

Scattered But Not Compromised Acts 8:1-25

Introduction

Through the first seven chapters of the book of Acts we have seen the fledgling church consistently facing danger both from without and from within

The Jewish religious leaders have endeavored to stop the church in its tracks by issuing two separate bans against speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus

And the church was in danger from within as its integrity was tested in the case of Ananias and his wife, Sapphira

Satan repeatedly tried to cause the church to stumble only to see it grow in both numbers and resolve in spite of his attacks

Then last week we saw the account of Stephen who was the first martyr of the church

First his opponents tried to argue with him in the synagogue and when they were unsuccessful they resorted to putting up false witnesses to testify against him

So, charged with blasphemy against the temple and the Law Stephen was dragged before the Sanhedrin to defend himself

And we saw how Stephen didn't really address the charges against him in any way but instead took the opportunity to remind the religious leaders of the history of their nation and how it revealed God's plan for salvation – and how in so doing he turned the tables on his accusers

We saw how Stephen's speech so enraged the religious leaders they lost all control, dragged him out of the city, and stoned him to death just to silence him

I'm sure that Satan thought he had finally achieved victory over the church

Warnings and beatings from without hadn't worked nor had working through ego and pride from within but surely if people started to die for their beliefs the church would dissipate

Remember, this was the thinking of the religious leaders as we saw in chapter 5 when Gamaliel counseled moderation and patience in dealing with this group they viewed as religious insurrectionists Gamaliel had reminded them that two other religious uprisings had flared up and then fizzled out with the deaths of their leaders

They must have thought that surely these upstarts would go away now that blood had been shed

Without a doubt things had changed for the fledgling church and would never be the same again

But as we know the church didn't fall to pieces even though following the progress of the church throughout the remainder of Acts will be something like following a wounded deer through the woods as drops of blood will mark its progress

In our passage this morning we are going to see that Stephen's martyrdom led to persecution of the church which led to the dispersion of the church which resulted in widespread evangelism by the church

We are going to be considering Acts 8:1-25 this morning where we will see that the church was indeed **scattered** just as Gamaliel had predicted might happen but that it was **not compromised** in any way

The church was still able to maintain its **Effectiveness**, its **Unity**, and its **Purity** in spite of being persecuted and scattered

I. Persecution and Dispersion

Follow along as I read **Acts 8:1-3** which sets the scene by telling of the persecution and dispersion of the church

And Saul approved of his [Stephen's] 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. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

The first thing we notice is that Saul is no Gamaliel

Gamaliel was the esteemed rabbi who served as Saul's teacher and he was known to be a moderate. As we have already seen in Acts 5 he was the one who counseled patience in dealing with the church. He recommended taking a "wait and see" attitude under the assumption that the movement would fall apart on its own if it were of human origin.

And that if it should continue to thrive it might be because it was God's plan and the religious leaders might be found to be opposing God.

But the portrait of Saul before us is that of a rabid zealot.

Verse 1 says that Saul "approved of" Stephen's execution but the word "approved" doesn't quite convey Saul's attitude toward it.

Saul didn't merely say, "Yeah, I'm good with it."

He took **pleasure** in Stephen's stoning – he **heartily agreed** with it – he **cheered it on** so to speak.

Then in **verse 3** we see that

"Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison"

That word, "ravaging" means that Saul was acting like a wild beast and seeking to completely destroy the church.

In the Greek Old Testament, **Psalms 80:13** uses the same word to describe a **wild boar** that uproots and destroys a vineyard and it's also used to describe the destruction engaged in by **invading marauders**.

And Paul later describes his activity at this time in **Galatians 1:13** where he writes:

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

The image of Saul going from house to house – most likely the places where house churches were discovered to be meeting – hunting down believing men and women and dragging them off to prison is frightening.

Saul didn't look at these Christ-followers as misguided souls who were merely mistaken and in need of education but as deliberate religious imposters and insurrectionists who must be destroyed.

