

**"You Shall be My Witnesses...in All Judea and Samaria..." [Continued]**

Text: Acts 8:1-4

3) Now brethren, there is another critical piece of information given here, as well, that we definitely do not want to miss. You see, we might be tempted to say, "Well, that is great! Well done, Apostles! After all, the Apostles/Preachers/Elders/Evangelists (maybe deacons, and all, who are specifically called to an office of some sort) should be involved in such evangelism, but that is beyond the scope of the regular, lay person/Christian. Well, wait a minute here, brethren! Who is it that has spread out of Jerusalem and into all of Judea and Samaria? Who are the ones evangelizing here? Not the Apostles! Notice, in verse 1, "except the Apostles." The Apostles remained in Jerusalem, and continued on with the ministry there. God is continuing His work outward, through regular members of the church. Now, this would include Philip, a deacon, who travels into Samaria (as we will see next time, Lord willing), but a lot more than Philip is referenced here! Those who went everywhere preaching the Word, (indeed, including Philip) were regular church members!

In other words brethren, here we have a great example before us, showing that the responsibility of evangelism does not fall only on leaders in the church. Evangelism is the responsibility of all church members...men, women and young people alike! We are all called unto the glorious task of proclaiming the risen Christ, to our fallen world, brethren! Do you see that, here?

"And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him" (vs. 2). Here, inserted between two references to the persecution that was taking place, we are told of the burial of Stephen. Clearly, the martyrdom of Stephen, provoked this great persecution that had arisen, and rather than see his death as pointless (or a tragic blow against God's kingdom), we are meant to realize that God had ordained it for the very purpose of spreading His Kingdom beyond Jerusalem! In other words, Stephen served as greatly by his death, as he had in his life! Nothing was in vain here! Indeed, precious in the sight of God, is the death of His saints.

And furthermore, we witness the boldness of these devout men, who were willing to step out and claim the body of Stephen, at the exposure of their own Christian identity, and at a time,

when the great persecution was fomenting. This was a noble and honorable risk! And so, they collect Stephen's body, bury him, and give him a proper lamentation (Great lamentation and mourning, for a great and faithful man of God). Though it was very risky, they considered the honor of Stephen, as of more importance than their own lives. [Remember the recent example of Jabesh Gilead--1 Samuel 31]

"As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison" (vs. 3). Indeed, Saul led the charge in the great persecution, and he wanted all to know that, after he was converted. But little did he know, at this point, that he would be a key player, ordained by God to lead the way, in Phase 3, of Christ's glorious plan for His church. Isn't it ironic that Paul helps set the stage for phase 2 (he persecutes the church outward into all of Judea and Samaria), and he will lead the way (pave the path) in phase 3, when the Gospel spreads to the ends of the earth!

## **II. Concluding Thoughts and Applications**

1) Without glorifying our past sins, there are, indeed, times when we ought to expose our past acts of wickedness, as a means of leveling the playing field for all to be welcomed into the Kingdom, and as a means of glorifying the grace of God in Christ.

2) In Stephen, we are reminded that the death of God's saints, whatever the circumstance surrounding those deaths (painful or not, murdered or not...etc), is never in vain. [see James and Peter later]. One dies early on, another lives long...both glorify God, unto their appointed ministries. Stephen's death, pushes the church outward, beyond Jerusalem.

3) As difficult and as painful as persecution can be; though much sorrow and difficulty accompany persecution, let us never see it as a victory for the enemy or a defeat for Christ! God uses both, times of rest/peace, and times of persecution, to build His Kingdom. He is sovereign over the whole package of history! What we may fail to see, during the present pangs of persecution, is that God is actually spreading His Kingdom further, especially through the faithful testimony of His persecuted saints. Let us be ready to preach the Gospel, wherever we are *sent*! [Illustration: What happens when you attempt to flush out the heat of spicy food, by drinking water? The water only serves to spread the heat all throughout your mouth and throat]

4) Let us learn from the Apostle Paul, that there is hope for even the "chief of sinners!" That muslim, who is presently, violently persecuting the church of Christ, may just turn out to be

the one, who carries the Gospel to unknown parts of the earth! Pray for our enemies! The church's greatest enemies can become her greatest heroes, should Christ call them, by His irresistible grace!

AMEN!!!