
 - Except for the apostles they were all scattered all over the regions of Judea and Samaria.
- **What is significant about the places where the believers went? Where have you heard the phrase “Judea and Samaria” before? What is God doing?**
 - In Jesus’ command before he ascended into heaven. This was the next region the Gospel was to go after Jerusalem.
 - God is using persecution to fulfill his perfect plan to spread the Gospel through his witnesses. God is faithful.
 - What Saul and the Jews “meant for evil, God intended for good, for the saving of many lives,” just like in the days of Joseph, for the spreading of the Gospel.

- **What happened to Stephen's body? Who took care of it? What does this show us?**
 - Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.
 - It would have been such a dishonor to have one’s body lying exposed. The religious leaders left him in a shameful way and had no intention of burying his body. Devout men still wanted to honor Stephen and give him a proper burial.
 - Were willing to risk themselves in the midst of threat of persecution to show this love, to honor the one who has died for the cause of Christ.

- **How do we see the persecution becoming more severe? What was Saul doing?**
 - He approved of the execution Saul was trying to completely destroy the church, now he felt approved to start persecuting more intensely.
 - Before, the persecution was the apostles and deacons. Now it is the common believer. The persecution is not just in out in the public, but he's

actually entering house after house, searching out anyone connected with the church.

- Without trial or investigation, he just dragged people off to jail without any rights or protections.
- **Was this to be the end of Christ's church? What great thing happened as a result of Saul's persecution? Who was contributing to the spread of the church. What do we learn about the believers that promoted the growth of the church?**
 - Instead of wiping out the church, it helped it to grow.
 - God was pushing them out. Not allowing them to be comfortable in their own fellowship.
 - Cooperation between God and everyday believers.
 - The scattered believers, instead of being fearful, were bold and bore witness about Jesus. They took the opportunity to share the Word wherever they went, empowered by the Holy Spirit. They continued to preach.
- **What does this show us about God? What promise is he fulfilling?**
 - God is faithful to his promises. He said, "You will be filled with power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. And **you will be my witnesses** in Jerusalem, **in Judea and Samaria**, and unto the ends of the world."
 - He is fulfilling his promise to reach all nations through Abraham's seed and is using his followers to do so. Persecution cannot stop the purposes of God.
- **Where did Philip go to travel? What happened there? What exactly did he preach? What story does this remind you of?**
 - (This Philip was an evangelist and one of the seven chosen to be deacon. This was not the apostle Philip.)
 - Samaria - "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem in all Judea and Samaria
 - John 4 - Samaritan woman - "the time is coming when you will neither worship here on this mountain or in Jerusalem."
 - Though he had to scatter, he was committed to the spread of the Gospel.
 - He proclaimed Christ and did miraculous signs. Demons were cast out and lame people were healed.
 - People paid attention to what he said **because of the miraculous signs**.
 - **Miracles often accompanied the word of God** being taught **in frontier and new locations** as the gospel spread. We see this **throughout the book of Acts** as the church grows and is established. The miracles opened people's hearts to listen to the Word preached!
 - Proclaimed the Messiah - rooted the preaching in their history, the works of God through people of Israel.
- **What was the mood in the city as these great things were happening? What does this show us?**
 - The city was filled with joy. Paying attention.
 - Joy is a rightful response to hearing the gospel preached, seeing the mighty works of God, and facing persecution.

Summary: What do we learn here from the early church? What commandments or examples to follow (act, speak, believe) are found in this story? Which ones still apply to us today?

- **Trust in God's sovereign plan.** Watch closely for what the Spirit is doing when things are not going according to plan. God often has greater kingdom purposes that he is working out even in the midst of suffering or persecution.
- **Trust that God will fulfill his Great Commission** and to use us in the process. "You will be my witnesses . . . in Judea and Samaria . . ."
- **Step out in faith.** The believers had to take the next step of faith, to move out to other places. Believe that God is with you. "And I will be with you, even to end of age."
- **Preach the Gospel.** The gospel continues to be the very heartbeat of the early church. Miracles only help support the main message of the gospel. It gives is credibility for the hearers.
 - They knew what was most important. They knew and understood that if the gospel was worth dying for, it was worth living for.
 - **Today- are miracles still needed to authenticate the gospels or now does the scripture testify to itself?**
 - We see miraculous things being doing in parts of the world where the Gospel is breaking in for the first time. Ex. Many Muslims having dreams that move them toward Christ.
 - "We can ask God to do anything that would exalt Christ. So whatever our position may be on miraculous gifts, all Christians can and should unite around the fact that the gospel and the preaching of Christ must remain primary."
- **Be joyful, even in suffering,** as God does his work and fulfills his purposes in us.
 - **Joy** was the **natural outflow** of the gospel preached and received and hearts changed, even in the midst of persecution. The church should be full of joy because of what Christ has done for us!
- **Lament for the brokenness of the world** and the suffering and death of those we love.
 - Lament and deep inner joy often go hand in hand.
 - Care for the community around, care for family
 - Honor those who have gone before us and have remained steadfast.
- **Believe that the Gospel is truly for all people,** tribes, and nations.

General Application: (discuss with whole group)

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