

The Church Growth Movement
Acts 8:1-25

Psalm 44:1-22

Romans 8:28-39

Responsive Colossians 3:12-17

Turn with me this morning to Acts chapter 8. Last week we studied through chapter 6 and 7 and we saw the account of Stephen, who was one of 7 men chosen to help in the distribution of goods to the needy for it would seem that as the congregation in Jerusalem grew, as more and more people came to believe it was getting harder to properly manage the giving of help to the widows, and the poor and as we saw in chapter 6 there were some who were being over looked.

Then in chapter 7, we see Stephen is brought before the council for he did not merely set tables and distribute goods, but also contributed in the ministry of the gospel, even as we can see in chapter 6, God also gave him gifts and he performed great wonders and signs among the people. One of the big take aways from last weeks message was the simple fact that our service to God is not some static thing, the assembly of God is not some union shop where you do your part and no other. No, it is dynamic, and while God has given each of us gifts to use to edify the body, and we each fulfill some role, that does not mean that we do not also fulfill other roles. Like in the example of Stephen, we each may have a role within the local body but we should all still be preaching and teaching the gospel when we are given the opportunity.

And this likewise extends into other gifts as well, for some are given to be prayer warriors, who are faithful and ever seeking to pray for one another...and while some may be driven and ever mindful of such that does not mean that we don't leave it all to them, for we also are to pray for one another. The same can be said for hospitality, sure some are gifted with a heart and openness toward others, but again...this doesn't mean that as Christians we are to be cut off from one another and live as islands, no, we are to be involved in each others lives, living a life that reflects Christ, growing in faith together which is not something that we do as individuals, but rather as members of one body. As Christians we should be seeking where we may minister, be open to the opportunities that God gives us out of love for our savior and out of love for one another.

The other take away from last week, which we will be digging into more this week is God's use of trials and persecution to grow his church. We are now into the 8th chapter of the book of Acts, and we can see already that there has been some moments of trial in the early church but it does not stop the spreading of the gospel and the growth of the church. And we will see in our text this morning one way that God uses the persecution that came upon the early church as a means to spread the gospel. So let us start out by reading chapter 8. (read Acts 8:1-25)

As we have seen, persecution has caused the people to flee and to scatter, but while doing so the take the gospel ministry with them and witness every where they went fulfilling what Jesus told them in chapter 1, where he said, "Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him saying, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? And he said to them, it is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father has put in his own authority. BUT, you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

The Gospel spread into the various regions around Jerusalem was driven and caused by God. He allowed this persecution to come upon the people for this purpose. It is a natural tendency for us humans to gather into tribes, to surround ourselves with those of like mindedness....we see a great example of that with the story of the tower of Babel, and God stepped in there as well causing divisions among the people in language, causing them to break away, and split up because they were becoming haughty and arrogant. But here we see that God has brought about an event that also causes people to split apart, but in this case he does so not out of a punishment, but so the word of God would be brought to others. Think on that for a minute...without Saul, and this great persecution he brought in Jerusalem, the gospel would not have spread as quickly, it would have remained there centralized in Jerusalem and would have likely remained largely a Jewish faith.

And again we see something that Satan through fallen man means for evil, who's intention is to thwart God, to stop the gospel message only serves to bolster and further its growth. For even those who did not escape, even those who were imprisoned or killed, it only worked to solidify their faith. Bringing a legitimacy to the claims, for they were willing to die for what they believed. In this account that Luke writes here, he sets up this introduction to a pattern of events that will be repeated, and is repeated throughout the life of the church, and the ministry of the Apostles. That is, rejection in one place becomes an opportunity for people elsewhere to receive the gospel and become a part of God's family. We see again, as we see over and over throughout all of scripture, God and the gospel are not defeated by human opposition, no matter how evil, or how violent and intense. This very thing that was intended to wipe out the early church, only served in its expansion and wider impact.

I read an interesting thing about Saul in this account of Stephen, that I think makes a lot of sense. Previously when I would read this account, I always saw Saul as sort of a newbie, a lower level member of this group that stoned Stephen, but the evidence and the context of this chapter shows that Saul here, was not some intern, or underling...but was likely the leader of this group. The act of the men of the Sanhedrin laying their clothes at his feet suggests that he was the leader in this opposition to Stephen, and was likely one of the main ones who was disputing with Stephen in the Synagogue. And really this makes sense even by Paul's own admission, in chapter 22 he gives an account he says, "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. I persecuted the Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished."

He was not a mere bystander, but was one of the driving forces of persecution....he was the right hand of judgment sent out by the High Council to hunt down, and punish any who were identifying as Christ followers. The community life that was set up in the early chapters of Acts, where each was provided for according to their needs, they gathered together in homes, they shared meals, and this is where Saul sought them, for it says that he entered every house, and dragged out the men and the women committing them to prison. They were not even safe within their own homes, which is why they fled.

As David Peterson wrote in his commentary, “The community life which found its strength in house meetings and spreading its influence from that joyful and caring context was not systematically dismantled. Saul is portrayed as one who breaks and enters, violently dragging the believers off to prison and securing the death of some. Just think of the astonishing reality here. Saul, a Jew, one of the descendants of Abraham to whom God led out of Egypt, who God gave prophets, and laws and ceremonies, to teach of himself, to point to the coming Messiah is here, now arresting and having put to death the very followers of the Messiah. We often think of persecution coming from the outside, coming from the world, but many times it comes in underneath the veil of religion.

