

THE GOSPEL TO JUDEA AND SAMARIA

Acts 8:1-25

Key Verse: 8:4

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

In today's passage, Luke the historian tells us about a great persecution that broke out against the church in Jerusalem on the day Stephen was martyred. Christians were scattered. But God used the persecution to expand his work of salvation beyond Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria. The believers took the gospel with them wherever they went. Philip was one of the evangelists. Many Samaritans opened their hearts when he preached the gospel of Jesus. We learn that we must preach the gospel no matter what situation we may be in.

I. THEY PREACHED THE WORD WHEREVER THEY WENT (1-4)

Look at verse 1. *“And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”* On the day of Stephen's martyrdom, a great persecution broke out against Christians in Jerusalem. The Jewish authorities were determined to stamp out the Christian movement. Jerusalem became a very dangerous place for Jesus' disciples. The Jewish police were looking for them to arrest and put them in jail. The persecuted Christians probably felt like the way the Jewish people felt under Hitler. Their life was threatened simply because they were Christians.

Look at verses 2-3. *“Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”* There were two different responses to Stephen's martyrdom. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. The martyrdom of the evangelist was both a great crime and a glorious victory in God. The godly men were inspired by the way he lived as a man of mission, and the way he died, with a smile on his face. They boldly retrieved the mangled body of Stephen and gave him a proper burial. More importantly, they mourned deeply for him, remembering his influence on their community. They would miss him a lot.

On the other hand, a Pharisee named Saul had a complete different response to the martyrdom. He began to destroy the church. He became like a maniac. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. It must have been something he saw in Stephen. No doubt he was deeply impressed by the way Stephen died. He could not push Stephen's words out of his mind. *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”* Stephen said this while he was stoned to death. These words challenged Saul's self-righteous mind. Saul tried to force his conscience to believe that he was doing a right thing before God. But he could not forget the peaceful smile on Stephen's face. He couldn't understand. How could a man die in such peace? He didn't understand because he didn't know Jesus. In his frustration, Saul became so angry that he decided to destroy the church. He used his training as a Pharisee and strong

leadership to organize a systematic attempt to arrest Christians in Jerusalem, going from house to house.

Under such severe persecution, there was no place in the city for the disciples to hide. They had to flee the city overnight with only the clothes on their backs. They had to leave behind everything—their homes, possessions, and jobs. They did not know what would happen to them. They had no future security. All they had was Jesus in their hearts. They were like the Jewish people in the movie, “Fiddler on the Roof,” who were forced to leave their hometown of Anatevka. From a human point of view, they were victims of a religious persecution.

However, there was God’s purpose in the persecution. Verse 1 says that all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. This was a fulfillment of Jesus’ world mission command 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.” The church in Jerusalem was growing. It also experienced growing pains, such as the food distribution problem among the ethnic members. From God’s point of view, it was time for them to move on to Judea and Samaria. God used the persecution to scatter the believers.

We often expect that God will do his work in a logical and reasonable way. That is, if God wants to pioneer a campus, he will move someone’s heart to go there, and then help him step by step. This is what God does often, as we will see in this book. But God also uses hardship to scatter his disciples to advance his gospel. Sometimes God does not ask us. He would push us out through some circumstances to where he wants us to go. Why? I think it’s because we often become too comfortable in our life of faith to hear his voice. Then we need a push on the back. The church in Jerusalem was growing rapidly. The apostles worked hard to take care of God’s sheep. Everyone loved the church. But none of them wanted to go out to places like Samaria. Jews didn’t like Samaritans. They would not associate with each other (Jn 4:9). They were willing to have a detour of hundred miles if they could avoid passing through Samaria. And the feeling was mutual. They despised each other. No one in the church volunteered to go as a missionary to Samaria. But God loved the Samaritans too. He sent his disciples to them through the persecution.

Look at verse 4. *“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”* The believers refused to become victims of the circumstances. They did not despair. Wherever they went, they preached the word of God. This was possible only because they knew the grace of Jesus personally. Their sins were forgiven by the blood of Jesus. They had a living hope in the kingdom of God. And they carried with them the gospel of Jesus wherever they went. They boldly testified that Christ died on the cross for their sins. They told them the door to the kingdom of God was open for them because of his resurrection. They shared the word of God through their 1:1 Bible studies. And God did his great work through their Bible study ministries. Notice that most of them were not church leaders. The apostles remained in Jerusalem. Those who carried the gospel were ordinary Christians. They were not ordained pastors in today’s terms.

What can we learn from them? God uses those who preach the word despite their circumstances. St. Paul is a good example. He was in chains as a prisoner in Rome. It seemed impossible for him to do anything in that situation. But he found a way to preach the word. He studied the Bible with the prison guards on duty. In this way, the word of God reached the palace and spread all around Rome. His body was chained, but God's word was not chained. Paul said, "I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1Co 9:16). He told Timothy: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction" (2Ti 4:2). God also wants us to preach the word of God whatever situation we may have. Why? Because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes (Ro 1:16). May God help each of us to preach the gospel no matter what our situation we may be!

