

## The Results of Persecution

### *The Gospel Spreads from Jerusalem to Judea & Samaria*

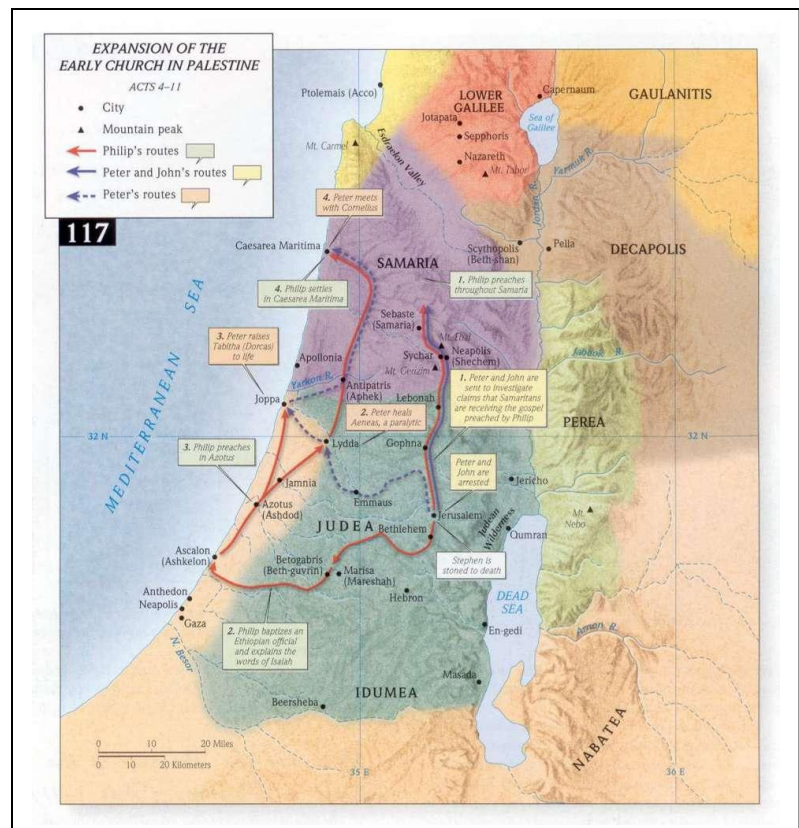
(Acts 8:1-8)

#### Introduction:

1. The life of Stephen and his martyrdom, as well as the other events recorded in Acts 6-7 are directly linked to what Luke records in Acts 8.
  - The persecution of the church continues to unfold and will become even more severe as we proceed through the Book of Acts.
  - The mention of Saul (Paul) where he is introduced (Acts 7) to us in a brief manner will continue in Acts 8 where we see him as the “chief persecutor of Christians”, then we’ll witness his conversion experience (Acts 9), and from there the Book of Acts provides us with a detailed look at his (Paul’s) missionary activities.
  - The other direct link between Acts 6-7 and Acts 8 is the mention of Philip and the way in which he is connected to Stephen.
    - 1) They both are mentioned as a part of the “seven chosen ones” (Acts 6:5) who serve as “ministers” to help alleviate some of the pressure from the Apostles to meet physical needs within the church.
    - 2) In many ways, Stephen’s martyrdom may be the catalyst for Philip’s evangelistic efforts outside the confines of Jerusalem.

2. Persecution need not be looked at as all bad

- In the case of Stephen his death sparked a movement that really marked the first great missionary outreach.
  - 1) Up to this point most if not all of the evangelistic efforts took place in Jerusalem.
  - 2) After Stephen's death we are told that the Gospel began to spread to the regions of Judea and Samaria.



- 3) It is highly probable that Stephen and Philip's work with the Hellenistic Jews was the beginning steps toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission to "Go ye into all the world" and also a fulfillment of the command to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world/earth.

