

>>>>>> Acts - Lesson 14 <<<<<<<

1) Let's begin by looking back at Stephen's death and in particular, the part Saul played in it.

**Acts 7:57–8:1 (NIV)**

- 2) First,, it will be obvious from what we read next, that Stephen's love for them and his courage was truly lost on all those who were participating in this heinous crime.
- 3) In fact, if anything, the crime itself emboldened them to continue their persecution but on a larger scale.
- 4) Of course, to state the obvious here, Luke makes two mentions of a young Jew named Saul.
  - a) First, he held their cloaks.
  - b) Second, he approved of the killing.
- 5) There are possibly some telling things here that we might find in the from of a couple of unanswered questions:

a) **Question 1: Why was Saul not in the thick of the stone throwing?**

- i) Saul was a Pharisee though very likely not a member of the Sanhedrin.
- ii) He was taught by Gamaliel – perhaps he felt at that point that this might have been the wrong thing to do – and yet we have to ask question 2...

b) **Question 2: Why did he approve the killing?**

- i) We are told that he was an official witness against Stephen.
- ii) It strikes me interesting that if Saul was (as he claims) a “Hebrew of Hebrews” – totally devout to the law in everyway – then would not one assume he would not be part of the corruption and general mess of the Jewish leadership at this time.
- c) Two other possible questions here – **First**, as a official witness, was he part of the lies?

**Acts 6:11(NIV)**

- d) **Second**, why would he have approved of this violent and illegal act?
- e) I think N.T. Wright may really have come to the correct conclusion.
  - i) Gamaliel took a “live and let live” approach to movements such as the one being delt with here.
  - ii) However, it may be that his young student Saul was not satisfied with that approach.
  - iii) For whatever deep seated reason within his core, Saul felt this “movement” was a pure and definite threat to his beliefs and the Jewish religious system as a whole.
  - iv) Saul was, to use his own words, zealous for the faith.

**Galatians 1:14 (NIV)**

6) We will be speaking a lot to Saul and then Paul in just a while – what the transition is and how it comes about.

- 7) However, for now, and with all that in mind, it is not at all surprising to see what happens next  
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**Acts 8:1b–8:3 (NIV)**

- 1) So much for a happy church home life in Jerusalem.
- 2) The Christian community had grown to well over 5000 at a point prior to this.
- 3) We are not told of any real persecution against them before this other than the skirmishes between the apostles and the Sanhedrin.
- 4) This day changed all that – and, if I were to venture a guess, this was likely the very day that Saul changed as well.
- 5) All the prior incidents of the apostles being arrested and harassed by the Jewish leadership now are overshadowed by the cruel murder of one of their beloved members.
- 6) Their mourning would have to however be short lived for, Saul evidently began his campaign to destroy the church that very day.
  - a) We can't know for sure since we are not told.
- 7) Of course, at this point the Sanhedrin was more than happy to go along with Saul's persecution.
- 8) I can't imagine what it would have been like for these Christians to be sitting in their homes and someone break in and simply grab you and your wife and haul you off to prison without a trial or even so much as a question.
- 9) As horrific as this sudden persecution was for those living in Jerusalem, it was perhaps a benefit for the Church from a divine perspective.
- 10) These young Christians were now forced out of the Jerusalem community and into the remainder of Judea and Samaria and for that matter, probably the rest of the known world.
  - a) One interesting statistic here is the word **ALL**.
  - b) Taken at face value, it seems like the persecution basically wiped out the Jerusalem Church.
    - i) The only ones left were the apostles.
  - c) Sometimes, if we won't do something on our own, God has His way of seeing that we do it anyway.

***Ever have that happen to you?***

- d) They wound up planting churches and the spreading the Gospel.
  - i) In this situation, this was inevitable.
- e) If the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leaders were to look back on this 10 years down the road, they would probably have considered it a big mistake.
- f) Instead of curing the problem they caused it to spread and lost any hope of controlling it.

- 1) Now that the Christian community is scattered because of this persecution, let's look at our first incident that arises from this.

**Acts 8:4–7 (NIV)**

- 2) First, I think it is important to get the picture of what these folks did. This innocuous verse 4 speaks volumes when we consider the circumstances.
  - a) These folks “scattered” because of a “great persecution”.
  - b) That being said, you would think that when they got to wherever they were fleeing to that they would have laid low so to speak.
  - c) Not so! – They jumped right in and started preaching the word, obviously at quite a risk to their own safety.
- 3) Next, we look at Philip who went to an unspecified city in Samaria.
  - a) This is Philip the evangelist – one of the seven chosen for the food distribution earlier – not Philip the apostle.
  - b) As we will see, this is not his home – one might have assumed that he would go there as the persecution began and indeed, he may have been on his way there.
  - c) However, we see him in Samaria and he begins to proclaim the Messiah.
  - d) Then, he went about healing all kinds of illnesses and casting out demons.
  - e) We definitely should note that “they all paid close attention to what he said” ... and ... “there was great joy in that city”.
  - f) I cannot help but believe that Luke included this as what we might consider a typical response to the message that these men and women brought wherever they went.
- 4) As we will see as we continue, Philip might have been on his way home but, God has quite an adventure in store for him at this point in his life.

**Acts 8:9–13 (NIV)**

- 1) O.k. Simon did become a believer, however it appears that along with his belief, came some misunderstanding of what was happening
  - a) Perhaps some unhealthy curiosity.
- 2) Simon was somewhat unique – he made claims about himself and obviously convinced at least some of the people that he was “the Great Power of God”.
  - a) He was a sorcerer so he was able to amaze the people but he was not from God so he could not do any of the miraculous things that Philip was doing, thru the Holy Spirit.
  - b) According to one commentary, at this time, sorcerers and magicians were numerous and influential.

- i) They did perform healings and exorcisms, and practiced astrology, but they utilized the power of Satan for anything that was truly miraculous.
- 3) Simon was amazed by what the Holy Spirit was doing through Philip and, as we will see, it caused a very inappropriate action on his part.