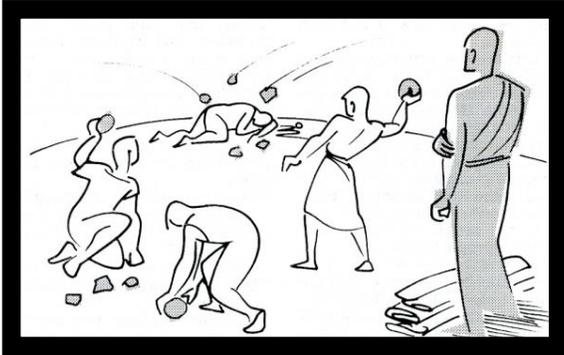


The Acts of the Holy Spirit and the early church

July 13, 2014, Part 16, Acts 7:57-8:3

The misguided beginnings of God's great evangelist



Acts 7:57-8:3 New International Version

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell

asleep. 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. 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.

The advancement of the church through persecution

Now we after many great weeks of study come to a great transitional portion of the book of Acts. This is one which establishes for us the second area of mission for the church as it moved out from Jerusalem into outer regions as Jesus had previously told them.

Acts 1:6-8 New International Version

Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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."

We now see that the thing which really moved the church out was the death of Stephen. And while this was a most horrible act of cruel hatred and violence, God used this act to propel the church forward even though many at that time felt the wrath of Satan working through men like Saul as well as other members of the Jewish Hierarchy.

Here's a serious question in the case of Stephen, that with all of the capacities and apparent evangelical possibilities that Stephen had, and with all the personal dynamic that was his, with the energy and the power of a Spirit-filled life, with such a great ability to handle the Old Testament, why was it necessary that that man have a ministry that was so brief??

His speech really seemed to gain absolutely nothing but negative results. We see that it was the trigger that God used to set off the persecution of all Christians on a much wider scale than ever before. It was because of Stephen that the whole avalanche of pain and persecution for the followers of Jesus came down.

In this great Biblical story, we now appreciate that it was Stephen's public testimony, that great rendition of the Jewish history that truly unleashed the anger of a certain Pharisee by the name of Saul. It was this Jewish headhunter who set about killing Christians and trying to extinguish the Church as rapidly and with as much vigor as he possibly could.

Although the causation of the scattering of many of the believers was sad indeed, it was nevertheless occurring perfectly in the design of God. This was a much needed step if the Gospel was going to eventually go to the outermost parts of the earth.

The Holy Spirit is in the business of turning negatives into positives, of taking disasters and turning them into miracles. We remember that every time Peter and John got in a hopeless situation, it turned out in the end to be just a greater opportunity to preach the gospel. It was the famed historian **Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus**, thankfully shortened to one name **Tertullian**, who is considered to be the father of Latin Christianity that made this quote:

"The blood of the martyrs has become the seed of the church."

When they got into a negative scene, the Spirit of God turned it into a positive. Every time the persecution arose, the preaching followed right on its heels. And God allowed the gospel to reach into areas and the hearts of people who could never otherwise be reached, other than through persecution. **Pastor and Teacher Dr. John MacArthur** writes the following on this early forced church issues:

It's kind of like trying to stamp out a fire, and the harder you jump on it, the more you scatter the embers and start fires all over everywhere. And that's exactly what happened. They started jumping all over the church in Jerusalem and all they did was send the embers all over the world, because that's how the Holy Spirit works.

So here we have the outline of the book of Acts, first in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, then the world. And so now we see that the Christians we're beginning to move out of Jerusalem, into these areas that only upon forced persecution made them move out to the lands of Judea and Samaria.

The Samaritans, in the mind of God it appears, formed a perfect bridge to the Gentile world, because the Samaritans were half-breeds, for they were part Jewish and part Gentile. Note the following thought of these often scorned and ridiculed people:

John 4:7-9 Amplified Bible

Presently, when a woman of Samaria came along to draw water, Jesus said to her, Give Me a drink—For His disciples had gone off into the town to buy food—The Samaritan woman said to Him, How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink?—For the Jews have nothing to do with the Samaritans—

As we continue in the progression of this great story of the early church, we find that Jerusalem takes a backseat, whereas previously in history, it was dominant. And it serves to point up repeatedly to us, that opportunity ignored is opportunity lost. Now we know through Scripture that salvation is of the Jews, note the following passage:

Romans 1:1,7,14-16 New International Version (NIV)

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Persecution really just kind of flamed at the death of Stephen. That kind of kicked it all off. And the central figure in the persecution as it began here is a man by the name of Saul. And being from the tribe of Benjamin, no doubt he was named for the great King of Israel, Saul himself.

Partnership in the murder of Stephen:

Acts 8:1a (NIV) And Saul approved of their killing him.

This verse according to most historians as well as myself truly should have been at the end of Chapter 7. We must remember however that while every word in the Holy Scriptures is inspired of by God, the verse and chapter separations in the Bible are not. The word (**approved**) seems carefully chosen to convey the fact that he did not himself take part in stoning, but contented himself with guiding and directing the murder.

We would be remiss if we did not explain that the word here used signifies not a bare consent only, but consented **with pleasure and delight**. We might say that Saul was well pleased with it and even **rejoiced at the death of Stephen in his heart, gaining with it the utmost pleasure and satisfaction**. Note the following from the **New Testament commentary by Joseph Benson:**

Quite literally, Saul was well pleased with Stephen's slaughter; for Saul was so full of rage and malice against the Christian name, that he thought no severities were too great to be exercised on those who thus zealously endeavored to propagate it.

