

Acts 8:1-8 | And Saul approved of his execution. And 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. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. ⁶ And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. ⁷ 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. ⁸ So there was much joy in that city.

Acts 8:1-8 | The Tale of Two Cities

The martyrdom of Stephen becomes a catalyst for the expansion of the church. The story does not end with him buried beneath a pile of stones, because his message is not snuffed out by his adversaries but expanded. The adversaries of God are not appeased by their sacrifice of Stephen, instead like predators who have tasted blood they become more aroused.

The recounting of the events right after Stephen's martyrdom describes two cities, Jerusalem and Samaria. Both stand as glorious testimonies to the work of the Holy Spirit in God's people. The Church as the body of Christ stands in Jerusalem like a good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, and goes into Samaria to seek and save the lost. The Church by the same Spirit of Christ acts like Christ. We'll look at each city.

1. Jerusalem

Acts 8:1 | And Saul approved of his execution. And 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.

Saul, who would become the Apostle Paul after his conversion approved of the execution of Stephen. He would not know that he was standing and witnessing a man enduring his own fate for bearing witness to truths he would soon confess. He was a young man at this time, full of zeal and willing to make a name for himself among the Sanhedrin. It is also worth noting that the Sanhedrin were made up of Sadducees and the persecution had been a Sadducee led persecution up to this point but Paul will unite the Sadducees and Pharisees in the persecution of Christians.

Notice that the very day of Stephen's Martyrdom sparks a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. This is the nature of an unjust trial. A just trial brings resolution by satisfying the demands of Justice. A false trial for the sake of revenge only enflames the

appetite of the ones who have executed it. The reason for this is because in their falseness they have exposed themselves. Because the Sanhedrin has been exposed, any who remain as witnesses to the events of the day are threats to them. They have shown their own falseness and the only available strategy left to them is brute force.

This is true at all levels but its true interpersonally too. If someone begins lying about you, or smearing you, then more will come. They will not be satisfied, they have enflamed their appetite. You should be aware of this yourself. Repent before you can no longer hear.

The persecutors of the church think they are dealing with men like them, who when threatened by the truth, will plug their ears. But they are dealing with a church who cannot close their ears, but who hear the shepherds voice and come to him.

There are two immediate results of the persecution, some who scatter and some who remain. The text says, all were scattered. But this is not referring to every single person, but that the church as a whole was scattered across the region, everyone at some level was disrupted by the attack. The question is, in the midst of persecution should you stay or should you leave?

Well we've seen the glory of Stephen's Martyrdom, shouldn't every Christian seek to become a martyr like him? Shouldn't everyone stay? Is this just a result of cowardice in the early church. No, the Christian does not seek martyrdom. There are no suicide Christians. This is a distinct difference between Christianity and Islam.

When Jesus describes this season to the disciples he says,

Matthew 10:23 | When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

So there it is, if you're persecuted in one town, flee to the next. Jesus is not requiring you to stand and be murdered. But we likewise must consider what Jesus did. He did not flee the persecution but went forward and endured the persecution that was coming for him.

That is he did not abandon his sheep. And we see the Apostles follow the model of Jesus. While all scattered the apostles and some devout men remained. How could the apostles leave the church which they were sent by God to lead? What kind of testimony would this send to the already shaken church? But consider, when Paul is being specifically targeted later in Acts, he will escape out a back window hidden in a basket in order to save his life.

Therefore we see some principles. If the whole church is persecuted along with its leaders, it is permissible for all to escape. If you are called to lead a people who require your care, you cannot abandon your post. If you are the one under attack but the church can sustain itself without you, it is appropriate to save yourself. You see there is not one blanket rule,

but throughout the scriptures the situation dictates itself by wisdom. The sixth commandment requires our valuing our own lives. But we must never abandon the responsibilities which God has entrusted us.

The picture in Jerusalem is dangerous but stalwart among those who remain.

Acts 8:2 | Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.

Stephen is not abandoned, but like Jesus devout men gather to bury him and they make great lamentation. There is a sadness that accompanies the loss of a great person in the church. We have this great hope of resurrection, there was a testimony of courage given by Stephen, and there was fruitfulness which would manifest from his life. These great mercies associated with Stephen's death do not remove the great lamentation that the devout men make over him at his burial.

We are not stoics. Unaffected by the evils and attacks of the world. Do you think their lamentation was a sign of unbelief? Of course not, consider the faith it must have taken even to be identified as one who buried Stephen?

Acts 8:3 | But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

But the conclusion of Jerusalem is one of terrible assault. Saul is seeking to completely destroy the church in Jerusalem. Going from house to house, he is dragging off men and women and sending them to prison. Stephen was the tip of the iceberg. Their desire was total destruction of the movement associated with Jesus of Nazareth. This is always the serpents plan. He always desires to utterly destroy the promised offspring.

2. Samaria

Acts 8:4 | Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

What of those who scattered? They left the area that was threatening their life, but it is no retreat with their tale between their legs. They bring the message with them and it begins to spread. The word for their scattering is diaspora. This is a familiar word to the Jews in their history because they were scattered from their homeland in the exile, and now they are occupied by a foreign ruler. But consider, this diaspora is not a punishment of God but a blessing of God to the world. But its also worth noting that the first diaspora ends up being a blessing of God to the world as well. Consider Daniel's leadership of Babylon and the conversion of King Nebuchadnezzar. Those who are proclaiming the word abroad are not the apostles but ordinary Christians. Everyone has the capacity to share the word of Christ that they have received. Hide it under a bushel?

Acts 8:5 | Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.

The story zeroes in on Philip. This is the Philip who was selected to be one of the first deacons alongside Stephen. He is not an apostle, but merely a spirit filled Christian who has received the gospel and remains courageous alongside his fellow servant of the church.

He went down to the city of Samaria. This is the first true witnessing to those outside of the Jewish community centered on the temple in Jerusalem. Although the Samaritans are circumcised they operate under a falsified version of the old testament and worship falsely at Mt. Gerazim. But suddenly Philip and the Samaritans have something in common. They are expelled from worship at the temple in Jerusalem. But this expulsion is no loss, because Philip himself is a living stone in the true temple, the church of Christ. What he proclaims is Christ. The whole of the gospel is summed up in Christ.

Acts 8:6-7 | And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.
⁷For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

What happens when the gospel arrives in Samaria? Precisely what we have seen when the gospel arrived in Jerusalem. The attention that is paid by the crowds to Philip is just like the attention paid to Peter during his first sermon on Pentecost.

The Spirit empowers the spread of the gospel by the preaching of Christ testified by signs and wonders. The signs testify to what the spread of the gospel means. Those who cry out and shriek in resistance and pain are the unclean spirit's who stand against the spread of the gospel. This is the true realm of our warfare. Against the principalities and powers that take sinners captive. But the proclamation of Christ is more powerful than they are. The forgiveness of sins frees us from their power, and they cannot withstand the spirit of Christ.

Acts 8:8 | So there was much joy in that city.

This is what we must recognize. The church was not retreating, it was expanding. This is the fruit of Stephen's Martyrdom. The church holds fast in Jerusalem by the courage of the apostles, and expands by the faithfulness of those who are scattered. While there is mourning in Jerusalem, there is joy in Samaria. And the commission of Christ is fulfilled.

Acts 1:8 | But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."