

The Acts of the Apostles

“A study of the application of theology to the work of the church as a group”

Chapter Eight

Persecution Causes the Gospel to Spread

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Cruel persecution would cause an deceitful cause to dissipate into the wind but the work of God thrives on persecution. Cruel persecution certainly would cause people to consider the truth of their movement. If the people had severe doubts then certainly the movement would disappear.

James 1:6 “But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”

We see in this chapter how Luke tells us that the gospel is spread to all men by the acts of persecution causing the people to scatter. The scattering does not result in hiding but in great actions of the Lord.

Acts 8:1 “And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Acts 8:2 And some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him.

Acts 8:3 But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.”

First Luke gives us the picture of Saul as he heartily approved the stoning of Steven and continued his work of persecuting the church of Jesus Christ. Saul completely understood that the new order and the old order were completely incompatible. Thus to maintain the old order the new way must be destroyed. The law allowed the burial of executed criminals but forbade the public mourning of their death. The people made a special effort to bury him and to wail concerning his death. Even though they knew that Stephen was with the Lord now, they still missed his presence just as we miss people who die. The death of Stephen did mean a lot to the people for he was one of the first people chosen for special work in the early church and God worked many miracles through him.

Note also that the apostles did not scatter but stayed to become the center of the church. History tells us that it was the Hellenists who felt the most threatened by this action against Stephen and they were the main ones who fled the city. It seems that from this time until its rebuilding in A.D. 135 Jerusalem remained predominantly a Hebrew body. After A.D. 135 the church at Jerusalem was predominantly a Gentile-Christian church. The Jewish Christians served the holy purpose of God when they were dispersed into the

Gentile countries as they took the Gospel to the Gentiles. Thus began the time of the Gentiles in the timing of God.

This stoning served as a different type of example for Saul. He was inspired by this terrible action to increase his persecution of the church. His actions were horrible much like the actions of the Nazi soldiers and police during the time of World War II when they entered houses and took off the Jews to prisons and much worse.

**Acts 8:4 “Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.
Acts 8:5 And Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.**

Acts 8:6 And the multitudes with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing.

Acts 8:7 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.

Acts 8:8 And there was much rejoicing in that city.”

We see the result of this persecution is that the disciples were scattered and continued preaching the gospel to other regions. They did not slow down their preaching but the persecution resulted in the preaching of the gospel being sent into other regions of the world as God was reaching out to “all” men. We see that demons were leaving people and miracles of healings were occurring. The persecution of Stephen and others resulted in a wide-spread work by the Holy Spirit through the new Christians and great rejoicing in Jerusalem. Philip was another of the Hellenistic “deacons” chosen by the early church and he followed in Steven’s footsteps by his mighty preaching and allowing the miracles of God to be worked through him. From our knowledge of the Samaritans we know that it was bold of Philip to preach the Gospel to these people. We do not know to which city in Samaria Philip went but it does not matter. The working of miracles was among the demon-possessed, the paralytics, and the lame people. These are the same types of people to whom Stephen and Jesus showed the signs that confirmed the origin of their strengths.

Acts 8:9 “Now there was a certain man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city, and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great;

Acts 8:10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God."

Acts 8:11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

Acts 8:12 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.

Acts 8:13 And 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.”

We know that people practiced works of magic as we are told of such instances even in the time of Moses.

Gen 41:8 “Now it came about in the morning that his spirit was troubled, so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh.”

Exodus 7:22 “But the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts; and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.”

Exodus 8:7 “And the magicians did the same with their secret arts, making frogs come up on the land of Egypt.”

But here was a man who was exceptionally good in his practice of magic. People are drawn to people who claim to be magicians. Some historians think that this Simon was the same Simon who founded the Gnostic sect. But whoever he was, he was highly regarded by the people. There are many such magicians in the world now and many such shows draw huge crowds on special TV programs. This man claimed to be doing great works of god and so that drew even more people to him. I can think of many similar situations today as people who claim to be healing people in the name of god draw huge crowds. People who claim that god will bring people wealth and healing and happiness today draw huge crowds. We know of large numbers of people coming to meetings in Atlanta, Texas, California, and other places. Jesus warned us of such people and He told us of their resulting judgment.

Matt 7:21 “Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.

Matt 7:22 "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?'

Matt 7:23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'”

Not all works that seem to be miraculous are real miracles. Certainly God does use miracles to validate that some people are indeed His people and doing His work. But we must be very discerning in our judging of these works for Satan can appear as an angel and he can do mighty works that can deceive us.

