

Text: Acts 8:1-25

Title: Persecution and the Gospel

Truth: Persecution transported the gospel message to distant places.

Date/Location: October 4+18, 2023 (rev. from August 19, 2012) at FBC

Introduction

We continue our study of the early church. Recall the Jerusalem church was born at Pentecost about AD 30; it grew to thousands of new believers within its first months; caring for an increasing number of Greek widows became a challenge; persecution came against the apostles, and Stephen died due to persecution.

These early experiences of the church foretold its future.

I. Persecution, v. 1-4

2 Tim. 3:12, John 15:20, Acts 9:4

A. Prominence of Saul. Saul was a primary persecutor. He approved of Stephen's death, even though the trial was incomplete and the execution was not done lawfully. After the death of Christ, the Pharisees had held to a mediating position under Gamaliel's advice (5:33-40) and even later (23:9). But Saul was radicalized against the new sect. In verse 3 we see this opposition – certainly not with the kind of restraints we would appreciate as American citizens! I must wonder how Paul thought he would get rid of the church—could he imprison 5,000 men (4:4), besides women and children? Make no mistake, women were not exempt from being persecuted and imprisoned (Acts 8:3, 9:2).

B. Scattering of the church. Like it or not, the disciples were 'encouraged' to fulfill Acts 1:8 by the persecution that scattered them to different geographical regions. God used fear for their lives and freedom as a motivator to move them out of Jerusalem and to the regions where the gospel had to go. Note in v. 4 they 'preached the word.' They didn't just clam up.

May we be obedient without having to have fear as our motivating factor. We want to honor God by faithful obedience to His word.

The apostles were not scattered. They stood their ground and stayed with the church. Maybe they were less targets once hundreds and perhaps thousands of believers left town.

- C. The Burial of Stephen was done by devout/religious men. We cannot be 100% certain from the text that these were all Christians; perhaps other Jews participated who did not agree with the mob's death sentence.

They made great lamentation. Mourning is not inconsistent with godliness. A certain kind of mourning—that without hope, without end—is inconsistent with the Christian faith. Proper mourning is that which adjusts over time, does not continue unmanaged forever, and keeps in mind the hope we have in God. As with any other emotion, mourning must be *regulated*. It cannot be out of control.

Transition: One of the Christians who left Jerusalem was Philip.

II. Philip in Samaria, v. 5-8

- A. Identification. This was almost certainly Philip the deacon from Acts 6:5, because the apostle Philip stayed in Jerusalem (8:1). Note his ability to preach Christ and ability to do miracles. Both were God-given.
- B. His *message* was Christ. His *method* was preaching and miracles. The miracles gained him an audience that believed what he had to say. There was a danger to the miracles, however, and we will see that in section IV below.
- C. Bible timeline question: how does this visit to Samaria fit in with what happened there earlier? That visit happened within the last three years. I am thinking of Jesus' visit with the woman at the well and the other Samaritans (John 4). Many Samaritans believed in Him then; but they did not have the benefit of hindsight on his atoning work and resurrection.
- D. Great joy came to that city because of the miracles: casting out of demons and handicapped people healed. They listened to what Philip was saying and heeded what he spoke, namely the gospel.

Transition: The news of these events spread to the apostles in Jerusalem, and they became involved too.

III. Peter and John in Samaria, v. 14-17, 25

- A. The benefit of getting Peter and John was that there would be an official link between Jerusalem and Samaria. The spread of the gospel to that place showed the unity of the Jews and Samaritans in Christ. This erased a huge sticking point from centuries earlier about differences in belief and practice, where to worship, etc.
- B. Theology: the coming of the Holy Spirit on a person.
 - 1. There is a question about the Samaritans' reception of the Spirit. Why was it delayed? It was temporarily delayed to accommodate apostolic participation to make that official link between Jerusalem and Samaria, in accordance with the Lord's command to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. This is an evidence of the 'transitional' nature of the book of Acts.
 - 2. We may be left with a question about our reception of the Spirit. For the remainder of church history after the early church, God's Spirit comes upon a person at the moment of salvation, no later. It is immediate, without tongues and without laying on of hands. All true Christians have been baptized by the Spirit from the moment of salvation (1 Cor. 12:13).
- C. Notice Peter and John continued preaching in many Samaritan villages. This ministry of Philip opened the door for much more gospel work to go on in surrounding areas.

IV. The Sorcerer, v. 9-13, 18-24

- A. His past life: his sorceries were like the miracles that Philip was doing. They captivated his audience. He promoted himself as someone great and powerful, and the people accepted him as such. In fact, his power was from the demonic realm, not from God. But as is often the case, people can be easily deceived about the source of the power because they are "wowed" by the results of it.

