

## 25. The Church Went Everywhere Preaching the Word

In our last topic, we see that Stephen became the first follower of Christ to die for his faith. We saw that we want to show our physical and spiritual children how to show the same love that Stephen showed to others. In our topic today, we are going to see that Saul became the leader of those who began to persecute the followers of Christ in an effort to try and stop the message of the death and resurrection of Christ.

The death of Stephen had a great impact both on the church and on the Jewish religious leaders. Acts 8:1-3 says, “Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen *to his burial*, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing *them* to prison.” We see that Saul had a large influence on the changes that happened among the Jewish religious leaders. Saul also helped cause some of the changes that happened in the church.

Saul had held the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death. The word translated “consenting” means *to be pleased with or to be in hearty agreement*. Many years later as Saul (Paul) made his defense before the Jews in Jerusalem, he said in Acts 22:19-21, ““So I said, “Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.” Then He said to me, “Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.”” Saul told the crowd which included some of his former companions in that persecution that he had been in hearty agreement with the death of Stephen until Christ transformed His life.

Saul also helped cause some of the changes that happened to the church because he became the leader of the great persecution that arose against the church at Jerusalem. This caused many of the followers of Christ to flee from the city of Jerusalem. These followers were scattered throughout the region to different places in Judea and Samaria and as we will see in the future to points even further away. Acts 11:19-20 says, “Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus.” We see that this persecution had a particular impact on the Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews because Saul was a Hellenistic Jew who had grown up in the city of Tarsus where he had a strong Greek influence. This is probably why it was possible for the apostles to remain in the city of Jerusalem at this time.

On the day that Stephen was stoned to death, we see that devout men carried Stephen to the place where he was buried. The word translated “devout” means *those who reverence God*. Acts 2:5 says, “And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven.” Many devout Jews that had a great reverence for God were from other countries. These devout Jews were in Jerusalem and heard about the wonderful works of God on the Day of Pentecost. As

a result, many of them became followers of Christ. We see that it was men with this reverence for God that buried Stephen. They also showed their great sorrow for his death.

Saul showed His rebellion against the followers of Christ by treating those followers shamefully. He began going to the synagogues looking for followers of Christ. Later, as he talked about what he had done, Paul said in Acts 22:19, ““So I said, “Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You.””” Everyone in Jerusalem had heard what Saul had done to Christians. When he found followers, it did not matter whether they were men or women. He dragged them to the judge and then would take them to the prison. He also caused many of them to be beaten for their faith.

Although many followers of Christ were forced to leave Jerusalem, it did not mean that the spread of the Gospel was stopped. Acts 8:4 says, “Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” Here, we see that persecution could not stop the development of the church. Some fled to other parts of Judea. Others settled in the area of Samaria. As we saw in an earlier paragraph, some even went as far as the city of Antioch. Instead of stopping the Gospel, persecution spread the Gospel because those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the Word. Here, we see an important lesson. We want every Christian to learn to clearly explain the Word of God so that each Christian will be equipped to serve the Lord wherever they might be scattered when persecution comes.

We see the impact that persecution had on the early church. Acts 9:31 says, “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.” This persecution quickly caused the Gospel to spread throughout the regions of Judea, Galilee and Samaria. As a result, we see that churches were established throughout all three of these regions. Then, we see that the churches continued to multiply in these regions. In fact, history shows that persecution always causes churches to multiply. As Christians are forced to flee, they share the Word of God wherever they go and God causes churches to multiply.

We see what the Lord did through one individual that was forced to flee from Jerusalem in this chapter. Acts 8:5-8 says, “Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city.” Like Stephen, Philip was one of the Greek-speaking Jews that was chosen to distribute food to the Greek-speaking Jews in Acts 6. Acts 6:3 says, “Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of *good* reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.” Then, Acts 6:5 adds, “And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.” Like many others that were forced to flee, Philip began sharing the message about the death and resurrection of Christ wherever he traveled.

We see that the first place where Philip went was to the city of Samaria. He immediately began to speak about Christ and His death and resurrection to the people of that city. This is the key message that we should share with anyone who does not yet know Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:1-5 says, “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.” We also see that God chose to verify the message of Philip with miracles just as he verified the message of the apostles by signs, wonders and mighty deeds.

We see that the people of Samaria gladly listened to the preaching of Philip. The multitudes responded to the message of the death and resurrection of Christ and many turned from their sin and placed their faith in Christ. Here, we see that many people are often ready to hear about the death and resurrection of Christ and turn to Christ. Romans 10:17 says, “So then faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” In order for people to come to faith, they need someone to share the Word of God with them. It was in another city in Samaria that Christ had told the disciples in John 4:35, “Do you not say, “There are still four months and *then* comes the harvest”? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!” People are often more ready to hear the Word of God than we are to share the Word of God. We will help our children develop a vision for the world as they see us share the Word with others.

Among the miracles that Christ chose to do through Philip to verify his message were cleansing people from unclean spirits (demons). Philip prayed and asked the Lord to heal those with unclean spirits. The unclean spirits cried with a loud voice as they came out of many people that were possessed by the demons. 1 John 4:4 says, “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” Christ is able to defeat any unclean spirit. We also see that the Lord chose to heal those who were paralyzed and those who were crippled in answer to the prayers of Philip.

The way that the Lord was working in the lives of the people of that city caused great joy in that city. This was the same thing that had happened in Jerusalem when the church began. Acts 2:46-47 says, “So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” The word translated “gladness” means *extreme joy*. We want to help our physical and spiritual children fully understand that the message of eternal life brings great joy to those who place their faith in Christ. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to share the message of salvation.