2Cor 11:14 “And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”

This man called Simon was drawn to the mighty works of God's real people and he wanted to be part of this group of people who were being so admired by the people. We read here that Simon believed and he was baptized, but did he have a saving belief? People can appear to be children of God, be baptized, and go through many actions of true people of God but still be under the wrath of God. We will see below that Simon really did not have saving faith. He was a pretender because he just wanted to be

admired even more than he had been when he was working his miracles. He saw that the miracles of these people were even greater than what he was doing and he wanted to be able to do the same miracles for his self-admiration. So how can we determine if a person who says that he believes and is baptized and does work in the church is really a child of God and really possesses saving faith? Often all we can do is wait and see what the person does as his life continues. There are two passages in Scripture that remind me of this sort of situation.

*Heb 6:4 "For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit,
Heb 6:5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,
Heb 6:6 and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame."*

*2Peter 2:18 "For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error,
2Peter 2:19 promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved.
2Peter 2:20 For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.
2Peter 2:21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them."*

Both of the cases above refer to people who, like Simon, believe for a while, participate in the activity of the church and then show that they never had true faith by leaving. John tells us that the unbelievers show us their true nature when they leave us.

1John 2:19 "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us."

Jesus also told His disciples not to try to remove the unbelievers themselves:

Matt 13:24 "He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.

Matt 13:25 "But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away.

Matt13:26 "But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also.

Matt 13:27 "And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?'

Matt 13:28 "And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' And the slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?'

Matt 13:29 "But he said, 'No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them.

Matt 13:30 'Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn."' "

There are many other Scriptures that alert us to the danger of false brethren and other pretenders in the faith such as chapter 11 of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians so please read that chapter. There is a worldly "faith" that is really a false belief and Jesus was well aware of such.

John 2:23 "Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, beholding His signs which He was doing.

John 2:24 But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men,

John 2:25 and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man."

But we are not God so we must wait and know the Scripture so that we can recognize the truth from falsehood.

Acts 8:14 "Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John,

Acts 8:15 who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8:16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Acts 8:17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

This story does not inform us of a second baptism in the Spirit as some people relate. There is only one baptism in the Spirit and that occurs when we are born again. The purpose of this story of the actions of Peter and John is related to us to inform us that we must tell people the whole council of God. Jesus told us what to do:

Matt 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

Matt 28:20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. "

The people had not been told the whole council of God for Jesus told us to baptize His people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. God's people are not to be ignorant of the total ways of God. I did not know the proper works of the Holy Spirit until the fall of 1970 when I was reading John chapters 14-16 and this knowledge brought forth my rebirth at the hands of the Holy Spirit and I was never the same since that night. I am not saying that I had a second rebirth for that would be against the teachings of my Lord Jesus. The bringing of the total truth of God brought about my first and only rebirth just as it did for these people. Also remember that these were the hated Samaritans so

their public acceptance by the leaders of the Jerusalem church was of particular importance. Because this event marks the progress of the Gospel message into a new people, this event is of particular importance and is marked by a new wave of miracles like that at Pentecost. Now the Gospel message could spread even further away from the center.

Acts 8:18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,

Acts 8:19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Acts 8:20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!"

Acts 8:21 "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God."

Acts 8:22 "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you."

Acts 8:23 "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

Acts 8:24 But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Simon revealed to Peter that even though he had some sort of human belief, he did not have saving faith and therefore did not really believe in Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Peter set him straight immediately by telling him that he was still in bondage to Satan. Peter told Simon what he had to do but Simon did not do as Peter commanded but instead asked Peter to pray for him. Certainly in the manner of thinking of Simon, he thought that the words of people with such power would be much more effective than his words. The canonical Scripture is silent about Simon from this time so we cannot use inspired words to tell us what the result was for Simon. There are some other writings that indicate Simon may have become a Christian or he may have been a developer of the Gnostics. We can only tell from this text that if our motive for wanting to be a Christian is wrong then there is no rebirth for us. A person could be born again and ignorant of proper teaching but if he joins a Christian group for worldly reasons his motives are not pure and Peter's admonition is appropriate to those people today also.

Acts 8:25 "And so, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans."

Acts 8:26 But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.)

Acts 8:27 And he arose and went; and behold, there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

Acts 8:28 And he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Acts 8:29 And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."

Acts 8:30 And when Philip had run up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Acts 8:31 And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him."

When we truly have Jesus as our Lord He may just pick us up from where we are and move us somewhere else to do His will. There was an old TV show called Quantum Jump or something like that and it showed someone being plucked from being in one person in one time and place and put into someone else in some other time and place. The TV show was rather silly, but I thought about Philip when looking at that show. Philip was truly subject to the will of the Father and ready to be used by Him in any way and in any place. Phillip was already hard at work teaching salvation by Jesus and certainly an impulse by many people when told by God to go somewhere else when they seem to be having such success for God where they are would be to say "later, God". Phillip obeyed God rather than staying where he was having such success for he realized that true success comes only by the power of God. If he had stayed rather than obeying God then his "success" would certainly have been tainted and maybe stopped. We must always be ready to obey.

