



Have you ever seen God use something evil for good? While we might not recognize the immediate results, we can trust that God is not absent when tough times are present.

### Persecution Erupts in Jerusalem

**Acts 8:1-3** (NET) <sup>1</sup> And Saul agreed completely with killing him. Now on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were forced to scatter throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup> Some devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was trying to destroy the church; entering one house after another, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

**all except the apostles were forced to scatter** It's unlikely that Luke meant only 12 believers - the apostles - remained in Jerusalem. What about their families? Later in Acts we see **the church** in Jerusalem (Acts 11:22, 12:5, 15:4). Luke notes that the majority of believers in Jerusalem fled the persecution fueled by Stephen's death.

Just as Joseph & Nicodemus had done with Jesus' body after his crucifixion **devout men buried Stephen**. We don't know who they are of whether they were followers of Jesus or not. They likely viewed Stephen as a righteous man unjustly treated.

**Saul was trying to destroy the church** in Jerusalem. How could God allow this to happen? God wasn't the author of the evil taking place, yet He would use the evil actions of Saul and other persecutors for GOOD.

It's possible that many believers in Jerusalem were becoming a holy huddle rather than a missionary force. It was time for the fledglings to get pushed out of the nest. And so God allows the evil of persecution to further the proclamation of the gospel.

### Persecution pushes believers to count the cost & reach the lost.

Persecution forces us to ask if Jesus is worth our suffering and sharing.

### The Result of Persecution

**Acts 8:4-5** (NET) <sup>4</sup> Now those who had been forced to scatter went around proclaiming the good news of the word. <sup>5</sup> **Philip** went down to the main city of **Samaria** and began **proclaiming the Christ to them**.

That Phillip went to Samaria is significant for 2 reasons:

- 1) Jesus told His disciples they were to make disciples of all nations. This included Samaria.

**Acts 1:8** (NET) <sup>8</sup> 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 farthest parts of the earth."

- 2) For many years Jews & Samaritans had been violent toward one another. Of course, Jesus had taken the apostles into Samaria where He spoke with the woman at the well (John 4)

and where they stayed a couple of days to share the good news. The people in that particular town received what Jesus & the apostles had said.

The Samaritan woman at the well communicated that, like the Jews, they too had been looking for the Messiah to come. She told Jesus:

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**John 4:25** (NET) <sup>25</sup> “I know that **Messiah is coming**” (the one called Christ); “whenever he comes, he will tell us everything.”

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So it was that Phillip was **proclaiming the Christ** [Messiah] **to them**.

**Acts 8:6-8** (NET) <sup>6</sup> The crowds were paying attention with one mind to what Philip said, as they heard and saw the miraculous signs he was performing. <sup>7</sup> For unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, were coming out of many who were possessed, and many paralyzed and lame people were healed. <sup>8</sup> So **there was great joy in that city**.

The miracles backed up Phillip’s message. These **signs** had God’s signature. What **joy** they must have experienced!

### **Confronting the Competition**

**Acts 8:9-11** (NET) <sup>9</sup> Now in that city was a man named Simon, who had been practicing magic and amazing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great. <sup>10</sup> All the people, from the least to the greatest, paid close attention to him, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called ‘Great.’”<sup>11</sup> And they paid close attention to him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic.

Remember when Moses had Aaron throw down his staff and it turned into a snake, only to have his competition - the Egyptian magicians do the same thing (Exodus 7:8-12)?

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**Exodus 7:12** (NET) <sup>12</sup> Each man threw down his staff, and the staffs became snakes. But **Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs**.

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**Acts 8:12-13** (NET) <sup>12</sup> But when they believed Philip as he was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, **they began to be baptized**, both men and women. <sup>13</sup> Even Simon himself believed, and after he was baptized, he stayed close to Philip constantly, and when he saw the signs and great miracles that were occurring, he was amazed.

That **Simon** the magician **was amazed** demonstrates that either 1) Phillip is better with slight-of-hand OR 2) a greater power is working through Phillip. The power of the miracles pointed to the power of the message. The people listened and **began to be baptized** as followers of Jesus, the Messiah of God.

Phillip, a Greek-speaking Jew, was taking the message of Jesus to the people across the tracks, the half-breed Samaritans. And how did it start? Persecution launched people out of their comfort zones to further the gospel message to those they normally wouldn’t associate with.

