

Persecution Scatters the Church

(Acts 8:1-25)

Introduction

Our verse for today was Jesus' final instructions to His followers before He returned to heaven. We call this the "great commission." He commanded His disciples to go out into all the world and tell them the Good News.

Ask: What is the Good News Jesus wants us to broadcast to the world? (Jesus died for our sins.)

The very heart of our faith in Jesus is that He came and died in our place on the cross to take the punishment that we deserve for the sin we commit. Isn't it good news that we can be saved?

Jesus wants everyone in all the world to know the message of salvation. So, He told His disciples to spread the news about Him from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. [Teacher, use a Bible map to point out these places.]

Opening Prayer

Father, we want to be in the center of Your will for our lives. That means we need the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can go out and tell the world that You came to save sinners from eternal separation from You. Please fill us to overflowing with Your power so that we can be bold witnesses for You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Memory Verse

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be My witnesses, telling people about Me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.
(Acts 1:8 NLT)

Lesson

We have seen exciting things happen in Jerusalem after God sent the Gift of the Holy Spirit. Many people believed in Jesus and were saved from their sins. As a result of the mighty works God was doing in Jerusalem, Satan, God's enemy, tried to stop people from believing in Jesus.

Ask: What did the religious leaders do to the apostles to try to get them to stop teaching in the Name of Jesus? (Put them in jail, beat them, and commanded them not to speak in the Name of Jesus.)

In last week's lesson, God's enemies took even more drastic measures to silence the message of the Good News.

Ask: What happened to Stephen when he boldly spoke to the Jewish religious leaders? (He was stoned to death.)

Stephen didn't die in fear of God's enemies because he knew he was not alone; right before he died, he saw heaven open and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!

Up to this time, all the people who had come to faith in Jesus lived in Jerusalem. But God knew people outside of Jerusalem needed to hear the Good News, too. So, He had a plan to scatter the people.

God raised up a man by the name of Saul to help make that happen. We were first introduced to Saul last week when Stephen was getting stoned to death. Let's look back at Acts 7:58.

Acts 7:58

... [Stephen's] accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Ask: What was Saul doing when the religious leaders stoned Stephen?

Saul gathered the coats of the men who stoned Stephen.

Now we meet Saul again in chapter 8, verse 1, where it tells us that Saul approved of Stephen's execution. Saul was standing there watching when Stephen was stoned to death, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen.

Ask: Why would Saul approve of stoning Stephen to death?

Saul was not an evil person; he was actually in training to become a Pharisee. And, his teachers, the Jewish religious leaders, taught him that Christians were dangerous. So, he believed that getting rid of Christians was a good thing!

Ask: Why did they think Christians were dangerous?

The Christians were going against everything they were teaching the people and it was disrupting the order of their beliefs. The problem was that the Jewish religious leaders did not believe all that the scriptures had written about the coming of the Messiah. That's why they didn't recognize that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the prophecies concerning the Messiah.

Let's read the rest of verse 1:

Acts 8:1

Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria.

After Stephen's death, great persecution broke out against the believers.

Acts 8:3

*But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, **dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison.***

Ask: What was Saul doing to silence the Christians living in Jerusalem?

Saul was going house to house rounding up the believers and throwing them into prison. Imagine sitting at your table with your family and Saul busts down your door and drags you and your family off to jail. This would be scary, wouldn't it?

The people were so scared, they packed up and left Jerusalem and moved out into the surrounding areas.

As the people moved away from Jerusalem, they began to share the Good News with their new neighbors.

Acts 8:4

But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went.

Believers who were scattered, preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went. God used this difficulty in the lives of the believers so others could learn about Jesus!

God can use the difficult circumstances in our lives for His purposes, too!

Next, we meet a man named Philip, another one of the seven men chosen to care for the widows.

Acts 8:5

Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah.