So many things call itself of God, that are not of God....especially when we see the fruits which seek to harm those who are of God. Saul and the Sanhedrin believed that they were being zealous for God, yet it was God's people they were persecuting. In their blindness, and disbelief they did not see Christ and his followers as those who have erred and who only needed to be instructed...but instead saw them as a threat, considered them impostors and believed that they needed to be eliminated. But as we see, it was God's design to spread the gospel, to grow the church beyond the borders of Jerusalem. Which is where we find Philip, the 2nd person that Luke mentions being one of the chosen 7 in chapter 6.

We find here that Phillip fled to Samaria, and it was there that he preached, and began his role as an evangelist. But as we see in our text this morning his time in Samaria was not without its own problem as well. There was Simon the Sorcerer who was captivated by the miracles performed by Phillip and verse 13 says that he also believed and was baptized. But later we see that when the Apostles arrive, and the Holy Spirit comes upon the Samaritans who believe, that Simon seeks to gain that power himself, revealing that his true intention was not belief, but as a means to gain this power. Simon was a man who himself was claiming to be someone with great power and had built up for himself a large following, as it says in verse 10, from the least of them to the greatest of them saying This man is the great power of God.

After this account here in Acts we no longer see a mention of Simon, but a second century Christian author named Justin Martyr who was a Samaritan himself, represents Simon in his writings as one being empowered by demons to perform magic, and is later recorded to be honored in Rome as a god. Another Writer, Irenaeus, described him as the founder of the sect of the Simonians, and as one from whom all sorts of Gnostic heresies derived their origin. It is unknown in scripture where Simon ends up, but his story has echoes of that like the rich young ruler. Who wanting to receive the gifts and the promises of the Spirit, yet was unable to part with his worldly goods. Peter confronts Simon, who is looking to buy the power of the Holy Spirit, he sees it as something that can serve him to further his own power and following, and Peter tells him in verse 21, “You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For you see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.

And just as the rich young ruler, when told he must sell all of his goods and to follow Christ goes away distraught, and saddened...Simon responds in kind and says, Pray to the Lord that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me.” I don't think that this was a confession of faith, but rather it was a merely a recognition that there was another power which he had no control over and he was hedging his bets. We see an example in Simon, as one who made a claim to faith, but instead of it being genuine was instead using it for his own gain, was seeking to add to his own power.

Even in the early church they had this issue, one which seems to plague the faith today. There are many who use this faith for their own gain, whether it be for financial gain, or to feed ones own pride, or even political gain. And in the end when these desires are exposed, it exposes the person as one who is false, a deceiver, seeking only their own gain. The heap up around themselves followers, in Simon's case it was through sorcery and a show of power, but today it is by flowery, and manipulative words. It is not any less destructive, in fact is probably more destructive then what Saul was doing to the church. For these liars and thieves come in undetected, and lead people astray through soft words and deception, where Saul bound men and women in chains and killed the body, a false prophet, and teacher binds them in lies and false hopes killing their soul.

If there is one thing that we should take away from this account of Simon it is that a mere claim of belief does not make one a believer. It is the heart, the claim must come from a heart that is searching and looking to please God, not a heart that is seeking to protect or serve itself. That is why the heart must first be changed, one must first be made able to believe before one truly will believe. Saul believed in God, and then proceeded to persecute and kill God's people. Was him claim to some faith valid before? Of course not, that is why it took God to intervene when he was heading to Damascus to gather up Christians. Saul believed in God, even what he was doing he did in the name of God believing that he was doing Gods work. Likewise it is the same for each and every one of us, without God's intervention, even that which we believe we are doing for good, is nothing more then condemning us. For without Christ, all good works are self serving, stained by our pride...as scripture puts it.. as filthy rags.

There is none good, no, not one. Believing that there is a God will not save your soul, unless God has first intervened and given you a new heart and opened your eyes and ears to see and hear him. So that brings up the question, how do you know that you truly believe? Well, the answer is, it simply comes by the Holy Spirit. The spirit ministers to you, it gives you the hunger for the word, a thirst after Christ. Convicts you of sin, quiets your soul in troubles, drives you to good works, not to gain merit or recognition...but because you love God, and you love one another. The trials, the hardships, that we face are opportunities for the spirit to work in us to show christian love toward each other. To bless, and be blessed by one another. The example we see in Acts, 4 of the people coming together, should not be a rare circumstance..but should be the standard of Christian operation.

Even in our passage this morning, we see that the church didn't change....they were still meeting in their homes, still offering up meals, still witnessing to one another even while Saul was breaking down doors and dragging them off to prison. God's church does not falter, God's people do not lose faith, even those who fled Jerusalem didn't hide, they continued to minister, to teach, and brought the gospel with them where ever they went, and God was pleased to use it to bring the gentiles into his kingdom. Think of that, if it wasn't for the persecution that drove people out of Jerusalem, who knows if the word would have ever spread out to the gentiles. God knows what he is doing, and even the things that we perceive as awful, God is working for his good pleasure.

And I think that is the main lesson here, and understanding persecution through the lens of God's sovereignty gives an entirely new perspective on the world. It does not matter how much mankind will deny, or even seek to destroy the things of God, the faithful will stand for it is God working in them to do so. And even that which others have meant for evil, God uses for his good purpose.

As we read this morning in Psalm's and in Romans, "For your sake we are killed all day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter." What a profound statement, even our death it serves God's purpose. But as Paul wrote, rejoice for "even in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us! For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, no angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

What comforting words, that there is nothing here on earth, or heaven above that will separate us from God. We are united in him through Christ, we may rest knowing that we are in his Sovereign hand, and there is nothing that can snatch us out of it.