

Acts 8: 1

1 Saul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Our study this morning follows the first recorded murder of a Christian in the Bible. Last week we looked at the life and death of Stephen who was martyred for his faith in Christ.

The martyrdom of Stephen is the beginning of the persecuted church. You will remember that thousands of Jews were coming to Jerusalem to hear the apostles preach about Jesus and the church had grown from about 120 at the time of Pentecost to perhaps 10,000 by the time Stephen was stoned.

Let's begin in verse 1 of Chapter 8.

1 Saul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

What do we know from the Scriptures about the Saul?

Born in Tarsus; A Hebrew of Hebrews; Son of a Pharisee; A Roman Citizen; Educated in Jerusalem; Taught by Gamaliel; Measured by the Law, his life was blameless; Promising Pharisee.

Saul was determined. Many might call him a zealot. Look at verse 2.

2 Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. 3 But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

The word “ravaging” used in verse 3 is used in other places to describe a wild animal mangling his prey. This man was going from house to house persecuting both men and women. He would ask the Jewish believers to renounce their beliefs. If after beating them, they renounced their faith and blasphemed God, he would simply throw them in prison, if not, he would have them killed.

In Acts 26:11 the regenerated Apostle Paul described himself and his actions of that time as “exceedingly mad against” the believers. He called himself, “a blasphemer and a persecutor.”

This persecution had an interesting effect on the believers however. You will recall that the Hellenistic Jews were not originally native to Jerusalem. And it was the Hellenistic Jews that were chosen by the Apostles to deal with the problem of the widows back in chapter 6. Among those chosen to deal with the problem were Stephen and Philip. The outcome of the persecution was that many of these Hellenistic Jews were scattered and went home. Notice in verse 1 that the Apostles stayed in Jerusalem.

But look at verse 4. While traveling home, guess what they were doing?

4 Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the Word.

Persecution does to the church what wind does to seeds. The wind blows the seeds and if the seeds fall on fertile soil, the harvest is great. In this case, God used the persecution for His glory.

The persecution was the beginning of the fulfillment of Jesus’ last words to the church as written in Acts 1:8.

8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.

Philip the Evangelist went to Samaria. Look at verse 5.

5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. 6 The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. 7 For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 So there was much rejoicing in that city.

What do you know about Samaria?

If you look at a map, Samaria is actually north of Jerusalem. The Samaritans were a "half-breed" people. They were a mixture of Jewish blood and Gentile blood. It was a nation formed when the Assyrians captured the ten northern tribes of Israel in 732 BC and then intermarried with the Jewish women.

The Jews hated the Samaritans. You will remember the story of Jesus going to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:7

7 There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." 8 For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. 9 Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

Jesus broke 2 barriers that day. First he spoke to a woman, and second, she was a Samaritan.

Philip had the gift of evangelism. He went into Samaria and began to evangelize and many came to know Christ. Not only did he evangelize but notice in verse 8 it says that Philip was able to perform miracles. And what were the results of this great persecution?

The end of verse 8 says there was great joy among the believers.

Successful ministries like Philip's always seem to attract some interesting characters. Look at verse 9.

9 Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to

be someone great; 10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, " This man is what is called the Great Power of God."

Simon was a magician. How many of you have been tricked by a magician?

When a magician says that he can make a building disappear, can he really do it?

Simon was a person that practiced magic. He knew he had no real power. He was simply an illusionist. Satan is also an illusionist. He tries to make people believe that he is as powerful as God. He tries to make us believe that as the Prince of this world what he has to offer us is more important than what God has to offer us.

Let's see what happens. Verse 11.

11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. 12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. 13 Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

Verse 13 says that even Simon himself believed and was baptized. This is an interesting verse. Keep your finger here and turn to Matthew chapter 7. As you are turning look at what James wrote in James 2:19

19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

Jesus said some very strong words in Matthew chapter 7. Look at verse 22. Jesus said,

22 Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles? 23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never

knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.

Apparently not everyone who claims to be saved really is saved.

Back to Acts 8. Simon's motivation was apparently not of pure motives. Look what happens as the story continues. Verse 14.

14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. 18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Why would Simon make such a request? What were his motives?

Notice Peter's response to Simon. Verse 20.

20 But Peter said to him, May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! 21 You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

What was Peter saying to Simon?

Simon's faith was not in God. He was simply trying to obtain more tricks for his trade so that he would continue to be able to make his living the way he had always done by perhaps learning how Philip was performing the miracles.

Peter speaks to his heart in verse 22.

22 Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity.

Simon never did repent himself. Look at verse 24. It begins with the word “But.”

24 But Simon answered and said, Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.

Notice Simon doesn't pray but rather asks Peter to pray to the Lord that the Lord might spare him from hell. How sad.

Now before we leave this passage, we must go back and ask, why didn't the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit when they believed? Go back to verse

11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. 12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.

Clearly, the Samaritans had true faith in Christ and they were even baptized.

Skip to verse 14.

14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

What is going on here? Why didn't the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit when they believed?

In order to answer that, we have to turn back to the book of Matthew chapter 16. Do you remember Jesus asking the apostles a very important question, “Who do people say that I am?” It was Peter who answered that question. Let's look at the passage. Matthew 16 beginning in verse 13.

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

Now on these verses the Catholic Church believes that Jesus ordained Peter as the first Pope. But when you study these verses it becomes abundantly clear that what Jesus is saying is that the statement "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" is the rock upon which the Church is built, not upon Peter.

The verses that follow are also interesting. Look at verse 19.

19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

Those of you that are English majors will look twice at the language here. Both times the words are, "shall have been." This means that it has already been done but the keys were given to Peter to do something that had already been done.

What is it that had already been done that Peter was given the keys to do? Well what are the purpose of keys?

So Peter has the privilege of opening the door of faith to others outside the Jewish faith. First it was at Jerusalem and around Judea and now to Samaria and in Acts 10 it will be Peter who will unlock the doors to the Gentiles when the household of Cornelius believes.

Again, God follows exactly what he promised in Acts 1:8. Let me also say again that the first 10 chapters of Acts represent a transition

period for the church. From the Jews to the Samaritans to the Gentiles, the gospel is being opened up one step at a time and the Holy Spirit is being revealed one step at a time. God's pattern for today is given to us in Acts 10: the sinner hears the Gospel, believes, receives the Holy Spirit, and then is baptized.

It is dangerous to base any doctrine on the first 10 chapters of Acts because it was the church in transition. Those who claim we must be baptized to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit have a hard time explaining what happened to the Samaritans and those who claim we must have "the laying on of hands" to receive the Holy Spirit have difficult time with Acts 10 where that didn't happen.

What is clear is that God wants the Gospel to go out and for people to come to know His son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 17 says

17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

I can imagine it was Pentecost #2. An outpouring of the Holy Spirit that was incredible.

This Christmas season, Jesus wants to fill our lives with His love. Let's close this morning by singing the chorus.

Oh come let us adore Him, Oh come let us adore Him,
Oh come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.