

- A Study in Acts -

**Chapter Eight – Spread of the Church and the Gospel**

**ACTS 8:1-8:**

In our previous lesson, we concluded with the events leading to and including the death of Stephen (the first recorded Christian martyr). **Chapter seven** marked a change in the attitude surrounding “**the Way**”. Earlier, we witnessed that the people esteemed them highly (**Acts 5:13**); and although the leadership demonstrated that they had no love for the Apostles or the followers of Christ in general, they were not in an all-out persecution mode.

The events surrounding Stephen will mark a change in this attitude. **Chapter eight** will begin with an introduction to the escalation of hatred towards the “**Called Out**”. This would not lead to its demise; instead, it would in fact advance the growth of the “**Body of Christ**”; fulfilling the words of the Lord to His disciples in **Acts 1:8**.

**Text #1:**

**Acts 8:1-3** “Now Saul was consenting to his death.

At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.

<sup>3</sup> As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.”

**Historic Note:** The “**Body of Christ**” in Jerusalem is now between 2 to 6 years into its existence. It is now that God has allowed this persecution to arise. Up to this point, those who have obeyed the Gospel of Jesus Christ had been focused on studying, learning, and demonstrating unity by the instruction of the Apostles of Jesus Christ (**Acts 2:42; 4:32; 5:42; 6:7**; etc.). Thus, by the time this “**Great Persecution**” would be inflicted upon these of “**the Way**”; we have a prepared and dedicated people for a prepared work.

Up to this point, it has been a formula for success.

**A dedicated people** in learning, preparation, and zeal.

**A dedicated people** who have an unwavering conviction for the truth.

**A dedicated people** who are diligent in their efforts as disciples (learners and practitioners).

= The growth of the “**Body of Christ**” (**Acts 2:41** – 3,000; **Acts 4:4** – up to 5,000 men; **Acts 5:14** – multiplying; **Acts 6:1** – multiplying).

To anyone who may ask; “*Why doesn’t the Body of Christ grow like this today?*” The answer is simple, it is missing the elements we have seen as the character of this early “**Body of Christ**” (dedicated people, planted firmly in and motivated by the truth!).

**All Scattered:** First, we should appreciate that it would not be every single member of the “**Body of Christ**” in Jerusalem (as we will see that there are still devout men who will see to Stephen’s burial), and the Apostles would also remain in Jerusalem. It is describing; however, that the majority would scatter and move away from Jerusalem in a limited way (Judea and Samaria – the regions immediately surrounding Jerusalem).

**Saul:** We also have the second mention of Saul by Luke in **verse 3**. Previously, he is recorded by Luke as standing over the clothing of those who were both witnesses and participants in the stoning of Stephen (**7:58-59**).

In our text, Luke records that he is fully engaged in the persecution of the “**Body of Christ**”; entering their homes and dragging of men and women to be put into prison (as I mentioned in the previous chapter, we will give a complete bio of Saul of Tarsus in **Chapter Nine**; however, you can read his own words concerning these events in: **Acts 22:19-20; 26:9-11; Galatians 1:13**).

**Text #2:**

**Acts 8:4-8** “**Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.** <sup>5</sup> **Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.** <sup>6</sup> **And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.** <sup>7</sup> **For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.** <sup>8</sup> **And there was great joy in that city.”**

**Note:** Although it was the Apostles of Jesus Christ that would receive the Great Commission, it was the Lords’ wisdom that the by-products of the preaching the Gospel, would likewise engage in the spread of the Gospel (**Matthew 28:19-20**). Starting in **Acts 6:8** (Stephen), and now in our text, Luke is recording the fulfillment of just this thought as Philip is now the focus of Luke’s pen.

**Philip:** Philip was first introduced to us in **chapter six**, along with Stephen, as two of the seven chosen from among the brethren to take care of the daily distribution to the Hellenist widows. We know that he was among those whom the brethren knew to be of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (**Acts 6:3**).

In this dispersion, we now see Philip going down (down in elevation) to a city of Samaria, where he will preach Christ to them.

**Samaria:** Many of you have notations in your Bible’s concerning the rendering by those translating the Greek to English, that states; “**or nation**”, where it is stated “**the city of Samaria**”. The original city of Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians and the surviving inhabitants were carried away into captivity, during the reign of Hoshea of Israel and Ahaz of

Judah (**2 Kings 17**), and the city and the entire area surrounding it were inhabited by settlers granted land by the Assyrians. There would be a limited remnant that would remain in the land as it would now be inhabited by the settlers from the northeast. As these dwelt alongside each other for many years, they intermarried. Ultimately the population took on the general name of Samaritans which included the mixed blood lines.

When Ezra would return, he would mourn, because the people had intermarried with the pagans (**Ezra 9**), and would demand that the foreign wives be put away (**Ezra 10**). This was to be done for the purity of the people and priesthood (**Nehemiah 13:29-30**). The vast number of those who dwelt in Samaria failed to obey this command, and was like the pagans, considered to be detestable. It was at this time that Sanballat of Samaria and his cohorts actually became enemies of the children of Israel as they tried to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem; an antagonistic relationship that would continue for many hundreds of years.

About three hundred years before our Lord would come, Alexander the Great would conquer this area along with all of Judea. He would in addition, plant many Macedonian settlers in this area.

Samaria (the city) would never be rebuilt under that name; however, it would be rebuilt in a limited fashion by Herod under the name of Sebaste.

So, it is much more likely that it was simply a city of Samaria, rather than the city of Samaria, as the area maintained the name, but not the city.

This will also help us understand that relationship between the Samaritans and the Jews at this time. The Samaritans were considered as dogs by the Jews, even though for the most part they practiced circumcision, and held the Pentateuch, and also waited for the Christ (**John 4:25**). However, the land of Samaria was right in the middle of Palestine, and in order to travel from Galilee to Jerusalem or visa-versa, a Jew would have to cross right through this area. This brought the Lord through this area often as he traveled to Jerusalem for the feasts (see: **John 4**).

We should also note that during the Lord's encounter with the Samaritans, He would find them much more susceptible than His own people the Jews. We will see a similar willingness to hear and obey the preaching of Christ, by Philip.

**Miracles:** In addition to the preaching of Christ among the Samaritans, Philip would also perform miracles among them. There is always purpose to the signs that would accompany the word, as it is preached first in the world, note:

**Mark 16:20** “**And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with *them* and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen.**”

This will also establish precedence between the mighty works of God, and the art of deceiving people we will be introduced to in the next segment.