

Chapter 19: Persecution and Joy

Acts 8:1–8

It took the Jewish religious leaders some time to give full vent to their rage against the church. Now that Stephen has been put to death, however, that slow-moving process accelerates quickly, moving into an all-out persecution against the church. On the surface, this might seem like the worst possible situation that the early church could face, especially as they are still trying to gain their footing in the world. Yet, the growth of the early church was never about the strength and ability of the people, and always about the sovereign plan and power of God himself. In this passage, we see vividly that *what the world intends for persecution, God intends for joy*.

Arising Persecution (Acts 8:1–3)

After Stephen's death in Acts 7:60, the very first thing Luke tells us is striking: "And Saul approved of his execution" (v. 1a). As we have noted before, it is likely that Saul of Tarsus in Cilicia was one of the Cilicians who attended the synagogue that brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:9–14). Previously, Luke had softly introduced us to Saul by noting that the witnesses against Stephen "laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 6:58). If the first mention of Saul does not name him (but only associates him with others from Cilicia), and the second mention of Saul is ambiguous as to his place or role in the execution of Stephen, this third mention of Saul makes this Pharisee's perspective very clear: he believed that Stephen deserved to die. Bruce captures the mindset of Saul well when he writes that Saul "was exceptionally far-sighted, and realized as clearly as Stephen did the fundamental incompatibility between the old order and the new. The temporizing policy of his master Gamaliel (Ch. 5:34ff.) was not for him; he saw that no compromise was possible, and if the old order was to be preserved intact, the new faith must be stamped out."¹

Next, Luke tells us that "there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles" (v. 1b). The word "arose" translates a common Greek word to narrate plot developments, which is often translated in the King James Version as "came to pass" (e.g., "*And it came to pass* in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed"; Luke 2:1 KJV). While he will make clear in v. 3 that Saul is the driving force behind this persecution, Luke once again holds back information about Saul to introduce us slowly to this figure of such tremendous importance. This persecution is significant for a number of reasons. First, whereas the Jews had slowly tested boundaries against the early church, first by warning the apostles not to preach Christ (Acts 4:21), and then by beating them for continuing to preach Christ (Acts 5:40),

¹ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 172.

something changes with the execution of Stephen. As Calvin writes, “the wicked are like brute beasts, for when they have once tasted blood they are more desirous thereof, and become more cruel through committing murder.”² Second, though, this persecution did not succeed in stopping the advance of the gospel of Jesus: “The persecution aimed to destroy the infant church; in the providence of God it did the very opposite.”³

Third, the reason that the persecution did not stop the advance of the gospel has to do with the immediate result of the persecution in causing “all” the church to be “scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.” Luke does not condemn these believers for scattering, for “they fled not unadvisedly, being discouraged, but because they saw no other means to pacify the fury of the adversaries.”⁴ Instead, this scattering directly results in expanding the reach and influence of believers with the gospel, as Luke will make clear in v. 4. The language of “scattering,” though, is important, as Polhill comments: “Luke’s word for the dispersal (*diaspeirō*) comes from the Greek word for ‘seed.’ They were scattered like one scatters seed. But scattered seed grow, and the irony is that the persecution and scattering of the Christians only led to their further increase.”⁵ The apostles themselves, however, did not flee at this time, “because it is the duty of a good pastor to set himself against the invasions of wolves for the safety of his flock.”⁶

At this point, Luke returns from his comments about the wider persecution to give us closure to Stephen’s story: “Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him” (v. 2). Shifting attention from Stephen to the persecution, and then back to Stephen here (only to return to the persecution again in the next verse) may seem jarring, but Polhill argues that this structure has a purpose: “By placing the burial of Stephen as the middle term between two references to the persecution, he emphasized the close connection between Stephen’s martyrdom and the persecution of the church.”⁷ Stephen’s death was not an isolated incident, but a gateway to a broader persecution of the whole church. First, however, Luke shows the honor and lamentation that the church showed to the first martyr of the church. Not only do we see the lamentation of the church, but we must necessarily remind ourselves that “precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Ps. 116:15).

