

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

Introduction

When the Synagogue of the Freedmen stirred up the people against Stephen (6:12), it was the first sign that the church might experience public persecution. Before this, the Jewish religious rulers could only threaten the apostles because the people liked the apostles so much. When Peter and John were arrested, the Sanhedrin 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 people's feelings changed. Stephen gave his powerful speech defending the gospel. He pointed out that the council had hard-hearts. Because the council was not afraid of the people, there was nothing holding their rage back. Stephen's **martyrdom** opened the doors for full-blown persecution of the church in Jerusalem. But God used the evil actions 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 which started the open persecution of believers was the stoning of Stephen. He delivered a powerful defense of Jesus Christ and boldly accused the council of resisting the Holy Spirit, murdering their Messiah, and failing to keep the law. As a result, Stephen felt the council's full fury.

When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. The gnashing of teeth is word picture of the viciousness of the Sanhedrin. Imagine a pack of angry dogs growling and grinding their teeth together and you will start to understand their anger at Stephen.

Stephen was not affected 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 surely remembered 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 guards. Stephen's words showed the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy.

The religious rulers understood exactly what Stephen was saying. He had been charged with blasphemy (6:13), and what he said directly to them was enough proof for them. They cried out and put their hands over their ears so they would not hear any more. They dragged him outside of 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 given false testimony against Stephen. Although they were the 'official' **executioners**, the whole crowd joined in the stoning.

The last prayers uttered by Stephen show his love for the Jewish people and are similar to our Lord's dying words on the cross (Luke

23:34 and 46). Christ committed His spirit to His Father and Stephen committed his spirit to Christ. The Lord Jesus asked forgiveness for His executioners, and Stephen did too. Then, Stephen fell asleep. He was buried with great sorrow by the believers.

NOTE: As the believers began to fully understand the doctrine of the resurrection, the word "dead," was often replaced with the more hopeful word "sleep" because they began to look at death as less final. See John 11:11 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13,15.

The words *at that time* in 8:1 are literally "on that day," meaning on the day of Stephen's stoning. This shows that the murder of Stephen was directly related to the persecution of the church. Jesus had warned His disciples that persecutions would come. He told them that 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 (planting) seed. The believers were scattered to sow the seeds of the gospel. The apostles were the only ones that remained in Jerusalem.

Saul was a man that 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 for the Greek name 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, people of Samaria, were racial and religious "half-breeds" in the eyes of the Jews. That means that they were only part Jewish. Their **ancestry** was **tainted** with

foreign blood (2 Kings 17) and their worship of God was mixed with worship of false gods. These were the reasons that Jews were not friends with the Samaritans.

Philip's message was *Christ*. Specifically, he preached about *the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ* (8:12). Philip performed miracles, casting out unclean spirits and healing those who were paralyzed and lame, just like apostles did. As the people of the city saw the miracles, they paid careful attention to Philip's preaching and the whole city was filled with great joy.

When the people believed Philip's message about Christ, they were baptized. Even Simon, a sorcerer, joined in with the crowd. He believed and was baptized. The people had previously believed that Simon was *the great power of God* and had followed him, but when Philip came with real miracles and the truth, they saw the difference and followed Philip instead. Simon joined himself to Philip, perhaps because the people were now following Philip and he had become used to being the focus of their attention.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The believers received the Holy Spirit when Peter and John laid hands on them and prayed. At that point, God confirmed the acceptance of the Samaritans into the body of believers.

When the Samaritan believers received the Holy Spirit, there was a clear outward demonstration of God's power, maybe a repetition of the speaking in tongues 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 shows that Simon was more interested in miracles than in the message of Christ. Peter **rebuked** Simon because all that God gives to us is a free gift, given by His grace. It can never be purchased with any amount of money.

Simon needed to repent and pray that God would forgive his sin. Peter was concerned about the condition of Simon's heart. 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).

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

Philip had completed his job in Samaria and God sent an angel to tell him to *Arise, and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza*. Philip arose and went. He followed the dry, desert route south toward Gaza.

Philip met up with an Ethiopian eunuch who was in charge of the treasury of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. The eunuch had come from worshipping in Jerusalem 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 from the prophet Isaiah. Philip heard the eunuch reading from Isaiah 53 and asked if he understood what he was reading.