- B. His profession of Christian faith: he made a profession of faith and was baptized in identification with the message that Philip was preaching. He, like the others, was seeing the miracles and signs that Philip did. This had a big influence on him. Perhaps he could see that these were true and good miracles as opposed to his own. Perhaps he knew that the source of Philip's miracles was also other-worldly. It appears that he was captivated by the miracles and signs (8:13). The gospel message of Jesus did not have central focus that it should have had.
- C. His sin: Simon wanted to pay money to have the same kind of Holy-Spirit-giving power that the disciples had. As if you can 'buy' a spiritual gift or 'buy off God' and get him to give you some special power. It is like he wanted to have what he had before, only in a 'new and improved' version. He wanted to have power, and be sought-after by the people. He wanted to be in control of doling out the Spirit of God.
- D. Peter's response: Peter delivered very harsh words of rebuke to this man. Notice them:
1. Your money perish with you.
 2. Implied: the gift of God cannot be purchased with money. Gifts are not purchased for one's self!
 3. You do not have a part with us.
 4. Your heart is not right in the sight of God.
 5. Repent of this your wickedness.
 6. Pray to be forgiven.
 7. You are poisoned by bitterness.
 8. You are bound by iniquity.

Notice that Simon asked for *Peter* to pray for him so that the expected consequences would not come on him (that he would perish). He was not repenting and praying that God will forgive him. He did not seem to have a personal connection to God whereby he would pray for himself, as Peter had directed him.

E. Theology: Was Simon the Sorcerer saved or not? He made a profession; he was baptized; but then he bore this bitter fruit.

The text uses words like perish; neither part nor portion; heart is not right; repent; may be forgiven; poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity. I take it that he is not saved, based on those very bad descriptions.

Someone can be unsaved even if they have some history that suggests a connection to the faith. On the other hand, someone can be saved who seems to have a lot of evidence against him too.

However, in this case, with Peter's apostolic insight making the pronouncements, it is hard for me to see Simon as a saved man.

F. In general, is there guidance as to how to determine if someone is truly saved or not? I would advise as follows.

1. It is not of first importance that we know for sure about any particular individual whether that person is saved or not. God knows those who belong to Him and those who do not. It is more important that we be faithful in living for the Lord and sharing godly principles with that person and all around us. Thinking of ourselves as a discerners of everyone else puts us in danger of making ourselves out to be judges of others. That attitude is not in accordance with proper Christian humility. Yet, it seems required that we have a rough estimate of whether someone is in the faith, for purposes of trying to ascertain what level of fellowship we should have with that person.
2. If someone embraces the Word of God, that is a very good sign.
3. If someone overcomes sin in his/her life and tries to do the right thing, that is a good sign. If someone makes excuses for sin, that is a bad sign.
4. If someone professes to believe in Jesus, that is good. But if there is no fruit, that is bad. If they later change their tune and say they do not believe, well, then you have to believe them!
5. If someone likes to gather with other Christians and pray and hear the Word and fellowship, that is a very good sign.

6. If someone wants to share their faith, that is a very good sign.
7. If someone holds to generally correct doctrine that is another good sign. Say they understand that God saves, that we are sinners, that God offers salvation through Jesus by faith—and only that way—then so far things look good.

As an aside, it does not seem that Simon the Sorcerer fits this entire description. Just because someone receives outward rituals or says words does not make that one a saved person.

G. I go back to the beginning of the prior section. It is best to focus on our own situation. We can do that by looking at James and 1 John where we see marks of true belief. 1 John, for example, asks us to think about the following:

1. Has our attitude toward sin changed (1:5-2:2)?
2. Do we keep God's commands (2:3-6, 5:2-3)?
3. Do we love God first and to love others as ourselves (2:7-17)? Or do we love the world?
4. Do we believe the doctrine of Christ (2:18-28)?
5. Do we practice righteousness (2:29-3:10a)?
6. Do we love our brother (3:11a-24, 4:7-10, 5:1-2)?
7. Do we have the Spirit of God (3:24, 4:13)?
8. Do we agree that Christ came in the flesh (4:1-6)?
9. Do we believe the gospel testimony about Jesus that He is Christ, Son of God, and was incarnate (5:1-13)?

James adds some more characteristics of Christians:

1. Count trials as a joy because of what they produce.
2. Asks God for wisdom.
3. Recognize the fleeting nature of life.
4. Endures temptations.
5. Does not blame God for sin in his life.
6. Is a doer of the Word of God, not a hearer only.

7. Controls his tongue.
8. Helps those in trouble.
9. Eschews favoritism or partiality.
10. Loves his neighbor as himself.
11. Adds to his faith good works.
12. Opposes demonic “wisdom” and selfish ambition.
13. Draws near to God and resists the devil.
14. Avoids judging his brother or speaking evil of his brother.
15. Does not boast about tomorrow but submits his plans to the Lord.
16. Does not trust in riches.
17. Is patient and waits for the Lord’s return.
18. Prays earnestly.
19. Tries to win sinners from the error of his way.

Conclusion

Threats to the church include persecution as well as false belief and syncretism. These can expose the weakness either of discernment regarding false belief or an uncommitted stance toward Christ. Christians desire to pay close attention to their lives to see that they are characterized by the kinds of things we listed above.

Two strengths of the church are the great joy of salvation and the unity of all believers regardless of their ethnic background. There are millions more opportunities for this to happen as we expand beyond our current borders and reach people who are lost.

MAP