Over the years, Israel had been conquered and ruled by a lot of different countries. The Samaritans were Jews that had intermarried with the other cultures and had corrupted the worship of the only true God by mixing it with false teachings and magic.

Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies; they hated each other. The Jews from Judea would not have anything to do with Samaritans. In fact, Jewish people normally would go out of their way to avoid going through Samaria on their way between Galilee to Judea. [Teacher, use Bible map.]

But Philip didn't allow this hatred between Jews and Samaritans to keep him from obeying God's command to take the message of salvation to Samaria. Here we are told that Philip went to Samaria specifically to tell people there about Jesus.

Acts 8:6-8

*Crowds listened intently to Philip because they were eager to hear his message and see the miraculous signs he did. (7) **Many evil spirits were cast out**, screaming as they left their victims. **And many who had been paralyzed or lame were healed.** (8) So there was great joy in that city.*

At first the Samaritans wanted to hear what Philip had to say because he was performing many miracles. It says, “*Many evil spirits were cast out and many who had been paralyzed or lame were healed.*”

Then, when they understood Philip’s message that Jesus was God’s Son who had come into this world to save sinners, many people came to faith and were filled with great joy.

Before Philip shared the Good News with these people, there was a man named Simon who was a magician.

Acts 8:9-11

A man named Simon had been a sorcerer there for many years, amazing the people of Samaria and claiming to be someone great. (10) Everyone, from the least to the greatest, often spoke of him as “the Great One—the Power of God.” (11) They listened closely to him because for a long time he had astounded them with his magic.

For many years Simon had amazed the Samaritans with his magic tricks. The people followed Simon because they thought he had God’s power.

When the people met Philip, they could tell that Simon was just tricking them. They could see that Philip had the real power of God.

Acts 8:12

But now the people believed Philip’s message of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, many men and women were baptized.

Satan tries to deceive people with tricks to keep them from believing the truth about the one true God. When these people heard the truth about Jesus and saw God’s true power working through Philip, they believed by faith that Jesus was the Son of God and the Savior of the World. Even Simon the sorcerer could see that it was God’s power working through Philip.

Acts 8:13

Then Simon himself believed and was baptized. He began following Philip wherever he went, and he was amazed by the signs and great miracles Philip performed.

We will talk more about Simon in a minute...

Acts 8:14-17

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God’s message, they sent Peter and John there. (15) As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new believers to receive the Holy Spirit. (16) The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (17) Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Peter and John prayed for these new Samaritan believers that they, too, would receive the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel is for everyone everywhere who believes in Jesus.

Now back to Simon. We left off in verse 13 where it says that he believed and was baptized. Let’s see if he truly believed in Jesus.

Acts 8:18-19

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power. (19) “Let me have this power, too,” he exclaimed, “so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!”

Ask: Why did Simon want the power of the Holy Spirit?

Simon had been popular because he had impressed people with his magic tricks. Now he was losing his popularity when people began to believe in Jesus. Simon was jealous of the apostles and wanted this same ability to have people follow him. He thought he could buy God's power. He wanted Jesus to help him to be famous like the apostles were. But Jesus wants people to make God's Name famous.

The Holy Spirit gave Peter the wisdom to know that Simon had evil motives for desiring the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8:20-23

But Peter replied, "May your money be destroyed with you for thinking God's gift can be bought! (21) You can have no part in this, for your heart is not right with God. (22) Repent of your wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive your evil thoughts, (23) for I can see that you are full of bitter jealousy and are held captive by sin."

After hearing Peter's rebuke, Simon didn't ask for God's forgiveness; he asked Peter to pray that the bad things that Peter said would not happen to him.

Acts 8:24

"Pray to the Lord for me," Simon exclaimed, "that these terrible things you've said won't happen to me!"

Ask: Verse 13 said, "Then Simon himself believed and was baptized." Do you think Simon was a true believer? (No!)

Simon was more worried about his own reputation than he was about God's. He was clearly a false believer.

