

"The Saints Scatter; The Gospel Spreads"

How many of you realize, when it comes to studying the bible; context is key? We have to be very careful that we don't take one part, apart from the whole so as to start developing our own extra biblical doctrines.

I bring that up because we have a very precious promise penned by the prophet Isaiah that says; *"No weapon formed against you shall prosper, And every tongue which rises against you in judgment You shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, And their righteousness is from Me," Says the Lord.*"¹ What a beautiful promise. But what does it mean? Does it mean that as a child of God, a servant of the Lord, you're essentially bullet proof? That no harm can befall you & that everyone who would do you harm will ultimately fall before you? ... It's a bit of a "Yes & No" scenario, isn't it?

We would by no means seek to suggest that Christians are immune from physical harm or even harsh words from the "tongue which rises against" us. We find both historically & scripturally that's simply not true. Yet we also rest in the sovereignty of a loving God who has our eternal good & His eternal glory at heart.

So that, there are times when God will sovereignly see fit to physically deliver us from harm, from disease or even death. Yet there are other times when God fearing, God loving people are subject to oppression, affliction, persecution &/or death. Such was the case for Stephen at the end of Acts Ch 7. As he simply shared the truth concerning God's word, God's ways, the Spirit of God & the Son of God, the religious leaders became infuriated w/him... They gnashed their teeth in rage against him, eventually stopped their ears & charged at him w/a mob mentality, threw him out of the city & violently put him to death by pelting him w/rocks (the stoned him).

Question; did they prosper against him? Sort of depends on your perspective doesn't it? If you're living in the *light* of this world, & for the *things* of this world... than yes. If you're able to see through the lens of eternity & the promises we've been given scripturally; no way.

Here's the thing. Though the word of God touches the tangible, its primary concern is spiritual, it's eternal. So that when we read, "No weapon formed against you shall prosper" in the O.T., we find that same principle underscored in the N.T. like this; (You're in Romans 8, look at Vs 31-39).

Are you following me? No weapon, (famine, distress, persecution, tribulation) formed against you will prosper. Not ultimately, not eternally because it can't separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

¹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Is 54:17). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Or as Paul wrote a little earlier in this Ch, *"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."*²& That's exactly what we'll see in Acts Ch 8.

It's a turning point; not only in the book of Acts but in reality, throughout the entirety of our bible up to this point. There is a sense (a very general sense) in which you could say that from Acts Ch 7, all the way back to the beginning of your bible, that the focus has been on God's great work in & through the nation of Israel. Again; I want to be very careful to articulate that I'm speaking *in general*, there are obvious exceptions along the way & we know that God's plan has always been to go *beyond* Israel unto the uttermost parts of the earth. But that vision was never really aggressively carried forth into practice until the transition that takes place in Acts Ch 8... Something changes here, there's a shift that takes place.

& What changes is the fact that the Christians are scattered from Jerusalem due to the outbreak of persecution that was triggered by the martyrdom of Stephen. & What we're going to discover is that Saul (the embodiment of this persecution) thought he was really doing God a favor by trying to put out the fire of Christianity in Jerusalem. But what he did was trigger an evangelistic campaign as believers took the gospel to every place they fled. Look at Vs 1.

Vs 1

As you probably know, the word of God is inspired, inerrant & infallible. However, the Ch breaks are not ☺. They were inserted along the way to help us navigate a little easier. This Vs belongs w/the previous section.

We were introduced to this young man (Saul) back in Vs 58 of Ch 7. As the men were stoning Stephen, they laid their coats down at Saul's feet. Here we discover that he wasn't simply an innocent bystander, he was (the word is) "consenting" to his death. This was his attitude toward what was happening. The word means "to approve" or "to be pleased with". Don't envision Saul (or as we'll come to know him by his Roman name "Paul" who will eventually be just as radical [if not more so] *for* Jesus as he was *against* Him) as a reluctant persecutor. Kind of going along w/it but not real sure of it. He took pleasure in it, this was like blood in the water & he's a shark (kind of an atmosphere).

