

Books of Acts

Persecution and the Growth of the Church

Introduction:

1. Last week I ended the message with a quote from Tertullian, who famously said in the year 197, during a particularly vicious persecution by the Roman Empire: *“Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust. Your injustice is the proof that we are innocent, the oftener we’re mowed down by you, the more in number we grow, the blood of Christians is seed.”*
2. Let me set the scene – Stephen had been martyred, and (Saul) Paul, who witnessed the stoning of Stephen, is on a rampage, persecuting and trying to eliminate the Christ followers.
3. Today, we will discuss **Acts 8:1-25**
4. As I previously have said, the theme verse for the Book of Acts is **Acts 1:8: “You receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you’ll be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”**
5. So today, we’re going to look at the movement of the gospel from Jewish-only to include another people group - the Samaritan people.
6. We’re going to see the power of the gospel uniting people who couldn’t stand each other.
7. But we’re also going to see the unification of the church by the very unusual activity of God, of refraining from giving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans until the apostles arrive from Jerusalem.
8. We’re also going to see an interesting encounter with a man named Simon the Sorcerer, and how we’re going to see how money cannot play a role in the establishment of church leaders
9. **So today, I am going to drop some pebbles along the way, like in the Brothers Grimm story of Hansel and Gretel, so that we can reach a destination as we unfold the message for today.**

Saul’s Attitude :

The First Pebble: What do we learn about Saul’s attitude concerning Stephen’s death?

1. One of the great stories is the conversion of Saul of Tarsus from a hater of the gospel and the church to the apostle Paul, who did more than anyone to build the church.
2. Stephen, whose face looked like the face of an angel and who had such a Christ-like disposition to his persecuting murderers, when he prayed: **“Father,” he said, “do not hold this sin against them.”**
3. So, he approved of the stoning of Stephen

Details of the First Persecution and the Courage of Ordinary Folk:

The Second Pebble: How does Luke describe the details of the first persecution that arises, and what’s the significance of the fact that the apostles were not scattered from Jerusalem?

1. We’re going to talk about Saul’s involvement in the persecution, but many people are being arrested and hauled off to prison.
2. And, significantly, the church was scattered. They’re like seeds being scattered everywhere.
3. And everywhere they go, they preach the word.
4. The significance of the apostles not being among those who were scattered shows that this was a laypeople’s movement – it was not the leaders who were sharing the gospel.
5. I believe we’re going to find out in heaven how much ordinary people were involved in the spiritual conquest of the Roman Empire.

6. Three centuries of the gospel advance by tradesmen, housewives, and ordinary folk traveling to see relatives, maybe some for business or trade that would never have made it into the pages of history.
7. And that is and should be the pattern today – ordinary people being the carriers of the Good News wherever they may find themselves
8. The Christians were hunted, dragged out of their homes, and imprisoned
9. We see in the Book of Hebrews, where the author urges them to remember those in prison as if they were fellow prisoners. ***“Remember those early days with the gospel when you joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property,” Hebrews 10:34 and Hebrews 11:35-39,*** where publicly, they stood with those who were being persecuted.
10. The authorities would use this as a means of gathering out of hiding true Christians by arresting some key leaders.
11. Whoever showed up to feed them in prison or bring blankets to them or care for them, they’re Christians too.

What about Saul?

The Third Pebble: What does verse 3 teach us about Saul and his position with the Sanhedrin, and what effect do you think it had on Saul to drag off men and women and put them in prison?

1. Saul began to destroy the church as he went from house to house.
2. This image of him dragging men and women out of their homes into the street is just degrading – think about it if it were you
3. It must have had a searing effect on his conscience; the painful effect of these innocent, godly, simple people who believed that Jesus was the Messiah eventually affected Saul.

Philip and His Ministry:

The Fourth Pebble: What does verse 4 teach us about the effect of persecution on the church?

1. Those who had been scattered who preach the word, and we know from the earlier verse that it was not the apostles.
2. This persecution was meant to quell this Christian movement, but in fact it had the opposite effect, as the Christians were scattered, with Philip being among them. (China)
3. Philip was one of the seven who were chosen to take care of the Greek widows
4. But he goes to a city in Samaria to witness about Christ

Division between Samaritans and the Jews:

The Fifth Pebble: The division between Samaritans and Jews that we see in this chapter, because it’s a big deal for them, and it might be lost on us, is how significant it really was that the gospel was breaking into this place.

