

## THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO SAMARIA

Acts 8:1-40

Key Verse: 8:4

“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”

Last week we studied about St. Stephen, who was martyred for his faith in Jesus. While standing falsely accused before the Sanhedrin, he was full of courage and spirit. Instead of defending himself, he taught the history of God to the Sanhedrin members. He challenged them to repent for not living up to God’s purpose. But they did not repent. Instead, they stoned Stephen to death. From a human point of view, Stephen seemed to be a loser. But from God’s point of view, Stephen was an everlasting victor who fulfilled his mission and went to heaven in glory. The power of the Holy Spirit was displayed in Stephen. We call it the spirit of martyrdom. The spirit of martyrdom enabled early Christians to conquer the world with the gospel. We want to learn the spirit of martyrdom in one-to-one Bible study. We want to learn the spirit of martyrdom to pray for world evangelization, including Muslim countries and North Korea. May God grant us the spirit of martyrdom.

In today’s passage the gospel spreads beyond the borders of Israel to the lands of Judea and Samaria. God spread the gospel through the persecution of early Christians. These persecuted people did not sit down in self-pity. They preached the gospel wherever they went as of first importance. Among many heroes of faith, Luke focuses on Philip. Today we can learn how to see God’s work from God’s point of view. Most importantly, we need to make decisions to preach the gospel wherever we go. As we do so, may God use us to spread the gospel.

First, they preached the word wherever they went (1-4).

Look at verse 1b. “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” Stephen’s martyrdom polarized the people of Israel and forced everyone to take a stand either for Jesus or against Jesus. The Jewish religious leaders no longer pretended to be objective. They decided to eliminate Christians by any means. By abusing the political and religious systems, they made it impossible for Christians to get jobs or an education. They despised Christians and committed hate crimes against them. They imprisoned them just for being Christians. In that atmosphere, Christians had no friends. They were betrayed even by family members. Jesus had warned them, “You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me” (Lk 21:16). It was unbearable. They were like Christians in Muslim countries today who can be put to death at any time for their faith.

Verses 2-3 reveal two different responses to Stephen’s martyrdom. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. They realized that Stephen was God’s servant and that his martyrdom was both a great crime and a glorious victory in God. They were not scared by Stephen’s martyrdom but inspired to give their lives to Christ like Stephen did. Many must have decided to be martyrs for the glory of God.

On the other hand, Saul became like a madman. He could not forget Stephen’s words, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” These words challenged his self-righteousness, convicting him of his sin. Saul tried to force his conscience to believe he was right. But he could not forget Stephen’s glorious face as he saw Jesus in heavenly glory. Saul was so angry that he decided to destroy the church. He used his training as

a Pharisee and strong leadership to organize a systematic attempt to destroy every Christian in Jerusalem, going from house to house.

We can picture the early Christians as they left Jerusalem. They seemed to have lost everything—their families, their careers, their future security, their chance to marry and enjoy a sweet home. All they had was Jesus in their hearts and the clothes on their backs. We might expect them to sing sorrowfully like the Jewish people fleeing Anatevka in the movie, “Fiddler on the Roof,” pushing their carts with their belongings in front of them. We might expect them to have a victim’s mentality. From a human point of view, they looked like losers.

However, there was God’s purpose in their persecution. Verse 1b says that all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. This was the fulfillment of God’s plan of evangelism. The Risen Christ had told them in Acts 1:8. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” From God’s point of view, the early Christians were victorious soldiers. Jerusalem had been conquered. Now it was time to move on to Judea and Samaria.

Here we must realize three things about God’s way of working. Firstly, God used persecution to scatter the early church. Sometimes we think that God only does his work in a logical and reasonable way. That is, if God wants to pioneer a place, he will move someone’s heart to decide to go there, and then help him step by step. This surely happens, as with Missionary John Peace. But God also used the intensive persecution of all believers to spread his gospel rapidly throughout Judea and Samaria. Sometimes God does not inform us or ask us if we would like to go pioneer somewhere. Sometimes God pushes us out through outward circumstances to move us where he wants us to go. God works through job problems, visa problems, and persecution to lead people where he wants them to go. Sometimes Christians become too comfortable in their life of faith to hear God’s voice. Then they need some outward motivation to move on to God’s purpose for them. God does not hesitate to move us through persecution and hardship.