We don't have time to develop his character today but suffice it to say he was essentially a terrorist against the church.

² *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Ro 8:28). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

He was the tip of the spearhead of the persecution that broke out, being exceedingly more zealous than his contemporaries to put an end to this new sect of Jesus followers that had arisen. Jesus had said, *"They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service."*³ This was Saul, so convinced that Christians were blasphemers that he thought he was offering God a service in having them put to death. So the more he killed, the greater work he was doing... this was his mindset.

So violent against the church was he that when he got saved, we read in Acts Ch 9, *"Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified."*⁴ He pursued and had Christians killed w/a vehemence.

That's why we read here that, "At that time", meaning this event triggered the outpouring of persecution. It was marked by this day, "a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem;"

Now; I want you to think about something here. Saul thought he was doing God a service by persecuting Christians. Sometimes I think we can be guilty of thinking we're doing God's work when we come down on people, or point out problems in people in our "stand for righteousness". But imagine the shock that Paul must've gone through when on that road to Damascus he finally realized that all the time he thought he was doing God a favor, he was actually persecuting His Son... I'm not saying, "Don't stand for righteousness". I'm saying, be careful. When you feel like going "from house to house" pointing out sinners, finding fault w/preachers... we can be radical, but sometimes we're radically wrong.

Ok; cause & effect. Cause, "great persecution". Effect, the church (minus the apostles) was "scattered throughout all the regions of Judea & Samaria." Jesus had said, *"When they persecute you in this city, flee to another."*⁵ So that's what they did. But check it out, it may've seemed (from the practical perspective) that they were scattered just randomly, seeking safety. (& I'm getting a bit ahead of myself here). But from a spiritual perspective, God was using this strategically as a means to spread the gospel.

This word "scattered", can also be translated "sown" or "distributed" as if a sower were sowing seed. Now that doesn't mean that God *caused* the persecution, but it's another example of how all things work together for good to those who love God.

³ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Jn 16:2]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁴ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Ac 9:31]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁵ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Mt 10:23]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

He was able to take what the persecutors were meaning for evil against them & use it for good to spread the gospel.

& Wherever *you* are, you should see yourself as having been “sown” there by God that you might bring forth fruit & share His love & the truth of the gospel w/those around you. Again, God didn’t cause this, but He used it for His glory. & God can & will at times use pressing circumstances to “shake us” out of our comfort zone & get us where He wants us to be... We say this all the time around here; we are not our own. We’ve been bought at a price (the shed blood of J.C.) & we belong to Him.

We all like to be comfortable, but maybe it’s a job transfer, a layoff, you were fired, a relationship changed, doors are closing, but God is using it to get you moving. If it were up to us we’d stay put, but God wants to use you in a different place, another environment, & sometimes it’s being shaken from the nest that gets us moving.

Vs 2

Btw I wanna say that sometimes we can have the impression that when a loved one dies that we shouldn’t really grieve or be overly sad because after all, they’re w/the Lord. But we need to realize that death brings separation & separation causes grief & that’s ok. It’s be expected. Here we see that devout men, carried Stephen to his burial & made great lamentation over him.

W/the mention of “devout” men, that may mean that they weren’t necessarily believers. They may’ve been greatly respected men who were still practicing Judaism, but not necessarily Christian, simply that they didn’t agree w/the way the council handled the situation. The idea here is that not every Jew was an enemy of Christianity. But here’s what I would say, grieving upon the death of a loved one or a friend is normal. However, we don’t sorrow as those who have no hope. As Paul the apostle wrote, *“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”*⁶ He’s speaking of the reunion of the saints at the return of Jesus. If we’re alive & remain at the coming of Jesus, then all those whom you’ve known who’ve gone before you to be w/Jesus, you will see again. So the separation that happens among believers is temporary at best. We will be together forever in Christ.

Vs 3-4

You see? What the enemy was using to destroy, God was using for good, to propel the preaching of the word of God & the gospel of J.C.