This was to the extent that he watched over the outer garments of the first witnesses, who actually picked up the stones with which to kill this great man of God. Now years later, this man Saul who later will be known as the great Apostle Paul remembers these days of old, of which we now speak in one of his many conversations with God:

Acts 22:19-20 NIV)

Lord, 'I replied, '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.'

Saul, as we know was from Cilicia, so it was very likely that he was actually present in the argument with Stephen that went on previously back in chapter 6, when Stephen was moving from synagogue to synagogue, arguing with the Hellenistic Jews, and very likely got into some debates with this man Saul. Now Saul it appears from the Bible was a brilliant individual.

He was a Pharisee, jealous for Judaism. He was the kind of guy who was committed, and that commitment led him to be extremely zealous in both locking up and even assisting in the killing of Christians. But to put this in perspective, Stephen got off easy when compared to the life that Saul/Paul would have. Little did Saul know as he stood there and kind of gloated over what they were doing to Stephen, that he would go through infinitely more than Stephen ever went through. Stephen had the wonderful blessing of dying the first time while Saul/Paul really went through some tough times:

2 Corinthians 11:23-27 (NIV) (((Paul, formerly Saul writes about himself)))

I have worked much harder; been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

Saul's diligence to rid the world of Christians:

Acts 8:3 (NIV) But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

Now we don't have any of the gory details of what Saul did specifically, we only have some general terms. But whatever it was, it resulted in the people being scattered all over everywhere and being driven out of the city.

The way that the Scripture relates Saul is precisely like some furious beast of prey. So the Greek word (*lymainō*) properly signifies. He did his utmost to ruin it, not caring what damage he did to the disciples of Christ, and setting no bounds to his rage and cruelty. Quite literally Saul would take both men and women and dragging them along the streets, without any regard to age or sex; committed them to prison. For no crime, real or pretended, but that of having believed in Jesus, and embraced the gospel.

Now we know from history that the Sanhedrin had no power to put these Christians to death, but they had power to imprison whomever they wished based upon their understanding of the law as given by God through Moses. They resolved as did Saul, it seems, to exercise this power to the utmost.

Galatians 1:13-14 (NIV)

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

The theologian Dr. Albert Barnes writes the following of our troublesome Saul:

Saul, the principal agent, was young, zealous, learned, and clothed with power. He showed afterward that he had talents suited for any station, and zeal that tired with no exertion and that was appalled by no obstacle. With this talent and this zeal he entered on his work. The Christians were few and feeble. They were scattered and unarmed. They were unprotected by any civil power, and exposed, therefore, to the full blaze and rage of persecution.



The great Jewish Pharisee, then takes his fight to the Christian, entering into every house, whether it be a Synagogue to find these traitors, or personal residences where the Christians used to assemble for the worship of God; or every house that had, or was thought to have, any Christians in it. So to put your mind in proper form for understanding the seriousness of what the Christians faced during these days, it was strikingly similar to what the Jewish people felt during the years under the threat of **Adolph Hitler**.

According to Luke's account, the persecution of the church in Jerusalem which brought about the Samaritan revival was, in large measure, the result of one key individual—Saul. No other names are mentioned. And, after the conversion of Saul, the persecution ceases, and a new era of peace commenced. I take it that Saul was therefore one of the driving forces behind the persecution of the church in Jerusalem. As the ringleader of the opposition to the gospel and the persecution of the church in Jerusalem, Saul was instrumental in the first “missions thrust” of

the church. Granted, this was not his intent, but it was the result. Note the following thought that shows anything and everything regardless, can be used by God for His good!

Psalm 76:7-10 New International Version (NIV)

It is you alone who are to be feared. Who can stand before you when you are angry? From heaven you pronounced judgment, and the land feared and was quiet—when you, God, rose up to judge, to save all the afflicted of the land. Surely your wrath against mankind brings you praise, and the survivors of your wrath are restrained.

How often we tend to think of the evangelization of the world of that day as the result of Paul's "preaching," rather than as a result of Saul's "persecution.," however both are true. Our Sovereign God, who is in control as much during a **great crusade of Billy Graham**, as he is in the midst of the **Dachau Concentration Camp**, can just as easily employ the intense opposition of an unbeliever to spread the gospel as He can the faithful preaching of one of His saints.

A sovereign God does not need the obedience of men to achieve His purposes, but how blessed it is when men obey, becoming a willing participant in God's plans and purposes, just as we at Living Water exemplify when visitors state that they truly feel the Love of God and the family connection to Christendom.

In Closing:

Now we should as modern Christians understand that God can and will use any type of circumstances to guide us into His will. When everything is going along fine, we may have never considered going a certain way or doing something different. However it often occurs that a certain crisis opens our eyes to a new way we would have never before considered. Remember that since God created us, He knows that sometimes we have to be shaken out of our comfortable life before we do what God wants us to do!

John 15:18-21 New International Version (NIV)

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.

Pastor and Teacher **Dr. Robert Deffinbaugh**

In reality, the evangelism of the Samaritans and the Gentiles did not take place because men actively sought to obey the command of our Lord, expressed in the Great Commission, but rather providentially, brought about by the Sovereign Head of the

Church, through persecution. The saints went about, sharing the gospel, not so much out of obedience as out of necessity. Persecution brought about proclamation. How God's ways surpass our own!