Then, Luke turns his attention one more time to the persecution, and here we see the lead role that Saul plays: “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (v. 3). Of the word “ravaging,” Lenski writes, “The verb indicates the devastation caused by a wild beast.”⁸ We should note also that Saul conducts his persecution by “entering house after house” (κατ’ οἶκον; *kat’ oikon*; i.e., “according to *each* house”). Importantly, this language darkly echoes an earlier statement in Acts, when the early church was “breaking bread in their homes” (κατὰ τοὺς οἴκους; *kata tous oikous*; i.e., “according to the houses”; Acts 2:46). On this point, Peterson comments that “the community life, which found its strength in

² Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:322.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 311.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:323–24.

⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, 211.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:324.

⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, 210–11.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 313.

house meetings and spread its influence from that joyful and caring context (2:46–47), was now systematically dismantled.”⁹

Arising Joy (Acts 8:4–8)

In v. 2, Luke told us that the church was “scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria,” and now he returns to that language: “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word” (v. 4). This language of *scattering* (διασπείρω; *diaspēirō*) the *word* (λόγος; *logos*) echoes Jesus’ parable of the *sower* (σπείρων; *speirōn*) who scatters seed, since the sower’s “seed is the word [λόγος; *logos*] of God” (Luke 8:5, 11). We must remember, though, that Jesus had originally charged his church to serve as his witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In God’s providence, he used the persecution of the church to send his people beyond Jerusalem and Judea, into the wider regions of Judea and (as we will see) even into Samaria. The gospel has not yet spread to the ends of the earth by this point, but this is a major step in that direction. Lenski notes the irony of this expansion of the gospel as a result of Saul’s persecution: “Saul thought he was crushing the Christian movement; in reality, the harder he worked to do so, the more he himself helped to spread that movement.”¹⁰

In the rest of Acts 8, Luke’s history largely focuses on the activities of Philip, one of the original seven deacons who were selected in Acts 6:5.¹¹ Later, Philip is called an “evangelist” (Acts 21:8), a role—indeed, an office (Eph. 4:11)—that seems to have begun to some degree here, in the midst of this persecution.¹² Here is where we read that Philip goes to “the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.” Polhill offers helpful historical background on the Samaritans:

From a Jewish perspective the Samaritans were a sort of *tertium quid*, neither Jew nor Gentile. They were descended from the northern tribes of Israel, the old kingdom of “Israel” that had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Those who were not taken captive to Assyria but remained in the land intermarried extensively with the native Canaanite population and the

⁹ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 277.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 314.

¹¹ “After having stated that all the apostles remained in Jerusalem (v. 1), we understand that Luke refers to the deacon Philip (6:5) and not to the apostle Philip (1:13).” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 315.)

¹² “Philip’s role as ‘the evangelist’ (cf. 21:8) in this expanding work is indicated first in Samaria (8:5–25) and then on a wider circuit (8:26–40)....Luke will continue to give us many further examples of people engaged in evangelism and show us different ways in which the message was preached in a variety of contexts. However, Philip is identified as one especially gifted in this ministry.” (Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 278.) See also Lenski: “[Philip] was thus more than the ordinary Christians who spread the gospel only as a part of their general Christian calling; yet he and his work remained under the authority of the apostles and of the mother congregation in Jerusalem (v.14) so that he acted with their approval and as their agent.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 315.) The fact Lenski points out about how the apostles needed to send down apostolic representatives (Peter and John) for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit in Acts 8:14–15 is an important detail to clarify that Philip does indeed act under the authority of the apostles.