II. PHILIP PROCLAIMED THE MESSIAH IN SAMARIA (5-13)

After giving us a big picture of what God was doing, the author Luke tells us about the personal account of one disciple. Philip fled to Samaria because of the persecution. This Philip was not one of the Twelve. He was one of the seven deacons chosen for food distribution. But like Stephen, he studied the Bible personally and became a powerful Bible teacher. In Samaria, he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. Verse 5 says that Philip proclaimed the Messiah there. I think this is very important for us to notice. He didn't talk about the severe persecution. He didn't talk about the cultural divide between Jews and Samaritans. Nor did he talk about the political issues of the time. He proclaimed the gospel of Jesus. He proclaimed that Jesus died on the cross for their sins, and that he rose from the dead to give eternal life to those who repent and believe. Many people were happy to hear the message about Jesus. 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. God was working mightily through Philip. Verse 8 says that there was great joy in that city. We learn that our preaching must always be focused on Jesus. We should never get tired of proclaiming Jesus. Young people may want to hear about something else, like controversial issues of our time, but we must proclaim Jesus to them. Why? Because only Jesus can save them from their sins. Only Jesus can give them eternal life!

The Samaritans paid close attention to Philip's message. When people pay close attention to the word of God, there is work of God. During his missionary journeys, St. Paul preached the gospel to all kinds of people—Jews and gentles, young and old, rich and poor, men and women, Some rejected the message. Others accepted the gospel and were saved. Acts 17:11-12 says the following: "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men." The word of God is the word of life. Those who accept the message of Jesus Christ by paying close attention to it are saved from their sin and death. They

receive eternal life as a gift from God. There was a great work of God in Samaria. It happened because Philip proclaimed Jesus there, and Samaritans paid close attention to his message. Let us pray earnestly that our Bible students pay close attention to the word of God.

Luke tells us that there was also a cautionary tale. A sorcerer named Simon did magic tricks to gain people's attention. When his magic show was on television, the entire Samaria was glued to the TV set. He made millions of dollars. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is rightly called the Great Power of God" (10). Actually, he was nothing but an illusionist who was stealing God's glory for himself. Are there modern parallels to him? America today is an entertainment-oriented society. There are many Simons who steal God's glory for themselves. They steal the minds of people with their tricks. Many young people are dazzled by pop stars. After listening to their music or watching their videos, their young minds are so captivated that they want to talk like them, dress like them, and act like them. They pay more attention to their idols than to the word of God. The problem is that their human idols cannot save them from their sin and death. They only take their time and money, giving them some temporary pleasures. Young people don't need a Simon. They need Jesus!

In that environment, Philip preached the good news of Jesus Christ. He proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God. His simple message had power. Samaritans began to see the difference between magic art and the gospel of Jesus. Their souls were awakened. They listened to the life-giving word of God. They experienced overflowing joy. They tasted the kingdom of God in Jesus. They were baptized, both men and women (12). Even Simon believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw (13). In our generation, young people spend too much time for social media, sports and games, not knowing there is true joy in Jesus. The Lord Jesus can set them free from the spell of magic artists. Jesus can heal their souls. Jesus can restore them as worshipers of God with a clear life direction and purpose. This is the reason why we must share the name of Jesus Christ with them.

III. THEY SENT PETER AND JOHN TO SAMARIA (14-25)

Look at verse 14. *When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria.* The news of what was happening in Samaria reached the church in Jerusalem. The apostles could have been skeptical or territorial. But they were not. They knew that the gospel had to be preached in Judea and Samaria. It was the Lord's command (Ac 1:8). They sent a journey team to support the ministry. When Peter and John arrived, they prayed for the new believers to receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When they placed their hands on them, the new believers received the Holy Spirit (15-17). In this way, the apostles supported the new ministry in Samaria. This was an important moment in the church history. The apostles witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Samaritans

whom they used to despise for their racial impurity. For the first time, the Samaritan believers were brought into the family of God in Christ Jesus.

Look at verses 18-19. *When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."* Simon the magician had become a believer himself, after seeing many Samaritans accepting Jesus as their Savior. But he had not given up his ugly, old habit, that is, to seek his self-glory. He thought it would be cool for him to have the ability to lay his hands on people and see them receive the Holy Spirit. He could almost hear the thundering applause he would receive. He could become a popular TV evangelist with tens of thousands of people flocking to his crystal church. So he offered money to Peter and John to give him the ability. He was more interested in signs than Jesus the Savior.

How did Peter rebuke him? Look at verses 20-23. *Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."* Peter told Simon to repent and to pray to the Lord. Simon was a believer, but he had no personal relationship with the Lord. He was still full of bitterness and captive to sin. Perhaps he was bitter that his days as a popular magician were gone. He couldn't even pray to God himself. He asked the apostles to pray for him. Anyway, Peter protected the new believers from Simon's bad influence. He didn't try to recruit Simon as a church leader just because he was a celebrity in Samaria.

Look at verse 25. *After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.* The apostles further proclaimed the word of the Lord. They testified about Jesus to the people of Samaria. Then they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages along the way.

We learned today that the gospel of Jesus spread to Samaria, because of a severe persecution. The church grew in the midst of trials. God does not want us to despair because of our unfavorable situations. He wants us to preach the Word in season and out of season. The word of God is the word of life. When young people pay close attention to the word of God, God will bless them with the gift of eternal life. They will have a great joy. May God use each of us in his life-giving ministry as he did with Philip!