

The Book Of Acts: Verse-By-Verse

Acts 8:1-8

With the death of Stephen, the Church's first martyr, Luke's narrative takes a decisive leap forward into the history of the Early Church. In verses 1-4 He records:

“And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”

Having given us Stephen's story in full, Luke now moves on to narrate Philip's evangelistic efforts. In a way, Luke is projecting the longest of his narratives – that of Saul of Tarsus. He tells his readers that Saul was present when Stephen was martyred. As Luke previously noted, Saul demonstrated his approval of Stephen's death by the fact that, “the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

Since Luke inserts this short note about Saul, it's important for us to have a little background on him.

Saul was a native of the Cilician city of Tarsus. (see Acts 9:11), and probably attended the synagogue in Jerusalem where Stephen debated the leaders of the Synagogue Of The Freedmen. As we will learn later,

Stephen was not the only one who could clearly identify the total incompatibility of the Old Covenant with the message that Christ and his apostles proclaimed.

While Paul's primary mentor, Gamaliel, suggested that the Sanhedrin leave Jesus' followers alone – lest they be found to be fighting against God – Saul saw no grounds for compromise.

In fact, he was farsighted enough to realize that the rise of this new order completely threatened the existence of Temple religion. In his mind, the preservation of the Temple order could only be accomplished by the destruction of the new order espoused by Christ and his apostles.

This, as Saul will later explain, is the reason why he agreed with Stephen's death sentence and publicly demonstrated it by guarding the executioners' outer robes. In his Acts 20 account of his conversion, Paul will relate this portion of his conversation with Jesus:

““Lord, these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.”” – Acts 20:19-20

Some historians believe that Saul not only held the clothes of those who killed Stephen, but he also acted as the “praeco” – the person assigned to proclaim that the convicted person was about to be executed for a specified offense.

It's somewhat ironic that Paul's refusal to allow any form of compromise between Judaism and Christianity led him, at first to persecute Jesus' followers, but later became his unwavering stance when he became a preacher of the gospel and its primary apologist.

Returning to Luke's narrative, it appears that he wants Theophilus to see a chain of events that started with Stephen's death:

1. Stephen's Martyrdom Brought The First Great Wave Of Persecution:

With Stephen's martyrdom a wave of persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem. While the apostles had garnered thousands of converts, the Sanhedrin was no longer waiting to see what would happen. Combining forces with the Roman authorities, they went on the offensive.

Notice how Luke describes this in Acts 8:1: "And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."

The Sanhedrin's prior, limited opposition to the apostles, was now giving way to a full-scale attack. Luke locates the center of this change in policy in the story of Saul of Tarsus. Although he had previously taken a passive role in Stephen's stoning, Saul now takes an active role in the attempt to stamp out this new religious sect.

In verse 3 Luke writes, "But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."

Luke uses the Greek word, “lumainoœ” for Saul’s efforts to “destroy” the Church. That word expresses a brutal and sadistic cruelty behind Saul’s methods of persecution. He records how Paul went “house-to-house” searching for converts.

I believe that we are meant to take note of that phrase, “house-to-house” – as Luke used it several times before to characterize the believers meeting together for meals and the celebration of the eucharist. We have a contrast here: Believers were meeting house-to-house and Saul is searching for them, house-to-house.

Luke further notes that Saul “dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” Notice that Saul did not spare the women: He secured the Sanhedrin’s permission to execute both men and women. As John Stott points out, “Saul of Tarsus had blood on his hands, for several others followed Stephen into martyrdom.”

2. The First Great Wave Of Persecution Led To A Dispersion:

In verse 2 Luke tells us, “... All except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” Now, in verse 4 he writes, “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”

Before Jesus ascended at Bethany, he had clearly told the core apostles that they would experience a clothing of power and then be sent out as witnesses, as he said, “in all Judea and Samaria’ (Acts1:8). He had not said how this sending out would take place, but the early Church was now finding that out.

I'd like to make a short venture into what is often neglected when we see the early Church being dispersed throughout the Roman world. That is the fact that, long before, the Jews had experienced their own dispersion, known as the "diaspora".

Let me walk us through this important period in Jewish history.

The first permanent Jewish diaspora was the settlement in Babylon which was precipitated by Nebuchadnezzar's deportation of Jews from Judah in the 590s-580s. Although the Israelites were also exiled by the Assyrians in the 720s - they did not ultimately survive as a separate group.

Although the Babylonian Jews returned to Jerusalem in several waves during the Persian period, a great deal of them remained in Mesopotamia.

In Egypt, Jewish settlements were established by Jewish soldier contingents brought there by the Persians. These communities were the prelude to a remarkable expansion of the Jewish population during the Hellenistic era.