peoples whom the Assyrians resettled in the conquered territory. These Samaritan descendants of the old northern tribes considered themselves still to be the people of God. They had their own form of the Pentateuch for their holy Scriptures, circumcised their sons, and built a temple on Mt. Gerazim to rival the one in Jerusalem (cf. John 4:20). The Hasmonean king John Hyrcanus (135–104 B.C.) destroyed their temple and made them subservient to the Jews. Later liberated by the Romans from Jewish domination, they continued to worship God in their own independent manner and to look for the *taheb*, a prophetlike messiah who would restore the true worship on Gerazim, a messianic expectation based on Deut 18:15 (cf. John 4:25). The Jewish prejudice against the Samaritans is well-known. To the Jews the Samaritans were half-breeds and heretics. Philip's venture into a Samaritan mission was a radical step toward Stephen's vision of a gospel free of nationalistic prejudices.¹³

As the Samaritans had responded to Jesus with faith—and, perhaps prepared by Jesus' time in their minds (John 4:39–42)—the crowds in Samaria “with one accord” (i.e., with one impulse/spirit; Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12; 7:57) “paid attention” to what he said, especially when they not only heard him, but also “saw the signs that he did” (v. 6). As Lenski notes, “These signs, like all those wrought by Jesus and the apostles, attested and helped to seal the preaching as being truly a message from God.”¹⁴

The specific set of signs are perhaps significant: “For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed” (v. 7). By these signs of casting out demons and healing bodily afflictions, Philip follows the pattern established by both Jesus (e.g., Luke 4:31–41) and the apostles (Acts 2:43; 5:12–16) early in their ministry in a given area, so that the new message could be authenticated by miraculous signs.¹⁵ This not only demonstrates a pattern for ministry, but it also demonstrates that God is making the Samaritan believers equal with their Jewish believing brethren: “The gospel is the great equalizer. In the gospel there are no ‘half-breeds,’ no physical rejects, no place for any human prejudices. There is acceptance for all, joy for all, ‘great joy for all the people’ (Luke 2:10).”¹⁶

The conclusion to this section is notable, as Luke writes, “So there was much joy in that city” (v. 8). Although the ESV does not bring this out, the language emphasizes that there “*arose* much joy in that city,” using the same word for “*arose*” as we saw in v. 1b: “And there *arose* on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem.” What began as “great persecution” arose ends with “much joy” arising; or, what man meant for evil, God meant for good.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Luke introduce Saul (Acts 6:9; 7:58; here, vv. 1, 3)? Why do you think that Luke introduces the figure of Saul so slowly, and how does that shape the way that we hear about his fierce

¹³ Polhill, *Acts*, 214–15.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 317.

¹⁵ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 177.

¹⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 215.

persecution in v. 3? How does the church respond to the death of Stephen (v. 2)? What does that response teach us about how we should view the tragedy of persecution? How does the persecution of the church echo the language of the growth of the church (v. 3; cf. Acts 2:46)?

2. How does the church react to the “great persecution” that arises in Jerusalem (v. 1)? How does this reaction contribute to the spread of the gospel? What is the significance of the term “scattered” (vv. 1, 4)? How does their “preaching the word” as they are scattered echo Jesus’ parable of the sower (Luke 8:11)? How does the church’s being scattered into the wider region of Judea and into Samaria contribute to the fulfillment of Jesus’ mission (Acts 1:8)?

3. Who is Philip, and where have we seen him already (Acts 6:5)? What does it mean that he will later be called an “evangelist” (Acts 21:8; Eph. 4:11; 2 Tim. 4:5)? How do we know that Philip is laboring in Samaria under the authority of the apostles (Acts 8:14)? How does that begin to inform our understanding of the role of the office of “evangelists” in the early church? Why might we conclude that the office of evangelist ceased with the apostolic age (vv. 6–7)?

4. How did Jesus prepare the way for ministry in Samaria (John 4:39–42)? How did the Samaritans respond to the preaching of Philip (vv. 6–7)? How does the description of the rise of “much joy” in v. 8 match the rise of “great persecution” in v. 1? What does this tell us about God’s sovereign power, not only to protect and preserve his people, but also to use even the greatest evil to extend his salvation into the world (cf. Gen. 50:20)?