Saul was a sadistically cruel defender of his faith who knew that if the Judaism that he knew and loved were to survive this new faith must be obliterated.

And it was Stephen's death that served as the starting gun for this persecution

Verse 1 says that persecution against the church in Jerusalem began "that very day"

The smell of blood was in the air and like a school of piranhas frenzied persecutors began to move against the church in order to destroy it

So, in a natural reaction to the violence against them, the believers took off and left Jerusalem

Verse 1 says they "scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria"

Luke reports that "all" of them except for the apostles left Jerusalem but I don't think we need to necessarily take that to mean every last believer left

It's likely that only the Hellenists were targeted for this wave of persecution since they would have been associated with Stephen who the religious leaders had just killed for the supposed crime of disparaging the temple and Moses

The apostles and the Hebraic church were still very closely associated with the temple and may well have escaped being attacked and driven out

If not, then the apostles were successful in building up the church in Jerusalem again quite quickly in spite of the persecution because we know that Jerusalem never seems to be without a church

Either way, we see the words of Jesus from **Acts 1:8** being fulfilled in an unexpected way

Prior to his ascension Jesus had told his apostles:

"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."

We have already seen them receive the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's power and they have been effective witnesses in Jerusalem

Now persecution is causing them to disperse into the second mission field of Judea and Samaria

The church is made up of people and people tend to get comfortable with the status quo and occasionally, God has to use extreme events to get us moving

And in **verses 4-8** we will see that the church loses none of its **effectiveness** in spite of being scattered

II. Effectiveness

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 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. 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. So there was much joy in that city.

Dispersion brought on by persecution didn't create a bunch of refugees but a band of missionaries

The word "scattered" brings to mind the sowing of seed and it's used that way in **Matthew 25:24**

It describes each believer going in a different direction but accomplishing the same purpose as the scattering resulted in the gospel message being sown far and wide because "all went about preaching the word" as we read in **verse 4**

This doesn't mean that every believer became a vocational minister or missionary

It simply means that, as witnesses, they naturally shared what had happened to them and who Jesus was to them – just as all believers are tasked with doing today

Remember, this is a part of how we are to make disciples – witnessing to others is supposed to be our purpose as we go about our daily lives

Then in **verse 5** we see Philip went north into Samaria and “proclaimed to them the Christ”

Our text says he went “down” to Samaria because Samaria is at a lower elevation than Jerusalem
But Philip went down in another way as well – at least according to the Jewish way of thinking

The Samaritans were hated by the Jews as they considered them to be half-breed infidels

In fact, a prayer of that time said in part: “Lord, do not remember the Samaritans in the resurrection”

The Samaritans had an equally low view of the Jews as we know from the parable of the Good Samaritan which Jesus told for its shock value as no Jew would have conceived of a Samaritan acting kindly toward a Jew and it forced them to consider who their neighbor was

Perhaps Philip was able to set aside the ongoing adversarial relationship that had existed for some 1,000 years between the two groups in part because he was a Hellenist and therefore not as entrenched in the dispute – or perhaps the Samaritans accepted Philip as a fellow reject

For whatever reason, that’s where he went and he had great success in presenting the gospel to them
His ministry of words was accompanied by the miraculous works of healings and exorcisms and people **paid attention** to him

And people were saved as the “paid attention” in verse 6 means to “pay attention and to respond accordingly”

Then in **verse 7** we read that “many who were paralyzed or lame were healed”

And just as in the case of the beggar who had been lame from birth, healing here has the connotation not only of physical healing but of spiritual healing – Luke is using a kind of shorthand for both

People were not only attentive to Philip’s preaching but were acting on what he told them

And people were **rejoicing** as we see in **verse 8**

The good news of Jesus Christ proved to be **effective** as Philip preached it to these traditional enemies of the Jews and where the gospel is effective **joy** is also found

We need to be sure to recognize that the Samaritans’ belief was because of Philip’s preaching the Word of God and not because of the miraculous signs that he did