Diasporas were not uncommon in the Hellenistic-Roman world. Along with the expansive conquests of Alexander the Great, ethnic resettlement and religious diffusion went hand in hand, as settlers brought with them ancestral cults and won converts for their respective religions.

In that sense, the Jewish diaspora was not unique. What sets the Jews apart was their ability to remain relatively distinct in their cultural lifestyles and religious loyalties. In

other words, while other cultures somewhat assimilated to their new environments, the Jews remained largely distinct over great geographical distances and long periods of time.

Let me point out a great contrast in the diaspora of the ancient, pre-Christian Jews and the early Messianic Jews. The ancient Jews/Israelites faced two large relocations because of God's judgment on their rebellion. Decade after decade, God sent prophets warning them of what loomed on the horizon if they persisted in their departure from covenant with Him.

In the case of the early Church – the first Messianic Christians – the first great diaspora was not a result of judgment. It was really a consequence of two things working together: 1. God's determination that the Church would be a witness to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the furthest reaches of the 1st-century world. 2. The Roman and Jewish goal to break up, if not destroy, the new movement expanding under the direction of the apostles.

A question about the Roman/Jewish strategy does arise. Why did they disperse the believers, but allow the core apostles to remain in Jerusalem? Or, why did the core apostles choose to remain in Jerusalem, rather than flee to the neighboring areas?

After consulting a lot of sources, I think one very feasible explanation exists. So, let's take a look at it.

Jesus' core disciples/apostles were all Hebraic Jews. They were joined by 108 of Jesus' followers on the Day of Pentecost. Their preliminary evangelism efforts were necessarily focused on Hebrew Jews, but on the day of

Pentecost, thousands of Hellenistic Jews from the Jewish diaspora came to faith.

By the time Luke records the events of Acts 6-8, the real thrust of evangelism is not Hebrew Jews, but the Hellenistic population. That becomes clear with the selection of the seven Hellenistic Jews for the administration of the widows' feeding. This is also why Stephen Philip are so dominantly featured in Luke's accounts.

By Acts 6-8, the majority of the believers were part of the Jewish diaspora community. As you recall, during Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin he rebuked them for crucifying Jesus and told them that Yahweh did not live in houses like the Jewish Temple.

The Sanhedrin's response – the execution of Stephen – demonstrates their resentment that a Hellenistic Jew – a non-native of Israel - would have the audacity to tell them such things.

When the full-scale persecution broke out, it was not primarily directed against the apostles – who were Hebraic Jews, but the thousands of diaspora-Hellenistic converts. Since they comprised the majority of "The Way", the authorities scattered them.

This would explain why Philip had to flee for his life, while Peter was relatively safe and could stay in Jerusalem.

Although Paul was himself a diaspora Jew, his family had moved to Jerusalem when he was young. This is evidenced by the fact that he was educated under Gamaliel, the leading theologian of his day.

As one scholar put it: “It would be entirely consistent with human nature for a member of the diaspora, who had moved to the capital to be prejudiced against others from the diaspora – especially if they had strange ideas.”

John Stott adds to this when he writes: “No blame is attached to the apostles for staying behind. Jerusalem would still for a while be the headquarters of the new Christian community, and they evidently saw it as their duty to remain there. Besides, it would have been dangerous for them to leave, even if the persecution was directed more against ‘Hellenists’ like Stephen than against ‘Hebraists’ like them.”

3. The Dispersion Led To Widespread Evangelism:

In Luke’s chain of events, we have: 1. Stephen’s Martyrdom. 2. A Wave of Persecution. This led to the third event: The widespread evangelism of non-Hebraic Jews as well as Gentiles.

I like this statement by John Stott: “The scattering of the Christians was followed by the scattering of the good seed of the gospel. For those who been scattered, as they fled, far from going into hiding, or even maintaining a prudential silence, preached the word wherever they went.” – John Stott

I’d like us to notice something here. Since the 12 apostles remained in Jerusalem, this new vanguard of gospel outreach was us to the rest of the Church. Before that, up until Stephen’s ministry, most of the evangelism and teaching had been the responsibility of the apostles. With the dispersion of the Hellenistic Christians, that era ended.

These new “preachers” and “missionaries” were not full-time vocational ministers; quite the opposite is true. They were the everyday men and women who had received Christ as their Messiah. Most of their names remain unknown in Christian history!

It would be good for us to note that three agencies were at work in all these events: 1. God was at work, ensuring the gospel would not just remain in Jerusalem. 1. The Sanhedrin was at work, ensuring the thousands of mostly Hellenistic-Diaspora converts were forced to leave Jerusalem. 3. Satan was at work, using human agencies to attack the believers.

