**THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO SAMARIA**

July 10, 2016

Acts 8:1-40

Key Verse 8:4 “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”

Stephen’s martyrdom set off a wave of violence against the church, which caused many believers to scatter. One of these was Philip who went first to Samaria and then to a desert road and then to Caesarea. In all of the events in chapter 8, the common thread is how God was working to spread the gospel rapidly. God worked through persecutions, he used miraculous signs, he sent the Holy Spirit, and he sent an angel. It was God working. Despite the opposition of the Sanhedrin, or sorcery, or anything else, God was sovereign over his church.

Acts can be divided into three phases, summarized by Jesus’ words at the beginning of the book, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (1:8) This chapter begins phase 2, as the gospel spreads from Jerusalem to the surrounding Judea and Samaria. On the surface, it seems that early Christians were suffering, but God was doing his work, fulfilling his promise. Today let’s learn God’s desire to advance his kingdom according to his sovereign plan.

I. They preached the word wherever they went. (1-4)

Look at verse 1b. “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” Stephen’s death was tragic. Why was a young man like Stephen who was filled with the Spirit and with such a great ability to handle the Old Testament, killed when he was so young? Why did he have to be so confrontational that cost him his life? Isn’t it rather pointless? But as we studied last week, Stephen could not betray his conscience. He wanted to be true even to death. Also as we will see next week, Stephen’s death became the seed of Saul’s conversion. Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs has become the seed of the church.” Stephen’s speech really seemed to produce nothing but negative results. It was the trigger that set off the persecution of all Christians. It was like seeing a little bit of blood, and all of the sudden they just got bloodthirsty. A little bit of blood like piranha. They saw it and they wanted to rip and shred the church. Saul was the prime mover. Now we don’t have any of the gory details of what Saul did specifically, we only have some general terms. But whatever it was, it resulted in the people being scattered all over everywhere and being driven out of the city. Jesus warned in John 15 when he said, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first…They will put you out of the synagogues and in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.”

Look at verse 4. “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” God used persecution to spread the church. This may sound paradoxical. How can God use the martyrdom and arrest of his children to advance the gospel? The Jerusalem church enjoyed beautiful fellowship and charity, powerful preaching, mighty wonders, and a good reputation. It was like the kingdom of God on earth. Why couldn’t they enjoy the heavenly fellowship forever? It would be difficult to leave all of this and go to a foreign country. But persecution caused the church to scatter throughout Judea and Samaria. Sometimes Christians become too comfortable in their life of faith to hear God’s voice. Then they need some outward motivation to move on to God’s purpose for them. God does not hesitate to move us through persecution and hardship. The Risen Christ had told them in Acts 1:8. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” From God’s point of view, the early Christians were victorious soldiers. Jerusalem had been conquered. Now it was time to move on to Judea and Samaria.

Here we must realize two things about God’s way of working. Firstly, God used persecution to scatter the early church. Sometimes we think that God only does his work in a logical and reasonable way. That is, if God wants to pioneer a place, he will move someone’s heart to decide to go there, and then help him step by step. This surely happens. But God also used the intensive persecution of all believers to spread his gospel rapidly throughout Judea and Samaria. Sometimes God does not inform us or ask us if we would like to go pioneer somewhere. Sometimes God pushes us out through outward circumstances to move us where he wants us to go. God works through job problems, visa problems, and persecution to lead people where he wants them to go. Adoniram Judson wanted to go to India as a missionary, but India refused to allow him to enter, and so he went to Burma, and became a fruitful missionary there.

Secondly, God lets his people suffer for world salvation. The persecution of early Christians involved suffering. God knew their sufferings well. Jesus felt in his own body the pains inflicted upon each believer (Ac 9:4). He allowed them to suffer---not because he did not love them---but because he really loved them. Suffering refined their faith and purified their hearts. Suffering made them strong, strong enough to overcome the world. 1 Peter 1:7 says, “These sufferings have come so that your faith---of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire---may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” God never forgets that someday we must stand before Christ to give an account for our lives. He wants us to receive praise, glory and honor at that time. So he pushes us to do things that we do not like to do. He gives us hardships on earth---hardships that we did not choose and which we naturally want to avoid---to refine our faith for the glory of God in heaven. We should be really thankful to God for the hardships he allows us to bear.