**Persecution pushes believers to count the cost & reach the lost.**

## Peter & John Travel to Samaria

**Acts 8:14** (NET) <sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.

Jesus & his apostles weren't always received by the Samaritans (Luke 9:51-55). Peter was there when John and his brother James came up with this bright idea:

**Luke 9:54-56** (NET) <sup>54</sup> Now when his disciples James and **John** saw this, they said, "Lord, do you want us to *call fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*"<sup>55</sup> But Jesus turned and rebuked them,<sup>56</sup> and they went on to another village.

So now the Jewish apostles of Jesus make their way back into Samaria, crossing the racial bridge. Can the two races - Jews & Samaritans actually form ONE FAMILY? If it's possible, the apostles must affirm it.

**Acts 8:15-16** (NET) <sup>15</sup> These two [Peter & John] went down and prayed for them so that they would receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup> (For the Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.)

This is a difficult passage, and it is used by Pentecostal denominations to say that a person can have Jesus in his/her life, yet not have been "baptized by the Holy Spirit". They point to passages like this as proof. Yet this is NOT the norm. Look what Paul writes:

**Romans 8:9** (NET) <sup>9</sup>...Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, this person does not belong to him.

The norm is that a person repents of sin, trusts Jesus, & is forgiven (Spiritual baptism), after which the person takes the first step of obedience in physical baptism - a picture of the spiritual baptism that has already taken place.

Yet we must remember that this is an important moment in the life of the fledgling church. Samaritans and Jews can really be brothers and sisters in Jesus? Verse 17 answers this with an EXCLAMATION POINT!

**Acts 8:17** (NET) <sup>17</sup> Then Peter and John placed their hands on the Samaritans, and **they received the Holy Spirit.**

Later Peter would recall how God how shown him this message was for ALL people, Jews, Samaritans, & Gentiles.

**Acts 15:8-9** (NET) <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, has testified to them by **giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,**<sup>9</sup> and he made no distinction between them and us, cleansing their hearts by faith.

The apostles were THERE to affirm that their former enemies had been transformed by the Spirit as well. We are not told if they spoke in other languages as Peter and John had experienced on Pentecost. The most important result was not transformed language but transformed LIVES!

**Acts 8:18-24** (NET) <sup>18</sup> Now Simon, when he saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, offered them money, <sup>19</sup> saying, "Give me this power too, so that everyone I place my hands on may receive the Holy Spirit." <sup>20</sup> But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could acquire God's gift with money! <sup>21</sup> You have no share or part in this matter because your heart is not right before God! <sup>22</sup> Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that he may perhaps forgive you for the intent of your heart."<sup>23</sup> For I see that you are bitterly envious and in bondage to sin."<sup>24</sup> But Simon replied, "You pray to the Lord for me so that nothing of what you have said may happen to me."

**When this guy was baptized did he really trust Jesus?** We simply don't know. What we DO know is that his method of operation didn't immediately change. Evidently, he wanted to harness the power of the Spirit for his own gain and glory. He was **envious and in bondage to sin**. Simon needed to **repent** - turn from his sinful **intent**. We don't know if he did or not.

We see a man who said he believed, a man who had been baptized, but a man who has not been changed.

The real point of this story is not whether CHARACTER was genuinely converted...but whether the READER is genuinely converted. Have you GENUINELY turned from your sin & trusted Jesus with your life? If so, you can trust that you are FULLY FORGIVEN, but...

🕒 that doesn't mean there is no work to be done. The Lord can forgive your past, but you still have to do the hard work of developing new disciplines for the future. You have been MADE righteous; now you must LIVE righteous.

**Acts 8:25** (NET) <sup>25</sup> So after Peter and John had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many Samaritan villages as they went.

The apostles no longer viewed Samaria as simply a place they had to pass through, but a people who needed to hear **the good news**. And on the way home to Jerusalem, they continued **proclaiming the good news to many Samaritan villages as they went**.

Remember why the Phillip and the apostles were in Samaria in the first place? They were there because of persecution. **God had used EVIL for GOOD**.

The greatest example of God using EVIL for GOOD occurred when the sinless Son of God was unjustly slapped, beaten, spit on, flogged, and crucified... **EVIL acts...that God used for GOOD**.

## **2 Questions:**

- 1) **What does following Jesus cost you?**
- 2) **Who are you reaching out to?**