

SCRIPTURE STUDIES

SERIES: A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS**ACTS CHAPTER 8 – Part 1****“SCATTERING THE SAINTS”****Acts 8:1-4**

Acts chapter 7 closes with the death of Stephen and Acts chapter 8 opens with the burial of Stephen. The event of Stephen's death seems to be a pivotal event in the history of the early church. Up to this point, there have been two death scenes in the early church. Both events signal a change in the church. The first event is recorded in Acts chapter 5 which is the death of Ananias and Sapphira. This triggered a wave of holy fear. The second event occurs in Acts chapter 7 which is the death of Stephen. This triggered a wave of holy fervor.

As Acts chapter 8 begins, we have our first introduction to the great Bible character, Saul, who was to be known later as Paul. Before he came to know Jesus Christ as his Savior, he was a vicious man, intent on killing Christians. The desire to put Christians to death drove him. Acts 8:1 tells us that Paul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death.

An event such as this one is bound to have a profound effect on any group. The reality of persecution and possible death would certainly cause personal evaluation of one's beliefs. And the actions which followed would reflect the sincerity of that belief. Of course, this kind of persecution could only cause a tremendous reaction: either people would be quiet about their Christianity in order to avoid torture, or their fervor would increase.

It was Winston Churchill who said, "Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result." But what happens when you are hit? What about those times when they do not miss you, when suffering and grief occur? In a word, it is called "persecution." Have you ever experienced persecution for the cause of Christ? Why were you persecuted? What was the form of the persecution and how did you handle it?

These early Christians reacted positively to persecution. Luke tells us that *"Those who had been scattered went everywhere preaching the word."* [Verse 4] Persecution caused the people to scatter, and wherever they went, they preached Christ.

Persecution is a theoretical term to us, but it was a reality to the Christians in the early church and it is a reality to Christians in many places in the world today. It all started in the events surrounding Acts chapter 8. Here in this chapter, we have a remarkable account of the resilience of the early Christians. God used persecution as a springboard to spread the gospel to the regions outside Jerusalem. **Let** us follow the account and see how it happened.

I. THE INSTRUMENT OF PERSECUTION.

The instrument of persecution was a man; his name was "Saul."

Acts 8:1 - *"And Saul was consenting unto his death."*

Acts 8:3 - *"As for Saul, he made havoc of the church entering into every house, arresting men and women and committed them to prison."*

Acts 9:1,2 - *"Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."*

The story of persecution centers around Saul. Who is Saul? He answers for himself: *"Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."* (Philippians 3:5,6)

Three things mark Saul from these verses:

- **He was religious:** *"Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee;"*
- **He was zealous:** *"concerning zeal, persecuting the church;"*
- **He was blameless:** *"touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."*

We will learn more about Saul/Paul later in the book of Acts, but he was the leader of the persecution against the early church, recorded here in Acts chapter 8.

II. THE INTENTION OF PERSECUTION

We often ask, when trials and troubles come to us, "Why is this happening to me?" If difficulties happen to us in the path of Christian duty we can believe that the Lord has allowed it. If however, the difficulty comes when we are pursuing our own personal agendas, we can know that we incurred trouble because we were out of the will of God. The persecution that the early church encountered was God-orchestrated.

God's Plan For Propagation.

Jesus Christ had made His program of evangelism clear enough to the early Christians. In Acts 1:8, He said, *"You shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."*

Jesus was telling these early Christians not to keep the gospel to themselves, but to spread it far and wide. The work of evangelization had been going on pretty well in Jerusalem, but evangelism needed to spread out into Judea, Samaria and the entire world. If it took persecution to get the message out, then that is what God would allow.

The apostles set out with great zeal after Pentecost, and it wasn't long until Jerusalem was saturated with the message of the risen, living Jesus Christ. In fact they were succeeding so well in Jerusalem that they had forgotten Judea and Samaria and the remainder of the outside world. Success right where we are carries with it the danger of complacency, blinding us to the needs of others elsewhere.

God's Purpose In Persecution.