The eunuch replied that he needed someone to explain the Scripture to him. He 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?*

Philip took Isaiah 53:7-8 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 slain unjustly. As the chariot continued down the road, it came to some water and the eunuch asked to be baptized. Philip's answered, *If you believe with all your heart, you may* (8:37). 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: *Envoy's will come out of Egypt (Ethiopia*

was located just south of Egypt); Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God.

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. The eunuch went on his way rejoicing, and according to ancient historians, he spread the good news of Jesus Christ throughout his country. Philip went to Azotus, the ancient Philistine city of Ashdod, just north of Gaza. He then traveled north, ministering to all the cities until he came to Caesarea, and there he settled down (21:8). †

Prayer

Pray daily that God will point out your sins and keep your heart right before Him?

Memory Verse

Isaiah 53:7 *He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.*

Vocabulary

martyrdom - the death or slaying of a person who is killed for his beliefs

executioners - one who puts a person to death

passionately - with strong emotion

ancestry - your family before you

tainted - affect with a bad quality; contaminate

proselyte - a person who has converted from one religion to another

QUESTIONS FOR ACTS LESSON 7

All questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

DAY ONE: Review last week's lesson and notes.

1. What have you learned from Stephen's words and actions that you can apply to your life?

2. a. How was Philip obedient to God and what good resulted from his obedience?

- b. ♥ (Heart Question) How does this encourage you to be obedient?

DAY TWO: Read Acts 9:1-12.

3. a. Where did Saul go after Stephen was stoned and what was his reason for going?

- b. From verses 3 and 4, what happened to Saul while he was on his journey?

- c. What question did Saul ask in verse 5, and what answer did he receive?

- d. What was Saul's reaction to the answer he received?

4. What did Jesus tell Saul to do?

5. a. What did the people traveling with Saul see and hear?

- b. What did they do for Saul?

6. Beside each word or phrase below, circle whether it is something Saul DID or DID NOT do and give verse for each.

vs. ____	Saul DID	OR	Saul DID NOT	Go to Damascus
vs. ____	Saul DID	OR	Saul DID NOT	See for three days
vs. ____	Saul DID	OR	Saul DID NOT	Eat or drink for three days
vs. ____	Saul DID	OR	Saul DID NOT	Pray
vs. ____	Saul DID	OR	Saul DID NOT	See a vision

DAY THREE: Read Acts 9:10-19.

7. a. Who was Ananias, and what did God tell him to do in verse 11?

- b. Was Ananias obedient immediately? Why or why not?
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8. a. What did the Lord tell Ananias about Saul?
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- b. How do the the following Scripture passages show the fulfillment of the Lord's words about Saul.
- a. Acts 9:20
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- b. Acts 26:1-2 and 22 and 23
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- c. Romans 11:13
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- d. 2 Corinthians 11:24-28
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9. Circle T (true) or F (false) next to each statement. Correct the statements you mark F.
- a. T OR F In obedience to God, Ananias found Saul and laid hands on him.
- b. T OR F Ananias called Saul "brother" and said that he had been sent by the apostles.
- c. T OR F Ananias told Saul he would now regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.
- d. T OR F Saul received his sight, was baptized, and immediately left for Jerusalem.

DAY FOUR: Read Acts 9:20-30.

10. Fill in the blanks.
- a. Saul preached in the _____ that _____ is the Son of God.
- b. All who heard were _____ that Saul was the same man who had been persecuting _____.
- c. Saul increased in _____ and _____ the Jews by proving that _____ is the _____.
11. How did the disciples help Saul?
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12. a. Where did Saul go next and what kind of welcome did he receive?
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b. Who helped Saul and what was the result?

c. What problem arose?

DAY FIVE: Read Acts 9:31-43.

14. a. To what areas had the church spread by this time? Locate them on a map.

b. What do you learn about the church from verse 31?

15. a. What two miracles did Peter perform and what was the result of each?

b. Who healed Aeneas? Give verse.

c. By whose power was Tabitha (also known as Dorcas) raised from the dead?
Give a phrase, with the verse, to support your answer.