

Missions – Acts and Onward

Week 4 – Persecution and Promulgation

Introduction: Last week we ended noting the growth and organization of the church leading to its first martyr Stephen the deacon. As persecution continues to rise the church continues to garner more of a following and more people are out promulgating the message.

I. Persecution of Jerusalem

1. What Started with Stephen quickly became widespread

† **Acts 8:1-4** – *And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.² And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.*

- A. The intensive persecutions instead of stomping out the church shoved the fire outward and spread the people northward and southward. **PTQ**
- B. Note that the apostles who were given immense bravery stayed in Jerusalem and continued there.
- C. The church that remained mourned for Stephen.

2. Saul persecuted the church after consenting to the death of Stephen

† **Acts 8:3** – *As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.*

- A. Saul Explains elsewhere that he did this in ignorance he was zealously against anything that he deemed is against the one true God, as a Pharisee. (Phil. 3:4-6)
- B. Saul as a character needs some further description.

- i. His name in the Hebrew is identical to the first king of Israel. The first saul was a head and shoulder bigger than the rest.
- ii. However Saul's Roman name (Paulus) which all Jews would have had in these days, meant small. So he was the big little guy.
- iii. And interestingly enough, it was John Chrysostom, the golden mouth, who said he was barely 5 foot tall with a reach that touched the stars.
¹ (he was also described by others as bald and bow-legged). **PTQ**



¹ Randal Smith, "Acts," One Book One Hour (GCBI Media, 2013.)

- iv. probably came from a semi wealthy family. Saul's family had sent him away to Jerusalem to learn under a well renowned Rabbi whom Paul himself identifies in Acts 22 as Gamaliel.
- v. Saul would have had a good understanding in three languages (Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic) and possibly even a fourth (Latin). ²
- C. Ultimately Saul was a well-meaning rebel against the Lord reminding us that sincerity does not equate to being correct. Even sincere people need changed by the truth of Christ.

II. Promulgation to Judea and Samaria

1. The Works of Saul caused the people who he had scattered to spread the word everywhere.
 - A. This shows the preaching of the Gospel is not sectioned off for some priestly class but God used an expanded on the work done by all the church. **PTQ**
 - † **Acts 8:4** – *Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.*
 - B. This continued both in the lay people and in the other deacons.
 - † **Acts 8:5-8** – *Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.⁶ And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.⁷ For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed.⁸ And there was great joy in that city.*
 - i. "Philip was one of seven chosen to oversee food distribution in the Jerusalem church (6:5; not to be confused with Philip the apostle [1:13]). Because of the persecution of Christians that followed Stephen's stoning, Philip and others fled Jerusalem."³ **PTQ**
 - ii. Phillip's expansion of the Gospel's territory into Samaria made it clear that the gospel could bridge even cultural division.
 - C. Christ's proclamation came into the Samaritans with such power that Simon the sorcerer had to admit that his personal magic and arts did not compare to what was being done in the name of Jesus. **PTQ**
 - † **Acts 8:12-14** – *But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.¹³ Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.¹⁴ Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John:*
 - i. "The Jewish religion was widely considered to be effective in petitioning gods for healing and for defeating evil magic and evil spirits. One of the purposes for

² Randall Smith, "Acts," One Book One Hour (GCBI Media, 2013.)

³ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Fourth Edition, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 211.

magic and divination in the ancient world was to coerce gods or divine powers to accomplish certain tasks like healing, cursing or blessing.”⁴ **PTQ**

