

Purpose In Persecution.
Acts 8:1-8
Sunday morning, February 7, 2010.

I. Introduction to Saul.

- A. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, introduced us to the person of Saul at the end of Ch. 7. Here Saul is said to have kept the outer garments of the witnesses who would have been the first ones to throw stones at Stephen. Acts 7:58.
- B. Chapter 8 begins by telling us about a great persecution that broke out over the church in Jerusalem, and that this was in no small measure due to the efforts of Saul.
 - 1. Saul consented to Stephen's death
 - 2. Saul was instrumental in the deaths of many more. Acts 9:1 and 26:10.
 - 3. He subjected men and women to beatings. Acts 22:19.
 - 4. He put them in prison. Acts 8:3.
 - 5. He was exceedingly enraged against them. Acts 26:11.
 - 6. He compelled them to blaspheme, that is to deny Christ. Acts 26:11.
- C. Why does Luke introduce us here to the person of Saul, and not in Ch. 9 where Saul's conversion is recorded?
 - 1. It is because Chapter 8 marks the point where the gospel leaves Jerusalem after her leaders utterly and finally reject the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - 2. The stoning of Stephen and the great persecution that broke out over the church in Jerusalem are the mile markers of this turning point, where the gospel leaves Jerusalem, goes next to all Judea and to the Samaritans, and then makes its way to the gentiles.
 - 3. The Lord Jesus had indicated this order before His ascension: "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." Acts 1:8.
 - 4. Here Saul, unknown to himself, becomes the unwilling instrument in the hands of the Lord, to bring this progress in the spread of the gospel about.

Application:

In this we have an example of how the Lord's, and our enemies, can ultimately accomplish nothing other than the furthering of the eternal plans and gracious purposes of God. That ought to be a comfort to us in our distresses, and help us not to waste our sorrows. It ought to help us to humble ourselves under the mighty and able and wise hand of God, so that He may accomplish His gracious purposes in and through us.

II. The fallout of this persecution.

- A. In vs. 2 we read of the courage that possessed the believers in the face of persecution. "Devout men went and claimed the body of Stephen, and gave him an honorable burial, making a great lamentation over him."
 - 1. The disciples of John the Baptist had claimed his body after John was beheaded by Herod. Mark 5:29.
 - 2. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus claimed the body of the Lord Jesus Christ after his crucifixion. John 19:38-42.

3. Here devout men claim the body of Stephen, and they entrust it to the earth for safe-keeping until the day of resurrection. Such an event for a Christian ought to be marked by solemnity, simplicity, dignity, and faith.
 4. There was sorrow in this event, and there were expressions of sorrow, even many, and they were deeply felt. "They made great lamentation over him." And yet, as believers we sorrow not as those who have no hope. Alongside our sorrow there is hope, and there is peace and rest, and even joy as we anticipate the resurrection morning. We miss our loved ones, but we are willing to miss them, and to entrust them to our Lord.
- B. In vss. 1 and 4 we read that the believers of Jerusalem were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, and that where ever they went, they preached the word of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.
1. It is not surprising that they fled and preached the word of the Lord in the regions surrounding Jerusalem in the Jewish province of Judea. These folks were their own countrymen.
 2. What is surprising is that they, being Jews, went to the regions of Samaria.
 - Samaritans accepted the writings of Moses, but not the rest of the OT.
 - Samaritans worshipped, not in Jerusalem, but in Mt. Gerazim. Deut 11:29 and John 4:20.
 - Samaritans were open to many pagan ideas in their worship practices.
 - Samaritans expected a "latter days restorer" like unto Moses acc. to Deut. 18:15, but not a Messiah from the house of David.
 - Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. John 4:9. They viewed themselves as far superior to the Samaritans. The Lord Jesus had begun to break through this barrier as He had conversed with the Samaritan woman at the well, and as He had healed a Samaritan leper, one of ten, and the only one who returned to give Him thanks. Lk. 17:15.
 3. How is it possible then that Philip and his companions end up in Samaria preaching the gospel?
 4. It would appear that the Christians in Jerusalem found a whole new humility as a result of being persecuted. They now had first hand experience with being despised and rejected; being regarded as the scum of the earth. They knew what it was to lose houses and lands and possessions as they were reduced to refugees.
 5. Being treated as such by their own countrymen put the Samaritans in a whole new light for them, especially since they were willing to hear and to heed the message of the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ.

Application:

Do you have people like the Samaritans in your life? What will it take for you to find this new kind of humility? Sickness, adversity, enemies?

- C. A whole new joy, and a great joy, came to the city where the message of the gospel was heard and heeded.

Application:

It is still that way: The humble will hear and believe and rejoice. It is because the humble willingly put themselves under the benevolent dictatorship of King Jesus. In doing so they find life, and they find it more abundantly. Have you come to that place?