Look at verse 4 again. “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” The early Christians were not victims of the circumstances. They did not sit down in self-pity. They preached the word wherever they went. This was possible by faith. They really believed the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They believed that their sins were forgiven. They believed they had a living hope in the kingdom of God. They did not feel poor. They felt truly rich in their souls. They carried with them the words of life that alone could save perishing souls. They boldly testified that Christ had risen and offered the kingdom of God to people everywhere they went. They had gospel faith and a clear principle to preach the word of God as of first importance. God uses those who preach the word regardless of circumstances. For example, St. Paul was in prison. It seemed impossible to do anything for God. But he found a way. He preached to the prison guards. In this way, the word of God reached the palace and spread all around Rome. He was chained, but God’s word was not chained. Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:2, “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction.”

The word “evangelize-evangelisco” just means to preach the gospel. It may have a vague connection to a word that means, “soap sellers.” When soap was first invented, it needed to be demonstrated to the public, and so there were street soap sellers. They would find some dirty looking man, and they would bring him out in the crowd and proceed to wash him, and to demonstrate how effective this really was in cleaning up. And so when the Christian people started preaching Christ, they weren’t talking about external cleansing; they were talking about internal cleansing, so they became known as “spiritual soap sellers.” And that is where we get the word “evangelist.” We ought to be busy confronting the world with the claims of Christ by which men’s hearts can be cleansed.

II. God’s work through one man Philip (5-25)

One of these scattered Christians was Philip. He was not the only evangelist. But his ministry serves as an example of the kind of work God was doing throughout Judea and Samaria. Philip had been one of the seven men in charge of food distribution, along with Stephen. So he may have been Stephen’s close friend. Stephen’s murder did not cause him to shrink back, however, but to grow bold. Look at verses 5-8. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. Probably students who had a habit of helplessly watching Youtube were set free to do their homework and began to get straight A’s. Many powerless people who were laying around and burdening others were suddenly healed by the power of God and began to work hard to support themselves. God’s work brought great joy in that city.

Now look at verses 14-17. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When Peter and John arrived, what did they find? The Samaritans needed the Holy Spirit. Philip was fully capable of bringing the Holy Spirit, as with the Ethiopian eunuch. Why didn’t the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit at the very instant they believed as believers do now? God had a special purpose here. He delayed the Holy Spirit until the apostles came, to show that that the Samaritans were in the one church, baptized into the one body. There is some historical background. The Jews basically hated the Samaritans. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. For 500 years, the Samaritans had worshipped in Mount Gerizim on their own. The Jews in the south and the Samaritans in the north each claimed in their own way to be God’s chosen people; there was intense rivalry between them. The Jews didn’t even go through Samaria. So God made a special provision in this case to let the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit through Peter and John. This expressed full fellowship with them as believers in one body.

III. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch

In the midst of a prosperous and fruitful ministry, an angel of the Lord called Philip to go south to the desert road. Philip did not question why, nor did he hesitate. There was one truth-seeking man who was confused and could not find the truth. He came to Jerusalem, but left without finding the truth. He was reading the Bible, but he could not understand and there was no one to explain it to him. And he was going back to Ethiopia, still confused. God sent Philip to catch him quickly and teach him the Bible. Look at verse 26. “Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’” We do not expect to meet many people on a desert road. But even one man can be precious, the hope for all of the nations of Africa.

So Philip obeyed God’s direction and he found one lone chariot. In it was an Ethiopian eunuch returning home. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. He was in fact reading one of the most powerful prophecies of Jesus. This was not by chance. For Philip to meet this one man, reading this particular passage at that very instant is the amazing providence of God. This event shows clearly that God is in control of all events. When we go fishing, may God lead us to such people. May we also accept that fishing is not random, but carefully orchestrated by God, who oversees the gospel work.

Philip asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip was ready to teach. You do not ask such a question unless you are ready to teach. It was an invitation for 1:1 Bible Study. The eunuch answered, “How can I, unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was a high official but he was not too proud to be a good student. He was reading about the crucifixion of Jesus. “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. After just one Bible Study, he was baptized and filled with joy. Philip did not have a chance to prepare for this Bible study, but he was always ready to teach. Then the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away to Azotus (or Ashdod) and he traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached the large city of Caesarea, where he settled and established a church (21:8). God was working dynamically through Philip. And he can work dynamically through us, if we are obedient to his calling.

In this passage we see that God is eager to spread the gospel. God went ahead of the early Christians to reach all Judea and Samaria according to his own plan, even into the strongholds of Satan, such a city under the influence of sorcery. God also wants to reach all Canadian campuses. God hears the prayers of the truth-seekers and wants to raise up Bible teachers for them. We must see what God is doing and be prepared to preach the name of Jesus Christ, wherever we go. Notice that the angel could direct Philip, but could not do Philip’s work of preaching the gospel. That privilege belongs to man, not to angels.