But the Lord of the harvest does not forget His own orders and He has wonderful ways to see that they are carried out. Therefore, *"There arose a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem, and they were all scattered abroad."* Where? *"Throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria."* We further read that, *"They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word."* (v. 4]

Do you remember the story of Joseph's treatment at the hands of his brethren? When they all came together Joseph said to his guilty, penitent and cringing brothers, as they knelt before him in Egypt, *"As for you, you thought it evil against me, but God meant it for good."* (Genesis 50:20)

Saul's anger and the anger of the Jewish Sanhedrin became the unwitting instruments of the good purposes of God and the persecution which the enemy meant for destruction brought about the expansion of the gospel. The gospel is like metal -- it expands with heat! *"Therefore, they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word."* Who can tell how long Judea and Samaria might have been without the gospel had not the persecution driven out the messengers?

Illustration: in Oliver Cromwell's day the government of England experienced a shortage of gold to make coins. They searched everywhere for gold with which to mint coins but could not find enough gold. The only gold that remained was in the statues of saints in the cathedrals. Cromwell said, "Melt down the saints and put them into circulation!"

That was what God was doing by permitting persecution to break out against the young church. He was putting the saints into circulation! Let us not wait until God puts us into a furnace of persecution before we testify for Him, but let us willingly and faithfully "Tell to sinners far and wide, Jesus saves! Jesus saves!"

III. THE INSTRUCTION ABOUT PERSECUTION.

What are some of the lessons that can be learned from what happened in the lives of the early Christians? There are two paramount types of testing or trials that we can experience:

A. The Trial Of Our Faith.

"The trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:7) This verse speaks of:

1. The Validity of Our Faith. *"The trial of your faith."*
2. The Value of Our Faith. *"Being much more precious than of gold that perishes."*
3. The Victory of Our Faith. *"Might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."*

Let us remember that when trials come there is behind them a divine design. One of the designs is the trial of our faith.

B. The Trial For Our Faith.

*"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is **to try you**, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter."* (1 Peter 4:12-16)

Notice that verse 12 states, *"The fiery trial which is to try **you**."* Job said, *"When he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold."* (Job 23:10)

The trial of our faith - that is faith itself that is tested. The trial for our faith - that is the one who has faith who is being tested. Do you have a gold medal faith? It has been said that gold is ordinary earth that has passed through an extraordinary experience.

How do you handle opposition? Persecution? Verse 16 says, *"If any one suffers as a Christian let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God...."* Notice: we must endure the first kind of testing, which is the trial of our faith before we will be subjected to the second type of testing which is the trial for our faith.

Persecution tries both our faith and the one who professes to have faith. If we have the genuine article, persecution will but fuel the fires of testimony and witness. If our lives are genuine they will attract attention and incur opposition from some whose ungodly lifestyles are counter to our godly lifestyle.

SUMMATION

In Acts 8:1-4, we have the account of the early church being subjected to persecution.

- The instrument of the persecution was a man by the name of Saul.
- If God subjects us to persecution, He has a purpose in it. The intention of the persecution in the early church was to force them to do what the Lord Jesus had already commanded them to do, and that was, *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel."*
- The instruction about persecution is this: we will be subjected to opposition and even persecution. Our faith will be tested and we will be tried for our faith. The intent of our trials is to purify us and promote the work of the Lord along also.

What shall our attitude be? As Peter said, *"If you are reproached for the name of Christ, happy are you."* (1 Peter 4:14) And in the previous verse he said, *"Rejoice in as much as you are partakers of Christ's sufferings."* (v.13)

Illustration: Will you pardon a personal reference? I so seldom refer to myself. However, I believe I have had some experience with trials both in my ministry and in my health. And how have they affected me? In two ways:

First, they have drawn me. They have drawn me closer to the Lord. Second, they have driven me. They have driven me forward in the ministry like winds drive a sailing vessel. Recently a pastor asked me, "How have you made it?" My answer was, "I have never given up!"

You see, the Lord Jesus is my inspiration. Listen to what He said, *"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour."* (John 12:27-28)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the poet, had a trial-filled life. Poor health plagued him. He was ordained to preach and then developed tuberculosis. His wife, Ellen, died two years after their marriage. One biographer wrote of him, "A doom seemed to hover over him. But under the surface, dark as it was, a purpose was in his mind. He knew he was born for victory."

Did you get that? "He knew he was born for victory!" That's it! Regardless of the troubles and testings, the pressures and the persecutions, as children of God we are born for victory! So let us go Onward 'Til Upward! saying with Paul every step of the way, *"Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord."*

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