Secondly, God lets his people suffer for world salvation. The persecution of early Christians involved suffering. God knew their sufferings well. Jesus felt in his own body the pains inflicted upon each believer (Ac 9:4). He allowed them to suffer—not because he did not love them—but because he really loved them. Suffering refined their faith and purified their hearts. Suffering made them strong, strong enough to overcome the world. 1 Peter 1:7 says, “These (sufferings) have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” God never forgets that someday we must stand before Christ to give an account for our lives. He wants us to receive praise, glory and honor at that time. So he pushes us to do things that we do not like to do. He gives us hardships on earth—hardships that we did not choose and which we naturally want to avoid—to refine our faith for the glory of God in heaven. We should be really thankful to God for the hardships he allows us to bear.

Thirdly, we learn that the work of world salvation happens according to God’s plan and purpose. It was God’s plan to pioneer Jerusalem and then to spread the gospel to Judea and Samaria. As God planned, so it happened. God is sovereign. God is ruling over human history and over his children to carry out his plan for world salvation.

Look at verse 4. “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” The early Christians were not victims of the circumstances. They did not sit down in self-pity. They preached the

word wherever they went. This was possible by faith. They really believed the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They believed that their sins were forgiven. They believed they had a living hope in the kingdom of God. They did not feel poor. They felt truly rich in their souls. They carried with them the words of life that alone could save perishing souls. They boldly testified that Christ had risen and offered the kingdom of God to people everywhere they went. They had gospel faith and a clear principle to preach the word of God as of first importance.

God worked through them. God uses those who preach the word regardless of circumstance. For example, St. Paul was in prison. It seemed impossible to do anything for God. But he found a way. He preached to the prison guards. In this way, the word of God reached the palace and spread all around Rome. He was chained, but God's word was not chained. Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction." Peter said in 1 Peter 3:15, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...."

God wants to use us to preach the word of God whatever situation we may be in. As fall quarter began, many high school students decided to preach the word of God to their friends and classmates. At Whitney Young a Bible club formed. Some wanted to have a fellowship-centered meeting with fun activities. But Paul Toh said, "No. We must study the word of God. We must study Mark's gospel systematically." He was so persistent that everyone agreed. Last week 30 students came and studied Mark's gospel. At Lincoln Park, over 30 students gathered. Danny Yang, Charles Jun and Mary Vucekovich proclaimed, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." At Northside, there was a Bible club meeting with 33 people. Sarah Ward, who met Jesus personally through the summer conference, led group Bible study on Mark's gospel. Moreover, 24 Junior High students at Taft studied 1 John 4 with Missionary Lydia Shin. These students pray to learn the love of God in Jesus this year. These young people are more sincere in gospel preaching than many senior people. May God help each of us to repent and decide to preach the gospel wherever we go.

Second, God's work through one man Philip (5-13).

After describing the big picture of what God was doing, Luke narrows his focus to one man, Philip to show how God was working in detail. Philip was one of the seven men chosen originally for food distribution. But like Stephen, he studied the Bible personally and became a powerful Bible teacher. He went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. Philip must have preached that Jesus Christ came according to God's promise, that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins, and that Jesus Christ rose from the dead to open the kingdom of God and give eternal life to those who repent and believe. There was a great work of the Holy Spirit. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many. Probably, students who had a habit of helplessly watching television were set free to do their homework and began to get straight A's. Many powerless people who were laying around and burdening others were suddenly healed by the power of God and began to work hard to support themselves. God's work brought great joy to that city.

The gospel brought healing and salvation to those who repented and believed. The gospel also exposed the work of the devil on a national level. There was a sorcerer named Simon. He did magic tricks to gain people's attention, and access to their bank accounts. He enjoyed their adulation as someone great. In fact, he was a servant of the devil who was stealing God's glory for himself. America has been known as a Christian country. In the past, magic artists were recognized as instruments of the devil and were not

tolerated. But after 40 years of secularization, our spiritual discernment has become so dull that magic artists roam around freely. They steal the minds of directionless people with their tricks to enjoy their admiration and money. Many proponents of eastern religions have gained large followings in the United States because they promise peace and rest in this high-tech, high-speed society. Many young ones have been dazzled by utterly corrupted pop stars. After listening to their music or watching their videos, their young minds are so captivated that they only want to talk like them, dress like them and act like them. They have no money for Sunday offering, but can spend \$75 for a rock concert. In fact, these pop stars are magic artists who steal God's glory for themselves. Without God's word, young people blindly follow them, impoverishing their souls.