The signs were simply used to validate his message and his mission – they were **confirming signs**

The signs also had another effect which we will see in just a bit but Luke emphasizes the saving aspect of the Word

In **verse 4** we see those who were scattered went about preaching the word

In **verse 5** Philip proclaimed to them the Christ

In **verse 6** the Samaritans paid attention to what was being said by Philip

Then looking forward to **verse 12** Luke makes clear the Samaritans believed Philip as he preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ

And lastly in **verse 14** we see that the Samaritans had received the word of God

Luke is clearly making known that salvation came about because of the preaching of the Word and not because of the miracles –

And actually, the miracles served to cause a great deal of trouble for one man as we will soon see

But in the dispersion we see God’s sovereign hand as he sent his church out to witness and Satan suffered another defeat as the church maintained and even expanded her effectiveness

Application

God often brings what looks like disaster into the life of his church in order to bring about his purposes As I have often said, our perspective is far too limited to truly know whether a thing is good or bad We only know whether a thing is pleasant or unpleasant in the moment

When difficulties and apparent setbacks come into our lives and into the life of the church we have opportunity to discover whether we truly believe what we're taught in **Romans 8:28** that all things work together for good for those who are called according to God's purpose

Whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, whether times seem good or bad, we must be committed to keeping our commission before us and to persevere in carrying out Christ's mission on the earth in the sure and certain knowledge that God is in control of it all so that we too might keep from becoming compromised in our effectiveness

III. Unity

If you will indulge me I am going to skip to verse 14 and discuss how the church was able to also preserve her **unity** during this time

We will then come back to the account of Simon and what to make of him

Look with me at **verses 14-17**

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

What we have before us in these verses is another case of God delaying the coming of the Holy Spirit God purposed this delay in order to preserve the **unity** of the church and the **integrity** of the church's cross-cultural evangelistic mission

Potential division

Just think what might have happened had the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit instantaneously at the time of their salvation as we do today

As we have seen the Jews and the Samaritans had been at odds for centuries and this animosity extended into their worship practices

The Jews, as we know, worshipped in Jerusalem while the Samaritans worshipped at Mt. Gerizim and they were both looking for a different kind of Messiah to arrive

We see this division illustrated for us in the account of Jesus and the woman at the well in **John 4**

Considering the gulf that existed between the Jews and Samaritans it's entirely possible that the two groups might have never joined together

Thus we could have seen a permanent division form in the fledgling church

There would also have likely been questions regarding the validity of the Samaritan conversions had the apostles not been personally involved

Also, Peter clearly was given the privilege of initially opening the doors of heaven to all people groups in **Matthew 16:9**

We have already seen Peter personally involved in the salvation of the Jews at Pentecost and now the Samaritans and we will see later on that he is the first to bring in the Gentiles in the account of the Roman centurion, Cornelius

So, in spite of extreme persecution which led to dispersion, the church has maintained her **evangelistic effectiveness** in reaching the lost with the gospel message and has also maintained her **unity** as the Samaritans are welcomed into the fold in spite of their historical and cultural differences

And in **verse 25** we see that the apostles as they headed back to Jerusalem continued to preach the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans while on their way – the door had clearly been opened The Holy Spirit was making bold strides in taking the gospel beyond the Jews to all the world even as the church was mainly doing so at this time because of persecution

Application

While we need to be **very protective of doctrinal purity** we also need to **seek unity** with our brothers and sisters in Christ – **even when they think differently about some things than we do**

Just as each local church is made up of diverse people with various gifts so too is the universal church Not every church will dress like we dress, use the same version of the Bible that we use, or enjoy the same style of worship music that we do

But we need to be very careful to distinguish between what is “right” and what is a “preference”

There is a huge difference between those two concepts and much of what we do here at Brick is based on our preferences and we need to allow for others to express their preferences as well