- ii. What is worth noting is that the spiritual realm is real and “magic” to some degree plays a role in life both historically and today.
 - iii. According to David Garland, “Simon is identified as a sorcerer, someone who practices black magic for personal gain. Worse, he accepts the people’s adulation of him as a divine figure, which from the Christian perspective would make him satanic.”⁵
2. The Apostles and the giving of the Spirit
- † **Acts 8:17-19** – *Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.¹⁸ And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money,¹⁹ Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.*
- A. Upon the Apostles seeing and hearing of faith amongst the Samaritans extended to them the right hands of fellowship as they had believed and been baptized but not yet received the spirit.
- i. What happened is not described but it was apparently visible in some way that the sorcerer Simon could tell there was a transfer of power (it likely could be speaking in tongues or another physical sign.)
 - ii. The Samaritans were brought into the fold of Christians on equal footing with the Jews. **PTQ**
- B. It is good to note that the book of Acts is narrative and transitory.
- i. Narrative means that it is descriptive of the past, not necessarily always prescriptive on what will or should happen. **PTQ**
 - ii. Many things are happening for the first time and sometimes work differently than how they persist.
- C. Simon’s offer to buy the Spirit selling-office.
- † **Acts 8:20-24** – *But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.²¹ Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.²² Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.²³ For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.²⁴ Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.*
- i. It is unclear if Simon ever received the spirit. However, the idea of offering to buy or sell blessings or ecclesiastical offices (like that of apostle) was come to be called Simony after him.

⁴ Michael F. Bird, “Paul’s Religious and Historical Milieu,” in *Paul’s Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 26.

⁵ David E. Garland, *Acts*, ed. Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 83.

- A concrete example illustrates the problem. Pope Gregory VII accused Emperor Henry IV of simony and lay investiture when Henry appointed his own choice to serve as archbishop of Milan.⁶
 - ii. Some have looked at Simon uncharitably as one who was a false convert
 - iii. Others believe Simon just sinned initially and his request for prayer may have indicated some level of repentance.
- III. Foretastes of further expansion
1. The Gospel going out to the Ethiopian Eunuch.
 - A. Phillip then going from there is told to bring the Gospel to a man of another race and social status.
 - † **Acts 8:26-27** – *And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.²⁷ And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship,*
 - B. This man is likely an attempted proselyte of the Jewish ways as he was heading home from Jerusalem and was reading the Scriptures.
 - i. “There are two methods of gentile conversion: *historical incorporation* and *eschatological ingathering*. Throughout Israel’s history, provision was made for gentiles submitting themselves to the God of Israel. While Israel did not practice an aggressive missionary religion, the Hebrew Scriptures show special concern for gentile “sojourners” in Israel.”⁷
 - ii. The man would have been a foreigner from Cush
 - iii. He was considered a second-class citizen especially because he was a eunuch. **PTQ**
 - iv. He was wealthy and in connection to high society, but would have been despised and likely kept out of the temple. (Deut. 23:1)
 - † **Acts 8:30-31** – *And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest?³¹ And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.*
 - C. The man was doing what we hope all people would do when reading the bible that is ask questions of the text trying to rightly understand and apply what we read.
 - i. Phillip was so complete in his understanding that he could take a passage from Isaiah and proclaim Christ’s fulfillment of it
 - ii. Amazingly the man hears and proclaims faith in Christ and is baptized.
 - iii. Verse 37 is not in all manuscripts which has caused a stir amongst especially the KJV only crowd. **PTQ**

⁶ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, ed. Marshall Shelley (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 222.

⁷ J. D. Payne, *Theology of Mission: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021),

† **Acts 8:37** – ³⁷ *And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*

- iv. God then raptures Phillip to a totally different location where he continues to preach.

IV. Persecution of Christians abroad

1. As the gospel is now expanding out so to does the persecution.

† **Acts 9:1-2** - And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,² And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem

2. Here we have Saul's introduction into the story as a redeemed person.

† **Acts 9:3-6** - And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:⁴ And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?⁵ And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.⁶ And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.

† **Acts 9:7** – And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.

“Problem: Acts 22:9 declares, “Those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me.” This appears to be an outright contradiction. **PTQ**

Solution: The contradiction is only verbal, not real. The word *hear* (*akouō*) can have different meanings in Greek, just as it does in English. It can mean “hear a voice” (as in Acts 9:7), or it can mean “understand the meaning of what was said.”⁸ **PTQ**

3. Saul's bringing into the church was not popular by the man whom God appointed to tell him the truth and heal his eyes after God blinded him.