- In many ways Acts 8 marks another transition or turning point in the development of the church.
  - 1) Up to this point the main focal area of focus has been Jerusalem but in time the Gospel will spread North, East, South and West to the regions known as Asia (or Asia Minor) where a foothold will be established that would soon bring the Words of Jesus to Europe, Africa, and the Near East!
  - 2) In many ways the murder of Stephen fixes a significant mark in Jewish history that reveals the complete rejection of Jesus by “Orthodox Judaism” and for that rejection they pay a steep price – the final destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.
  - 3) Thus the Gospel moves from the confines of Jerusalem towards a new people and new lands. This story of the church continues to unfold even in our day as people from all over the world are coming to faith in Christ.
  - 4) Perhaps the martyrdom of Stephen could be considered one of the major catalysts for the Gospel spreading to the Gentile nations.
  
- 3. As the church progresses; three very important things stand out in this passage we will look at (Acts 8:1-8):  
*(Note – points borrowed from John MacArthur’s Commentary on Acts pages 229-235)*
  - **Persecution** is realized
  - **Preaching** is revolutionized
  - **Productivity** brings rejoicing

### **Persecution is Realized (Acts 8:1-3)**

1. The phrase; “On that day” connects the martyrdom of Stephen (his death) to the persecution of the church. (Acts 8:1b)
  - The implication is that the Jewish leaders approved of Stephen’s death for they already determined he was a blasphemer.
  - This execution (as far as the religious leaders were concerned) marked a significant decision/choice to reject the words of Stephen that Jesus is the Messiah, which was a rejection of Jesus Himself. Thus all who followed these teachings must also be put to death.
  - We know that Saul (later known to us as Paul) was directly involved in the death of Stephen (Acts 7:58) and also in the subsequent persecution that followed. (Acts 8:1a, Galatians 1:13, Philippians 3:6, Acts 26:1-11)
  - This persecution is a mere fulfillment of the words of Jesus to His followers, for He said; “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). In bringing about this persecution they will even think they are doing God’s service (John 16:2).
2. This persecution causes the believers (with the exception of the Apostles) to scatter from Jerusalem into the regions of Judea and Samaria. (Acts 8:8c)
  - I don’t think we have to conclude that “everyone” left Jerusalem for the church continued there (See Acts 15); but it is probable that most if not all of the Hellenistic Jews were the ones who fled. See Acts 11:19-20)
  - We should consider this scattering a good thing in that it moves the church toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission.
  - This scattering also aids in the ministry of Philip to the region of Samaria. (Acts 8:4-25)

3. The apostles however remained in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1d-3)
  - We aren't told precisely why they stayed but perhaps verses 2-3 provide some of the answers:
    - 1) There appeared to be people; who Luke identifies as \_\_\_\_\_ who protested (***loudly lamented*** – *something that was forbidden by the **Mishna** when a criminal was executed*) of Stephen's death. These ones may not have been believers quite yet and still needed to be reached with the Gospel.
    - 2) Saul himself was on a rampage (making havoc of the assembly – see Acts 22:4) and some go as far to conclude that he tore the church apart! Perhaps the apostles remained to add comfort and guidance to the believers in Jerusalem.
    - 3) A third reason (although not specifically mentioned) is they may have remained to ensure that the Gospel continue to be preached in an accurate manner and to combat potential heresies that they knew were on the horizon.
  - The apostles themselves were sensitive to the needs in Jerusalem and they understood its strategic value in the overall propagation of the Gospel.
    - 1) Thus they remained at their post as much as a defender of the Gospel as they were proclaimer's of those same truths.
    - 2) Jerusalem was still a mission field
    - 3) The instructions to preach the Gospel in Jerusalem was still just as important as taking that Good News to the other regions of the world.

### **Preaching is Revolutionized (Acts 8:4-7)**

1. Alright – revolutionized may be a little dramatic but I needed a “R”
2. This is a good reminder that persecution often brings about some of the greatest missionary drives throughout the history of the church.
  - Notice the transition; because they had been persecuted and subsequently scattered they \_\_\_\_\_ the Word.
    - 1) This implies action
    - 2) This also implies that the missionary activity (proclamation of the Gospel) was not limited to just the apostles and spiritual leaders.
    - 3) Finally this implies that in spite of \_\_\_\_\_; the Word of God grew in the hearts, minds and souls of those who embraced it. (Acts 12:24, 19:20)
  - We continue to witness the fruit of persecution even in our time as even though every attempt is being made to discredit the Gospel; it continues to shine in the hearts of those who believe.
    - 1) Although we in America may not see so much a physical persecution we continually have to defend the truth claims of the Gospel against those who deny it...thus in many ways we do face even fierce opposition – just in a different way.
    - 2) Clearly some of the greatest physical persecution for faith in Christ is seen in foreign countries where the protections against religious oppression is not provided and thus blood (in the same way as Stephen) continues to be shed for the declaration of the Gospel.