You might meet someone who says they are a believer but has not truly put their trust in Jesus. We need to have the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to be able to tell the difference.

Acts 8:25

After testifying and preaching the word of the Lord in Samaria, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem. And they stopped in many Samaritan villages along the way to preach the Good News.

Peter and John returned to Jerusalem and as they travelled, they shared the Good News in many Samaritan villages on their way.

Today we learned that as the Jerusalem believers faced persecution, it was God's way of moving them out of the city and into the world.

God will use the circumstances in your life to move you where He wants you to go. Difficulties can make us a stronger believer and more useful for God's work.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, sometimes You use difficulties in our lives so that other people can get to know You. I pray that we will not be afraid when we hit a bump on our journey through life. Help us trust that You are always leading and directing us so that we are most useful to You. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Learning Centers

Game Center

Opposition to the Faith game

Preparation: Create a 24" dartboard for a floor game with three circles. Note: it works best if you use fabric like felt so the marbles don't roll so fast. Make the bullseye an 8" circle and the secondary circle 16". Label the bullseye, "Jerusalem" (10 points), the middle circle "Judea" (20 points), the outer circle "Samaria" (50 points), and label the area off the dartboard as "The Ends of the Earth" (100 points).



Place some marbles in the center of the dartboard on the bullseye. Use another marble as the “shooter”.

Play: After correctly answering a review question, the player uses his thumb to flick the “shooter” from the edge of the dartboard into the bullseye to scatter the marbles placed there.

After each turn, add up the points based on where the marbles have rolled. Then gather the marbles and return them to the bullseye for the next person to scatter.

Tell the kids that the object is to have as many marbles as possible land outside of Jerusalem. Tally the points for each team.

Or, use the following questions in another game or discussion:

1. Why did Jewish leaders think that Christians were dangerous? (They thought Christians were causing disturbances and riots.)
2. In what way did the persecution help to spread the news of Jesus to remote areas of the earth? (Forced people to run for their lives.)
3. What can we learn about how God works from this example of the early church? (He works through hard circumstances in our lives.)
4. What is the “great commission”? (Jesus commanded His disciples to go out into all the world and tell them the Good News.)
5. What is the “Good News”? (That Jesus came and died for our sins.)
6. Why did Saul approve of Stephen’s death? (Stephen’s death pleased Saul because he did not believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah.)
7. What was Saul doing to silence the Christians living in Jerusalem? (He was dragging people out of their homes and throwing them into prison for believing in Jesus.)
8. How did the people respond to the persecution they were experiencing in Jerusalem? (The people were so scared, they packed up and left Jerusalem and moved out into the surrounding areas.)
9. What good thing came about because the people moved out of Jerusalem into the surrounding areas? (They began to share the Good News with their new neighbors.)
10. Where did Philip go to preach the gospel? (Samaria)
11. Why were the Jews and the Samaritans such bitter enemies? (The Samaritans were Jews that had intermarried with the other cultures and had corrupted the worship of the only true God by mixing it with false teachings and magic.)
12. How did the Samaritans respond to Philip’s message about Jesus? (They believed.)
13. Why did the people come out to hear Philip? (At first the people wanted to hear what Philip had to say because he was performing many miracles.)
14. Why did people come out to hear Simon? (He was a magician and had amazed people with his magic tricks.)
15. What happened when Philip told the people the truth about Jesus? (When these people understood the truth about Jesus, and saw God’s power working through Philip, they believed by faith that Jesus was the Son of God and the Savior of the World.)
16. Verse 13 says, “*Simon himself believed and was baptized*”. Do you think he was a true believer? Why or why not? (Simon offered Peter and John money to buy the power of the Holy Spirit; he obviously did not understand the true gospel. Then, after Peter scolded him, Simon didn’t ask for God’s forgiveness; he asked Peter to pray for him.)

17. What does it mean to “believe in Jesus”? (It means that you trust that what He did on the cross satisfied the Father’s anger (wrath) against your sin.)

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