But we're seeing the escalation of the situation. "As for Saul, he made (the word is) 'havoc' of the church." That word speaks of a boar, ravaging a vineyard, or a wild animal tearing at its prey's raw flesh. *The idea is that he was doing everything w/in his power to destroy the church of J.C. Going from house to house (finding where the church was gathering, whose house was the home fellowship in) & dragging men & women out of it, throwing them in prison & seeking the death penalty whenever possible.*

He was an equal opportunist persecutor, men, women, didn't matter. If you loved Jesus you were on his list. Families were separated, lives were shattered, he couldn't have cared less. He was enraged against the church. As he wrote to the Galatians, *"For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it."*⁷ The word "havoc" is in the imperfect tense. Meaning that he refused to quit, he was ravaging the church & he kept ravaging the church.

Listen, I'm telling you, you might wonder, "Could God ever forgive me," or "Is it possible for even ___ to be saved"? The answer is "Yes", if this guy could be saved, anyone can be saved. Jesus didn't come to call the righteous, but the sinner to repentance & as such we all qualify.

Vs 4 gives us the result, people were scattered. Persecution was used by God to plant believers all over the place, which only served to spread the message. These guys weren't "professional preachers" or "Evangelists", they were everyday folks like you & me who simply shared God's word & what Jesus had done in their lives when they were conversating w/people. *You can do this, it's what we're called to do. It doesn't matter where you are, they were doing it in Jerusalem, when they fled to Judea they shared there to! Listen, it may shock you to realize; most people don't come to Christ through the means of a "professional preacher".* They come to Jesus because a friend was sharing w/them, or talking to them, because of folks like you & me, let your light so shine, don't be ashamed of the gospel, for it's the power of God unto salvation for all who believe...

Vs 5-8

Lamentation in Jerusalem, joy & celebration in Samaria! Listen, when Jesus sets you free, it brings joy to your life. Who was Philip? He was one of the 7 chosen to serve tables back in Acts Ch 6. Like Stephen, he wasn't an apostle, an elder in the church... just a guy who loved Jesus & was willing to serve. Being faithful in the small things God used him in radical ways.

Again, you don't have to be a spiritual leader for God to use you in great ways!

⁷ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Ga 1:13]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Just be faithful, serve Him right where you are & He'll do incredible things through your life. Philip becomes the 1st evangelist in the sense of taking the message beyond Jerusalem. The Jews were rejecting Jesus, the Samaritans were accepting Him in droves!

Btw, this is what I want you to see primarily in this section. He, "preached Christ". Listen, we could preach on social transformation, gender identification or any # of important topics, but God has called us to preach Jesus...

Paul was about as scholarly as they came. Yet when he wrote to the Corinthians he said, *"And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."*⁸ Why? Because social transformation, gender identification or any other topic that pertains to humanity finds its solution, finds its resolve in Christ. We need Jesus.

Now; God was doing a radical work in Samaria (Btw the Samaritans & Jews were generally divided, there was ethnic & racial division there) but again, Jesus breaks down barriers. This is the area that 600 yrs earlier was conquered by the Assyrians & all the wealthy & middle class Jews were deported & a pagan people were moved in. They intermarried w/the lowest class of Jews left in the region & that's how the Samaritans were formed. There was a deep-seated prejudice between Jews & Samaritans. These are the people that James & John offered to call down fire upon for Jesus, but Jesus rebuked them & said, "The Son of Man didn't come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

What's kind of neat is to consider the fact that this was the same region that a few yrs earlier, Jesus had visited a woman at a well here who in turn brought out a bunch of men from the city & Jesus ministered to them. He'd kind of gone before Philip here, prepared the way. I don't know, maybe Philip led w/that encounter, or shared the parable of the Good Samaritan, either way people were being saved, miracles were happening, bridges were being built & there was great joy in the city.

Vs 9-13

Simon the sorcerer contrasted w/Philip the Evangelist. Simon worked illusions, he practiced some sort of occultic rituals & used it to magnify, glorify himself. He claimed to be "the power of God." Philip worked miracles; but magnified & preached Jesus. Here's what I want you to see, what validates someone's ministry isn't the miracles, it's the message.