Diversity in the church is necessary for effectiveness because the people we are trying to reach and serve are diverse

We need to ‘major on the majors and minor on the minors’ while seeking to foster and preserve the unity of the church

IV. Purity

This brings us to the matter of Simon the Sorcerer who was a Samaritan and an apparent convert to Christianity

it also brings up the issue of being vigilant to maintain **purity** in the church

Let’s look at **verse 9-13** where Luke introduces us to Simon

But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

First, we see that Simon practiced what Luke refers to as “magic” and apparently had for some time

What Luke refers to here is what we would call “witchcraft” or “sorcery” and Simon was presumably harnessing supernatural means or powers to perform various signs and wonders

In other words, Simon’s magic was engaged in practicing the occult arts which were likely demonic in origin and power

We see in Exodus that it isn't impossible for Satan to perform counterfeit miracles that mimic what God is doing as Pharaoh's sorcerers copied the signs God had given to Moses

Of course, miracles attract attention and the people were amazed by the things Simon was able to do He was **famous and influential** but he was also **self-serving** and he claimed to be "somebody great" And the people bought it hook, line, and sinker as they said not only that he had the power of God but that he actually **was** the power of God

We can't help but contrast Simon's behavior with Philip's

Simon was self-promoting and caused the people to esteem him as a god

He performed his magic for profit and for power and he enjoyed his fame

Whereas Philip was merely the conduit for God's miracles which were performed to validate the gospel

Then everything changed for Simon as Luke reports in **verse 12**

But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Notice some distinctions in how the people responded to Simon and Philip

The people were amazed by Simon and held him up as something great because of his magic

But they **believed** Philip – not because of his miracles but – **as he preached the good news**

It was the message and not the miracles that convinced the people to believe

And we see that their belief resulted in their salvation as men and women submitted to Christ in believer's baptism

Was Simon saved?

Verse 13 is controversial in that a plain reading of it would seem to indicate that Simon was also saved Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

It's hard to argue with the blunt statement, "Even Simon believed"

Philip and the other believers seem to have been convinced that Simon's profession of belief was genuine since they allowed him to be baptized

But the passage is controversial and for the reasons I will show you, I am of the opinion that Simon's belief was not "saving" belief but something else entirely

I need to hasten to say that this isn't an issue about which one can be dogmatic

In fact, Simon's salvation was a question that was presented in one of my college classes and it resulted in quite a lively debate between godly men and women seeking to understand the text

So let's look at the evidence and if you come out of the sermon believing Simon truly was a believer I won't hold it against you and I hope you won't hold my opinion that he was not against me

Simon expressed belief and was baptized so there was obviously no indication that his belief was false

Luke also reports that Simon "continued with Philip" which means he followed Philip around

But I want you to notice the difference between Simon and the others who believed

The others believe because of Philip's preaching whereas Luke reports that Simon was amazed by the great miracles that Philip was performing

It seems that a sorcerer met someone whose power was even greater than his own and he was enthralled and was perhaps following Philip to discover the source of the miracles

It seems to be apparent from Luke's reporting that Simon was more drawn to the miracles than he was the message leading naturally to the question of what exactly it was that Simon professed to believe This thought is further confirmed when we pick up Simon's account again in **verses 18-19**

Peter and John have arrived in Samaria and Simon witnessed them bestow the Holy Spirit to them by laying their hands on them – notice his reaction to this revelation

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

What the apostles did knocked Simon's socks off!

He just had to have the power that they displayed for himself so he offered to buy it

Obviously, he was making what he saw as a business transaction that would add to his bag of tricks and enhance his reputation and no doubt his marketability as a sorcerer

Simon was in it for the money, the power, and the fame just as he had always been

Rather embarrassingly for Simon his name has become synonymous with this kind of behavior as "simony" is the practice of buying or selling of ecclesiastical appointments or the profiting from sacred things

Notice also that the text doesn't say that Simon perceived that he **received** the Holy Spirit through the laying on of the apostles' hands but that he "saw that it was **given**"

Apparently, he only noticed how others received the Spirit

And yet he doesn't ask for the Holy Spirit for himself – just the power to give the Holy Spirit to others

Next, we need to look at Peter's response to Simon's request in **verses 20-23**

But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."

