

Bible Study 25 – Acts 8:1-8 – The intensification of persecution and the resultant scattering of the church

And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

4 Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. 5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 6 And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. 8 So there was much joy in that city.

1. One of the chief persecutors of the church was Saul: And Saul approved of his execution.... But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

a) He, like many others, was vehemently opposed to Christ, his gospel, and therefore the church... He is offended and triggered by the good news that is rooted and centred in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ... He is determined to snuff out the gospel; to silence the followers of Jesus... He is determined to destroy the church...

b) He was vociferous in his opposition to the Christian faith and all that adhered to it... He has a zeal but not according to knowledge, we might say... he was full of hatred and hostility to the Good News wrongly believing that it was contrary to the revelation and will of God...

c) He was violent in persecution of Christians... He sought and received permission from the authorities to persecute and prosecute believers... He used force to enter home after home and had people chained and dragged off to prison... And he foolishly thought he was doing God service... persuasion not coercion is the correct way...

2. As a result of the intense persecution the church was scattered: And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.

a) There was barely time for Stephen to be properly buried with appropriate funeral rites... and so some devout men in their grief risked their own lives to bury Stephen with proper decorum and, ceremony... which says much about Christian belief in the dignity of the body...

b) There began a systematic persecution of Christians in the capital– none were spared... And I reminded of what happened to the Jewish people in Europe during the 30s and 40s by the Nazis and their sympathisers... or to Christians too in certain Communist dictatorships last century... And we have heard disturbing news that the same is presently happening to Christians and others in Afghanistan...

c) There was State backing for the persecution which included incarceration as a prelude to beatings... I was reminded again recently that the State is not our moral compass when it was pointed out to me that the people that hid the young Jewish girl, Anne Frank from the Nazis were actually breaking the law, while those that executed her were obeying the law! The moral law is given from a higher authority than that of the State and it is that law that should be our chief moral compass...

3. As a result of the scattering of the church, Christ's gospel spread throughout Judea and Samaria: Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word (4).

a) The scattering of Christians was like the scattering of seed... What we have before us is a wonderfully positive example of the law of unintended consequences... The evil intention of Christ's enemies was thwarted because their actions helped accelerate the Great Commission,

the furtherance of Christ's Kingdom and cause, and the growth of the church! The wind of persecution only increased the flame of gospel love... Or as one of the early church fathers put it: the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.'

b) Those scattered shared the good news wherever they went... They were not all preachers and teachers by office in the church, but the Greek word translated as 'preaching' here can mean sharing. They all gave a reason for the hope that was in them. They communicated verbally the good news about what God has done for fallen humanity in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ...

c) Those scattered knew the faith from the word and the apostolic revelation. They held to Christ with real conviction. And knew the faith well enough to articulate it. And I think there is an important lesson here for us.

In the early church and until fairly recent times Christians were generally speaking knowledgeable about the faith and the gospel that lay at its heart. However, over the last century and certainly in recent times that has changed somewhat. The impact of simplification through the introduction of paraphrase-type versions of the scriptures that do away with theological terms, coupled to the impact of theological liberalism, which replaced doctrine with social action, to the abandonment of regular Bible, devotional, and theological reading, and catechesis, have left the church poorly-equipped to communicate as effectively as she once did the good news entrusted to her and which is essential for her maintenance and growth.

4. Philip successfully shares the gospel in Samaria: Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 6 And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. 8 So there was much joy in that city.

a) Philip purposefully went to the city of Samaria. He went prepared to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour... His goal is to herald the good news. To share the message of salvation – of life, light, and love with all that will listen...

b) Philip proclaimed Jesus Christ. He did not go preaching the latest politically correct dogma. He did not go preaching a novel philosophy. He did not go to win friends and influence people, although he did both by proclaiming Christ... He did not go to bolster his ego and gain a reputation for himself. Rather he went to tell people about Jesus Christ and why they should receive and rest in him by faith... And the people listened to him, and many believed the gospel...

c) Philip practised what he preached. He lived out the gospel. He not only talked the talk, but he walked the walk! His faith was seen as well as heard! His witness was in word and work! He cared for others. Others were healed by God's amazing grace through his instrumentality... He made a difference for Love's sake. He brought love, joy and peace to the city of Samaria by preaching the gospel of Christ. So there was much joy in that city.

Questions

1. Why was Saul so antagonistic towards Christians?
2. Why is coercion never a justifiable means of conversion?
3. Why do you think that church people today are content to do good works without communicating the good news?
4. What is the Good News that Philip and others preached?