1. So, the clearest statement, as I said, is ***John 4:*** there’s a lot of backstories as to why the Jews had no dealings with Samaritans.
2. The back story has to do with the two different exiles of the Jews.
3. The northernmost kingdom was, for the most part, apostate from the get-go.
4. Jeroboam, son of Nebat, set up the golden calves or whatever their gods were; they also set up their own priesthood that was not a Levitical priesthood.
5. But the patience of God ran out.
6. The Assyrians came in, and they went into exile.

7. The Assyrians settled some Jews with Gentiles, and they all mixed, and they worshiped many gods, and it became a kind of hybrid mongrel race.
8. There were Samaritans who only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament, the Books of Moses, and did not accept any of the history after that, nor did they accept any of the prophets.
9. They were basically like apostate liberal but still claimed to be Jews.
10. However, Jesus, speaking to the woman alone at the well, demonstrating the ultimate example of the second great commandment, love for neighbor, would have been considered scandalous, but He laid the groundwork.

Relationship between miracles and gospel preaching:

The Sixth Pebble: Looking at the miracles, they had a temporal function.

1. The miracles of Jesus had a temporal function, but at the same time, they served eternity by proving that Jesus was God in the flesh.
2. The miracles of healings, including the lame, and also demons were cast out (**verse 7**)
3. They got to hear the gospel message – it is almost as if the healings and deliverance were “the dinner bell.”

Simon the Sorcerer:

The Seventh Pebble: Who was Simon, and how does Luke describe his life and effect on the people before Philip came?

1. He was a practitioner of the dark arts.
2. He amazed the people of Samaria, and as it is said, he boasted that he was someone great.
3. **Verse 10 says, “They all paid attention to him from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great.’”**
4. We could characterize this encounter between Simon and the gospel preachers as a power encounter
5. These types of things are often seen in Third World countries, where demons run amok and where you’ve got witch doctors and the like, and people are under the control of those evil forces. **Malawi Witch doctor**
6. But we need to realize that demons are every bit as active everywhere on earth, even in our country.

Believer’s Baptism:

The Eighth Pebble: Believe first, and then water baptism next.

1. In the New Testament, you never see an example of infant baptism.
2. Simon makes a profession of faith and gets the water baptism, but it’s pretty clear that Peter and John do not think he’s converted.
3. Some people make verbal assent and might even receive water baptism, but then later they apostatize.

Coming to Samaria:

The Ninth Pebble: What’s the purpose of this account of the apostolic visit to Samaria, and how do we explain the delay between the Samaritans’ belief and their receiving the Holy Spirit

1. The issue we are looking at is the giving of the Holy Spirit.
2. Up until this point, they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, so when they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit

3. The giving of the Holy Spirit came with outward visible signs, usually the speaking in tongues.
4. What is happening here - I think it's pretty obvious that the terrible rift between Jerusalem and Samaria is now being closed by the Samaritans accepting the message of Christ?
5. Paul works very hard in **Romans 14** and other places to keep unity between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians.
6. It's the answer to all the divisions there

Simon's Response:

The Tenth Pebble: Simon sees all this, and so he responds.

1. Simon is blown away
2. Well, we can see very clearly from what Peter and John say to him,
3. And this became known as simony.
4. Simony is the act of selling church offices and roles or sacred things.
5. ***Verse 23 - Peter says, "May your money perish with you because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money."***
6. The offer of money showed Peter this was an unconverted man, that he was full of bitterness, full of wickedness, and captive to sin, and so

Apostolic Ministry in Samaria:

The Eleventh Pebble: Verse 25 - the Apostolic Ministry in Samaria

1. So, we now see Philip, who is not an apostle, moving out in obedience to the Holy Spirit
2. It reminds me of **John 4**, when the whole Samaritan village, at the urging of the Samaritan woman, went out to hear Jesus

Finally:

1. And so, we get to our destination – all along the way, we have dropped pebbles, lest we forget the way back.
2. The way back, where?
3. Back to **Acts 1:8** ***"but you receive power and ability when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be My witnesses to tell people about Me, both in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth."***
4. We see the spread of the gospel.
5. We see people being saved.
6. We see the power of the Holy Spirit coming in a very unusual way to maintain unity between Jews and Samaritans and make sure there's just one church of Jesus Christ.
7. All of this is the marvelous work of the Holy Spirit in building the true church of Christ from Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth.
8. And so, it is my sincere desire that each one of us recognize the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and for us to be obedient like these ordinary believers and go