† **Acts 9:10-12** – *And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord.¹¹ And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth,¹² And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.*

A. God's plan had included Ananias whether it was his preference or not.

B. God told Saul in a dream Ananias was coming. Luckily he does not pull a Jonah but instead obeys the Lord.

⁸ Norman L. Geisler, *A Popular Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014),

- C. People in the less Christian areas of the world have told stories of dreams of a specific man they need to talk to only to find out this person would bring them the gospel of Jesus Christ.

V. Promulgation by the Church's Persecutor

1. God's plan for Paul was to use him for a particular purpose which we will see laid out in the book of Acts. His whole life was planned before his salvation and it is unclear if the whole of what he was supposed to do was told him.
 - † **Acts 9:15-16** – *But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:¹⁶ For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.*
2. Here Paul received the Holy Ghost apart from the Apostles. Thus showing an apostle is not necessary to the process always but was at particular points. **PTQ**
 - † **Acts 9:17-18** – *And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.¹⁸ And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.*
3. Paul's preaching was so intentional that he commanded attention although was met with some distrust.
 - † **Acts 9:20-22** – *And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.²¹ But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?²² But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ.*
4. Because his life was in danger after serving and learning from Christ up and around Damascus/ Arabia for 3 years or so he went down to Jerusalem. (**Gal. 1:17-18**) **PTQ**
 - † **Acts 9:26-27** – *And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.²⁷ But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.*
 - A. Saul's persecution hit close to home and thus he was not readily accepted in Jerusalem.
 - B. Thus Barnabas, who has a heart for the needy, stood up for him and got him into the Jerusalem church.
5. Saul's change preaching was so significant that again people were ready to kill Paul thus beginning the 9-10 years of silence in Paul's life back at Tarsus. **PTQ**
 - † **Acts 9:29-31** – *And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him.³⁰ Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.³¹ Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.*

- A. After seeing the impact on Paul, it was clear that the Christian faith was there to stay and for a time for relative peace. Instead, the churches all across the regions were built up in knowing and following the Lord.
 - B. As in church history the threat wasn't gone but the wave of persecution may have just been a little less intense.
6. Peter continues to do miracles. **PTQ**
- † **Acts 9:32-35** – And it came to pass, as Peter passed throughout all quarters, he came down also to the saints which dwelt at Lydda.³³ And there he found a certain man named Aeneas, which had kept his bed eight years, and was sick of the palsy.³⁴ And Peter said unto him, Aeneas, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole: arise, and make thy bed. And he arose immediately.³⁵ And all that dwelt at Lydda and Saron saw him, and turned to the Lord.
 - A. The first was a lame man in Lydda which seemed to turn all of both Lydda and Saron to the Lord.
 - † **Acts 9:38-42** – *And forasmuch as Lydda was nigh to Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent unto him two men, desiring him that he would not delay to come to them.³⁹ Then Peter arose and went with them. When he was come, they brought him into the upper chamber: and all the widows stood by him weeping, and shewing the coats and garments which Dorcas made, while she was with them.⁴⁰ But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up.⁴¹ And he gave her his hand, and lifted her up, and when he had called the saints and widows, presented her alive.⁴² And it was known throughout all Joppa; and many believed in the Lord.*
 - B. The final miracle is one that takes place in Joppa with the raising of Dorcas from the dead.
 - C. This miracle did great work in bringing many to the Lord there and it placed Peter exactly where he was needed to become the first one to bring in a Gentile convert.

Conclusion: As the story progresses the Gospel is made more widely accessible to different groups of people. Persecution spread the people who in turned further spread the Gospel. We must remember the goal is not to make the leaders to do the work of the ministry, but for the leaders to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry. Christ is being expressed as higher than other powers. People are seen as equal before God in the church regarding breaking down walls of division and inequality. Ultimately Paul's conversion reminds us that God can save even the most ardent opposition. As the church has grown and changed more changes are coming and a new Apostle sits nearby on the horizon.

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