Peter's reply is hardly one that we would expect if Peter were talking to a fellow believer

With this response Peter actually expresses that Simon and his money should go down to eternal destruction in hell – that's the literal meaning of "perish"

And Peter says that Simon's problem goes to the most basic levels of his mind and his heart

He tells Simon that his thinking was wrong because he thought he could buy the gift of God with money

And he tells him that he has no part in this matter because his heart was not right before God

For a person to be told that they have no part or lot in the matter of salvation means that they are lost And Peter seems to clearly proclaim that Simon's heart was unregenerate and he calls on him to repent before God

Then in **verse 23** Peter says that Simon is in "the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity"

To be in the "bond" of something is to be enslaved

While a person remains unsaved Scripture tells us that they are in bondage to sin but that believers are freed from that bondage and are slaves to Christ

So, if Simon is truly still in bondage to iniquity as Peter claims it would seem that he could not at that time have been a saved individual because that isn't a state fitting to a believer

And yet, Peter extends the opportunity for redemption if Simon will only pray for forgiveness

But look at Simon's response in **verse 24**

"Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Once again, Simon showed deference to those he saw as more powerful or more in control of the spiritual arts than he himself was

Sadly, Simon doesn't seem even now to desire the gift of salvation

He not only doesn't pray as Peter instructed him to do but he only asks Peter to pray that he might be spared the outcome Peter predicted for him

Like I said, we can't be dogmatic about either position regarding Simon's salvation but the evidence seems to show that he likely was an unbeliever at the time of this report

The church was growing rapidly and undoubtedly the apostles and the other believers were thrilled and excited as each convert was added to their number

But they were still careful to maintain the **purity** of the church

Application

We need to always remember that there is an eternal difference in what one professes to believe While verse 13 clearly says that Simon believed it appears that his belief was not saving belief

Simon may have believed only in an intellectual sense as many people have since then

But there is a vast difference between intellectual assent, or desire, or even remorse and surrender

And belief that saves requires full and complete surrender to the regenerating power of the shed blood of Jesus Christ

Simon was convincing enough in his testimony to procure baptism

But it's possible to be baptized and still remain unsaved

And it's possible to become a member of a local church and still be an unbeliever

That's why we stress the need to be saved and the importance of being a member of the universal Church or the "big C" church before one seeks to be a member of our local church

And that's why we make every effort through New Member Classes and interviews with the pastor and elders to try to determine a person's status regarding salvation

The purity of the church is crucial and we believe that we must do everything possible to maintain it

That means we must take all necessary precautions as people join and undertake the necessary discipline when a member is found to be in unrepentant sin

Conclusion

Persecution is never pleasant but it is often profitable

God often sends difficulties our way in order to try us or to refine us or to grow us as we conform to the image of his Son

Sometimes God must even use persecution to get us to do the things we might not otherwise do

Stephen's martyrdom was horrible as was the persecution that his martyrdom spawned

But the dispersion was used by God to further his purpose in sending the gospel to the Gentile world

The church could have been devastated by these events

They might have scattered like the followers of Judas and Theudas and the movement could have come to nothing in fulfillment of Gamaliel's prediction

The church could have become splintered and combative within its own ranks had the natural distrust and animosity of between the Jews and Samaritans been allowed to continue within the church

Or the church could have compromised its purity simply for the sake of security of numbers

In the end, the church was scattered but not compromised as they maintained their effectiveness in ministry, their unity in Christ, and their purity within their ranks

Brick Church has been through difficulties in the past and may well experience them again

We need to follow the example of the early church as we stay on mission in continuing Christ's ministry here at the crossroads and beyond

Let's pray