

Bible Stories

THE CHURCH SCATTERS

Acts 1:8

September 30, 2023

Beginning with the stoning of Stephen, a great persecution began against the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. Saul created havoc for the church, entering homes and hauling men and women to prison. He would later describe his activities this way:

- Acts 26:9-11 - *I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests, I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.*

Except for the Apostles, the whole congregation fled throughout Judea and Samaria:

- Ellen White (AA 106.1) - *When they were scattered by persecution, they went forth filled with missionary zeal. They realized the responsibility of their mission. They knew that they held in their hands the bread of life for a famishing world; and they were constrained by the love of Christ to break this bread to all who were in need. The Lord wrought through them. Wherever they went, the sick were healed and the poor had the gospel preached unto them.*

Philip (another deacon) went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. As the crowds saw the signs he was performing, they began to pay attention to what he was saying.

- Ellen White (AA 106.3-4) - *Christ's message to the Samaritan woman with whom He had talked at Jacob's well had borne fruit..... When His disciples were driven from Jerusalem, some found in Samaria a safe asylum. The Samaritans welcomed these messengers of the gospel, and the Jewish converts gathered a precious harvest from among those who had once been their bitterest enemies.*

A man named Simon lived in Samaria at that time. He claimed to be someone great. He practiced magic and the people believed he was a man of God.

When Philip came to town preaching the Good News, the people turned to him and many were baptized – including Simon. He was amazed by all signs and great miracles Philip was doing in Jesus' name.

The Apostles heard of all the happenings in Samaria, so they sent Peter and John to check it out. When they arrived, they prayed over the new converts to receive the Holy Spirit.

When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit had come through the laying on of hands, he offered Peter and John money, saying: "Give me this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Peter: *May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.*

Simon: *Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.*

Peter and John went back to Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel in many Samaritan villages as they went.

Philip was still in Samaria when an angel appeared to him. The angel told him to head south to the desert road that runs between Jerusalem and Gaza. Philip obeyed.

As he made his way along the road, he encountered an Ethiopian Official from the royal court of Candace. He had been worshiping at Jerusalem and was on his way home. He was riding in his chariot studying the book of Isaiah when Philip approached:

Philip: *Do you understand what you are reading?*

Official: *How can I unless someone explains it to me?*

This is the passage the Ethiopian was reading - *"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."* {Is. 53:7}

Official: *Who is the prophet talking about - himself or someone else?*

As they went along, Philip told the man about Jesus. When they came to a pond the official asked to be baptized. When they came up out of the water the Holy Spirit took Philip away. The official continued his journey home and Philip found himself at Azotus {Ashdod – on the coast}. He kept preaching the gospel in all the cities, until he came to Caesarea.

- Acts 11:19 - *Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.*

In Antioch large numbers of Jews believed and turned to God – becoming the first believers to be called “Christians.”

Barnabas was sent to investigate:

- Acts 11:23 - *When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*

What do we do with this story?

The church in Jerusalem was experiencing great success:

- Acts 2:41 - *Three thousand were added to their number that day.*
- Acts 2:47b - *.... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*
- Acts 4:4 - *... The number of men grew to about five thousand.*
- Acts 5:14 - *More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.*

However, there was a real danger that the disciples were becoming content and satisfied with their success and would fail to fulfill Jesus’ commission to “go into all the world.” Already they had begun to think that their most important work was to protect the church in Jerusalem instead of educating the new converts to spread the Good News to those who had not yet heard it.

Understanding that growth, endurance, and perseverance occur in the arena of conflict rather than in the arena of ease, God allowed persecution to come upon the new church. The believers in Jesus faced hardships at every turn and yet, despite intense persecution, the message of Salvation spread rapidly. First in Judea, then Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. (Adapted from “Acts of the Apostles,” page 105.2)

We are uncomfortable with the thought that God allowed the persecution of His people. Why? Because we don’t like discomfort, let alone pain and hardship. We expect that the blessings of God only ever involved good and pleasant things.

But here is a hard truth – growth rarely occurs in a pain-free / struggle-free environment.

Here are 3 examples:

- *We don’t like to see our children in pain, but we would rush them to the doctor if they never experienced a growth spurt. Growth spurts = pain.*

- *We don't like the pain associated with exercise. But the medical truth is that muscle does not strengthen and grow unless it is stressed.*
- *We don't like to see the struggle of the butterfly as it works to break free from its cocoon, but here are some important butterfly facts:*

Butterflies release a chemical that strengthens their wings as they emerge from their cocoons.

Their movements inside the cocoon pumps fluid into their wings, which help the wings expand.

The struggle helps butterflies build the necessary muscles to do all things butterfly do.

Turns out the 'struggle' is the key to their development and if we interfere, hoping to spare them the struggle, the butterfly is doomed.

The Christian life is not trouble free and nowhere in Scripture does God promise such an earthly existence. As a matter of fact, He promises the exact opposite:

- *John 16:33 - I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*

And Paul makes an important observation in the book of Romans:

- *Romans 8:35, 37-39 - Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Yes, it is tempting to want to skip the struggle, but it is not possible to do so without eternal damage.

So, when trouble comes, instead of making the giant assumption that God is "punishing" us or has abandoned us or any number of other lies the devil whispers in our ear, we should see the opportunity for growth.

We should ask if we, too, have become too comfortable, too secure, too complacent.

Maybe, just maybe God is using the troubles of this world to get us where He knows we need to be.