3. The focus now shifts to a faithful evangelist named \_\_\_\_\_
- This is not the Apostle Philip for we are told that the apostles remained in Jerusalem.
  - This Philip was probably the same person mentioned in Acts 6:5 along with Stephen and he (like Stephen) was “set apart” for ministry to the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem.
  - With the scattering of the Hellenistic Jews (of which Philip was a Grecian Jew); the ministry of Philip was expanded to a wider area with even more responsibility. (See Matthew 25:23)
  - We consider Philip an \_\_\_\_\_ due to his efforts of preaching the Word.
    - 1) The proclamation of the Gospel (preaching) is often synonymous with evangelizing or being an evangelist.
    - 2) In many ways the missionary activities recorded in Acts are considered doing the work of an evangelist.
    - 3) Ironically; Philip is the only man in Scripture given that official title of \_\_\_\_\_ (Acts 21:8). Paul will instruct Timothy to do the work of an evangelist but does not issue that title to Timothy.
  - We are told that Philip went “down to the city of Samaria” (Acts 8:5); but Samaria is north of Jerusalem.....how is it that Luke tells us he went down instead of up?
  - Is there any significance in Philip going to the region of Samaria? (See Luke 9:52-54, John 4:9, 8:48, Matthew 10:5-6, John 4:20-25)

- It is obvious that the Holy Spirit had already prepared the hearts of the Samaritan people. (Acts 8:6-7)
  - 1) In what way do we see this? (Acts 8:6)
  - 2) What was the significance of Philip performing these signs, wonders, and healings to the people of Samaria? (Acts 8:6-7)
  - 3) The evidence of “unclean spirits” in their midst revealed the need of the Gospel; for where demonic oppression exists, the need to be freed from that bondage of evil is all the more needed.....and only the saving knowledge of Christ can bring that about.
  - 4) It is far better that we focus on the preaching of the Word and less on the physical actions of exorcizing demons performed by the apostles, and allow the Holy Spirit to do the internal work; less we fall into the same trap as did the Jewish exorcists in *Acts 19:13-16*.
  - 5) Lest we think that demonic activity does not reside in the good ole USA - listen to the paraphrased words of C.S. Lewis from the Screwtape Letters: “Satan and his demons adapt themselves to whatever world view prevails in a given society. They are equally at home with Western materialists as they are with third world magicians.”
  - 6) Clearly Satan was active in the region of Samaria and he is just as active in our midst today.....just look around you and see how people are in bondage to sin! Thus the need to declare Christ is the foremost charge given to the Church and we are losing ground to the evil one by the second!



### **Productivity Brings Rejoicing (Acts 8:8)**

1. There is nothing like witnessing the results of souls being saved and Philip saw this first hand with many Samaritans coming to faith in Christ. (see Acts 8:12, 14-15)
2. In many ways the results in the region of Samaria can be compared to the results in the early days of the church at Jerusalem.
3. What was the result of the people turning to Christ? (Acts 8:8)

### **Concluding Thoughts:**

1. These verses (Acts 8:1-8) along with Acts 6-7 show that not only the influence of the Apostles but other leaders stepped up and boldly declared the truth claims of the Gospel.
2. In addition these verses show us that the Gospel changes lives and that the preaching of those truths is central to the church.
3. The pattern that we see here in these verses will be seen over and over throughout the pages of the Book of Acts:
  - Persecution
  - Preaching
  - Productivity
4. In our next two lessons we will see how the gospel impacted two different people contrasted in two different ways:
  - The “**false faith**” of Simon the Magician
  - The “**true faith**” of the Ethiopian Eunuch