Philip simply preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. This simple message had great power. The name of Jesus Christ set Samaritan people free from the spell of the magic artist. Their souls were awakened to the reality of the Holy Spirit's presence with them. They listened intently to the life-giving word of God. They experienced overflowing heavenly joy. They tasted eternal life and the kingdom of God in Jesus. They decided to receive baptism from Philip to identify themselves as Jesus' people.

When we see the magic artists of our times we can be overwhelmed by their number and influence. But the name of Jesus Christ has great power. The name of Jesus Christ can set young ones free from the spell of magic artists. The name of Jesus Christ can heal their souls. The name of Jesus Christ can restore them as worshipers of God with a clear life direction and purpose. The name of Jesus Christ can awaken them to God's great hope to establish America as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We must share the name of Jesus Christ with them.

Third, the apostles participate in Samaritan ministry (14-25).

The apostles in Jerusalem heard that the Samaritans had accepted the word of God. The apostles could have been skeptical or territorial. But they were not. They went to see what God was doing. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers to receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Peter and John placed their hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit (14-17).

Though the gospel was spreading rapidly through many suffering lay evangelists, the role of the apostles was essential. It was through their prayer and laying on of hands that the Holy Spirit came upon the new converts in Samaria. This suggests that God wanted to use the apostles as overseers of the work of God. Here we see the importance of prayer support of senior leaders. Though junior leaders were actively carrying the gospel to new places, they needed the prayer support and oversight of senior leaders. At the same time, senior leaders should respect the spiritual work of junior leaders. Then there is harmony and spiritual order in God's ministry and the Holy Spirit works mightily.

When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he tried to buy the ability to give the Holy Spirit to others. His real motive was exposed. He wanted to regain the influence he had before Philip came to Samaria. Peter rebuked him plainly. He was not part of the ministry at all. He needed to repent of his wickedness and seek God's forgiveness. Peter told him to pray. But Simon did not pray. Instead, he asked Peter to pray for him. He was rebellious and disobedient. Exposing his hypocrisy, Peter protected the new converts in Samaria. There was no compromise. If Simon did not repent, he was an enemy of God. In this way, God established the

superiority of the gospel over the power of darkness. Peter and John testified about the Lord Jesus to the people of Samaria. Then they returned to Jerusalem.

Fourth, God cares for one man, an Ethiopian eunuch (26-40).

In the midst of a prosperous and fruitful ministry, an angel of the Lord called Philip to go south to the desert road. Philip did not question why nor hesitate. He started out, in obedience to the angel's command. On the way he met an Ethiopian eunuch. This was a powerful man of standing. Still, he had a deep desire to worship God. So he made a long, expensive journey to Jerusalem. He was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah. Then the Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Philip ran up to the chariot. He asked the eunuch, "Do you understand what you are reading?" "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" The eunuch needed a Bible teacher. Philip began with the passage he was reading and told him the good news about Jesus. Heavenly sunlight came upon his soul. He realized that God loved him so much he sent his one and only Son Jesus to die for his sin. God loved him so much that he sent Philip just to preach the gospel to him. Philip baptized him and then disappeared. The eunuch did not see him again. But it was not necessary. He had the gospel in his heart and returned to Ethiopia rejoicing. Here we learn God's care for one man who was seeking him. God seeks those who are seeking him. Moreover, God uses men like Philip, who simply obey the leading of the Holy Spirit as his coworkers to seek and save lost ones. Truly effective evangelism is done through absolute obedience to the Holy Spirit.

In this passage we see that God is eager to spread the gospel. God went ahead of the early Christians to reach all Judea and Samaria according to his own plan. It is God who wants to evangelize all American campuses. It is God who wants to carry out one-to-one Bible study with those who are seeking him. We must see what God is doing and be prepared to preach the gospel, that is, the name of Jesus Christ, wherever we go. When we do so, may God use us to liberate many young Americans and raise a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.