⁸ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [1 Co 2:1-2]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Who are they magnifying, who are they glorifying? People were amazed at Simon's magic, but their lives were transformed & they were set free through Philip's ministry as he led them to faith in Jesus.

& When they believed (notice) they were baptized, men & women. They proclaimed their faith publicly, identified w/the death & resurrection of J.C. The old life having passed away, they were now walking in the newness of life in Christ. It was an outward demonstration of their inward transformation.

Vs 13 tells us that Simon himself also believed & was baptized, then he followed Philip around just being blown away, seeing all the miracles. The question comes up, was his faith sincere? At this point we don't know (& ultimately, I hesitate to affirm that we *can* know) because the bible doesn't just flat out say. But signs point to "No" & we'll see why.

One thing I want you to realize is that the word "believe" in Vs 13 doesn't always indicate a life changing transformation. For instance; James said, *"You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!"*⁹ Demons believe; but they're not saved. So a simple mental acknowledgment, or intellectual consent to something doesn't necessarily indicate salvation. Plenty of people will miss heaven by 18". The distance from their head to their heart... This is why the bible exhorts us, *"Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure,"*¹⁰ Paul said, *"Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves."*¹¹ You say, "Well, how do I do that?" There are a few ways (love of the brethren, being able to acknowledge Jesus as Lord from a place of sincerity & truth from the heart), but James would say, "What's happening in your life?"

Has there been any change? Any fruit, are there any works that back what you believe? You show me your faith w/out your works, I'll show you my faith by my works. How are you serving, in what way am I advancing God's agenda? I'm definitely not saved by works, but saving faith will go to work in my life, does that make sense? As the body w/out the spirit is dead, so faith w/out works is a dead (non-life giving) faith. Let's read on.

Vs 14-17

That's interesting isn't it? They believed, were born again & baptized, but there was another unction of the Spirit still available that they hadn't received. We've spoken of this before (don't have time now).

⁹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [Jas 2:19]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

¹⁰ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [2 Pe 1:10]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

¹¹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). [2 Co 13:5]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

The disciples believed, were born again, but Jesus promised them power when the Holy Spirit had come upon them which they received on the Day of Pentecost. The bottom line is this, we want all that God has for us & until we see Jesus face to face there's more. Every day we do well to seek a fresh filling of His Spirit.

But this particular event was important because all the animosity previously shared between these 2 groups could've caused a Samaritan denomination & a Jewish denomination. But God brought Peter & John down, formally building the bridge, breaking down the barriers, one God, one faith, one church in Christ. Neither Samaritan, Jew, black, white, male, female, slave nor free. We are all 1 in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Vs 18-20

You see, these are where the question marks start coming up around Simon. #1 The price has been paid at the cross, you don't purchase the gift of God, you receive it by grace through faith. #2 "Your money *perish w/you...*" Is pretty harsh language if you're talking to a child of God... Look at Vs 21

Vs 21

"Your heart is not right in the sight of God", what's God always looking to? The heart.

Vs22-25

Some would say that Simon simply (as a new believer) slipped back into his old way of thinking, not unlike people do today, (people stumble & lie, or fall & wind up drunk etc) but that doesn't mean you're not saved, we all stumble. It's common for magicians to purchase tricks from one another & Simon was thinking along those lines... Others say, "No, the fruit of his life demonstrates that his heart was never transformed..." Again, I'm not sure that we can talk about Simon w/absolute certainty. But at this point it's not Simon we need to worry about. What's happening in *your* heart? Is *your heart* right in the sight of God? If not, repent, turn from your sin, believe on the Lord J.C. (from the heart) & *you too* will be saved...

Prayer Points:

God, we're grateful for Your grace, that You love us, that You've given Your Son for us that we might be washed clean of our sin & given new life in Him. We thank You that You are in control... even when we're shaken from our comfort zone. Help us to be faithful to share Your word, to proclaim Jesus to those around us, fill us w/Your Spirit...

Make your calling & election sure. Don't trust in going to church, in "being a good person", what you do or don't do. Trust in J.C. & what He's done for you upon the cross. Turn from your sin & receive life in Jesus' name.