Amazingly, instead of stopping the gospel, this persecution and dispersion only made it spread further. It reminds us of what happened in 1949 when the Chinese National Government was defeated by the Communists.

Six hundred and thirty-seven China Inland Mission missionaries were forced to leave. At first, it appeared to be a total disaster, but within four years 286 of them had been redeployed in South-East Asia and Japan, while the indigenous Chinese Christians multiplied to some 30-40 times their number when the missionaries left.

The Chinese Church was living proof of Jesus’ promise, “I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” – Matthew 16:18

Returning to our text, now that Luke has set the stage for the rest of chapter 8 – and, really, his entire narrative – he goes on to tell the story of two remarkable forays of evangelism. In both cases, Philip – one of the original seven – is the principal subject.

Beginning at verse 5, Luke records, “Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city.”

Since Luke was not present during these events, how did he get this information? If we look ahead at Acts 21:8, here’s what we find: “Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven.” This was about 20 years after the events Luke is writing about.

Having been forced from Jerusalem, Philip went north to Samaria and preached the gospel there. Now it’s important to remember that there was a longstanding dispute, if not rivalry between Judea and Samaria.

By this time, the rift had lasted for a thousand years. It started with the break-up of Solomon’s kingdom in the tenth century B.C. At that time, ten of Israel’s tribes defected, and made Samaria their capital. Only two tribes remained loyal to Jerusalem.

This division became worse when Samaria was captured by Assyria in 722 BC. Thousands of Samaritans were deported, and the country was re-populated by foreigners. Worse yet, in the 500’s when the Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, they rejected any help from the Samaritans.

By the 4th century, the Samaritan Jews built a rival temple on their sacred hill, Gerizim. That temple was destroyed

by the Hasmonaean ruler John Hyrcanus I (134–104 B.C.) when he conquered Samaria and added it to his own realm.

In time, the Samaritans came to reject all Old Testament Scripture other than the Pentateuch. When the Romans conquered Palestine in 63 B.C., the Samaritans were liberated from Judaeian domination, but the relationship between them and Jews only widened.

As the Gospels attest, the Samaritans were despised by the Jews as hybrids in both race and religion and viewed as both heretics and schismatics.

If you recall, Jesus made two attempts to take the Good News to the Samaritans. The first time, he was rejected. James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven and destroy them, but Jesus rebuked them. The second time, Jesus was fully received after his conversation with the Woman at the Well.

Still, it was a bold move for Philip to take the message to the Samaritans. There was no guarantee he would be met with the same enthusiasm Jesus received his second time there.

What could Phillip use to build a relational bridge to share the Gospel? One thing in his favor was the fact that the Samaritans shared a common hope with the Jews that a deliverer would come – often likened to Moses. The Samaritans called him the “Taheb” or “restorer.”

Philip could build on this hope since Jesus was already identified by his followers in Jerusalem, both “Hebrews” and “Hellenists,” as the promised prophet like Moses.

Although Luke tells us Philip went to Samaria, he doesn't identify what city he evangelized by Philip. History doesn't help much with identifying it either.

The ancient city called Samaria had been re-founded by Herod the Great and renamed Sebaste, in honor of the Roman emperor. However, it was a Hellenistic city and would not have housed a population of genuine Samaritans as our text seems to suggest.

Others have suggested it was the city of Gitta, which, according to Justin Martyr was the hometown of Simon Magus, whom we will see later.

Whatever the case, Luke probably means some city in the region of Shechem. According to John's Gospel, both John the Baptist and Jesus had been active for a period in this area. This would have provided Philip a foundation on which to build his preaching ministry to the Samaritans.

Philip did, as it turns out, have great success in first attempt to preach at Samaria. Look at what Luke records in verses 6-8:

“When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.”

Philip's ministry follows the same pattern we have seen so far in Luke's narrative: The preaching of the Gospel accompanied by miraculous signs and wonders. Let review some of the passages that speak to this pattern:

- Acts 2:43 says, “Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.”
- Acts 5:12 records, “The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people.”
- Acts 5:16 tells us, “Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.”
- Acts 6:8 indicates, “Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.”

Philip’s preaching was marked by the same kinds of miracle, signs, and wonders. Notice the specific areas of miracles that verse 7 lists for us:

- Impure spirits came out of many.
- Many who were paralyzed were healed.
- Many who were lame were healed.

These miracles, especially those of deliverance from impure spirits, were so striking, it gave Philip a platform from which to preach the message of Jesus as Messiah.

Those miracles were so remarkable that great numbers believed his message and were filled with rejoicing. Once again, Jesus’ statement, “You will be clothed with power and be my witnesses” was finding a powerful realization in one of his outer-circle followers.

Next Time: Simon Magus