Candace is not a formal name but a title, like Pharaoh. This man was a high official who was in charge of the finances. If he was a real eunuch then he would not have been permitted to fully worship at the temple and he could not have become a proselyte to the Jewish faith. This man was obviously interested in religion and was probably looking for some higher truth but we know that no one seeks God unless God acts first.

Rom 3:11 "There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God;"

We can certainly speculate that God had acted on this man since God also sent Phillip to help him in the understanding and had him reading out of the Word of God. The custom of reading out loud also facilitated this situation for Phillip heard him reading. Without some sort of introduction it would have been very unusual for someone to just come up to such an important person and start talking with him but here again God is working in the situation. This is an important lesson for us in our walk in the world. God prepares people with a question and He prepares His children with the answers and puts them together for His glory. I have seen such a scenario worked out several times in my life. All we have to do is to be willing to learn and then be ready and willing to match a question with the knowledge given us by God.

Acts 8:32 "Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "He was led as a sheep to slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He does not open His mouth.

Acts 8:33 "In humiliation His judgment was taken away; Who shall relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth."

Acts 8:34 And the eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?"

Acts 8:35 And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.

Acts 8:36 And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?"

Acts 8:37 [And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."]

What a “coincidence” that this person was reading the prophecy of the death of Jesus Christ! Philip did the bidding of Jesus by teaching this person the gospel message and then the eunuch knew that next he needed the baptism. We need to be prepared to teach the gospel to whomever the Lord brings to us. The Jewish teachers were divided over whom this Scripture was speaking. Some thought that the slaughtered lamb represented the nation, some thought that it referred to Isaiah, and others that it spoke of the coming Messiah. Phillip knew exactly that the Scripture was a prophetic teaching of the true Messiah, Jesus and he told the man about Jesus. God then used the teaching of Phillip to bring about the rebirth of this man so that he immediately had saving faith. Then God arranged the moment so that water was present for baptism!

Verse 37 is not in the oldest manuscripts. There are a number of instances in the Bible where a scribe added a sentence or so to the original but in no instance do any of these additions change the meaning of the text. The scribe should not have made the addition but it is somewhat like me reading a Bible passage to someone and pausing to elaborate a bit on it. My wife does not like me to do that but I am just so caught up in the message that I just elaborate a bit. It is indeed a miracle in that none of these additions change or even modify the teaching of the Word. Indeed something like what verse 37 states must have happened for the next event to unfold.

Acts 8:38 “And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him.

Acts 8:39 And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch saw him no more, but went on his way rejoicing.

Acts 8:40 But Philip found himself at Azotus; and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities, until he came to Caesarea.”

Philip fulfilled the mission that Jesus required including the baptism. The Spirit caused Philip to go on this mission trip and then picked him up and put him into another mission where he continued to preach the gospel. God here also works a miracle to proclaim that Phillip is His spokesman. We have no record of the reaction of the caravan and the eunuch to this disappearance but we can imagine the excitement as the eunuch put the caravan back on its path and rejoiced over his addition into the family of God. We have no further inspired information about the eunuch and his activities. A church father Irenaeus wrote that he became a missionary to the Ethiopians but whatever the man did next we can be assured it was done to the glory of God. Azotus was about 20 miles north of Gaza so Phillip had a sudden miraculous travel a considerable distance away. Luke has given us a wonderful introduction into the formation and early actions of the church and now he will give us more information about the life of Saul.

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Appendix

Faith and Belief

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Faith is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8) and

- comes from hearing by the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17)
- is granted to each believer (Rom 12:3)
- (with grace) is necessary for salvation (Eph 2:8)

Belief is a cognitive process by which one comes to an understanding of and commitment to something. Belief originates in the mind of a person, and may or may not be grounded in faith. **A person may believe without faith**, and therefore not be saved since faith is essential to salvation (Eph 2:8) and righteous living (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb. 10:38). Scripture gives us examples of people who believed on their own human power but were not saved:

- John 12:42-43 believed, but not confessing
- James 2:19 demons believe
- Acts 8:9-24 (see vv. 13, 21) Simon believed and was baptized but his heart was not right and he was still in bondage

When the Bible speaks of believing or believers in regard to Christians, it is assuming the existence of a foundation of faith in Christ since everyone, both believers and non-believers can *believe* (cognitive process) something. People are able to generate belief, but only *receive* faith that then leads to real belief in Jesus.

Faith, therefore, is **the power of God which enables** one **to believe** the truth of God (resulting in justification) **and to live a changed life** according to that truth (resulting in sanctification).