

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

ACTS 7:1 - 8:8

Several years ago the Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel reported a home burglary. The owner was out visiting friends. When he returned the television, electronics, even his valuables had all been ignored. All that was stolen was a cardboard box filled with white powder.

The thieves thought they'd scored some cocaine.

But it wasn't coke in the box, it was the owner's sister, Gertrude. The box held her cremated remains.

Here's a funny thought for you... Imagine, the thieves trying to get high, snorting ole Gertrude. If ever there was proof that drugs are *a dead end*, this is it!

Yet the thieves' mistake helps describe the Jewish leaders who arrested Stephen. They too were trying to get high on ashes - on the remnants of what was dead.

They were putting their trust in the *Temple, and in traditions, and in the trappings* of Judaism. The Jews relied on a religion that looked alive, but was merely ashes and death. Jesus had fulfilled the Jewish Law.

The rules and rituals of Judaism had become obsolete. **Christianity was God's new way.** The Law of God had exposed our failures, but the Spirit of God conveyed forgiveness and provided power for victory.

The Law condemned. It was grace that saved - yet the Jews were still keepers of the Law. They were snorting ole

Gertrude, whereas Stephen was high on the life of God's Spirit. He was full of joy, power, hope.

In fact, the last verse of chapter 6 says Stephen had a glow of glory about him. Acts 7 is Stephen's defense.

At the end of Acts 6 the Jews had made several false accusations against Stephen. They accuse him of blasphemy against the Temple and the Law of Moses.

Stephen didn't disrespect the Temple or the Law. He never discredited their proper role in God's plan, but he knew that through Christ God was doing a new work.

And this is what his enemies failed to get...

This is what prompted the High Priest's question in 7:1, "Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

Remember, Stephen started out as a deacon, a *table server*. In Acts 6 God promotes him to a *miracle worker*. Now in Acts 7 God uses him as a *theologian*.

At each stage of service Stephen was faithful - and God often rewards *faithful service* with *broader service*.

The Apostle Paul may've been thinking of Stephen when he said in 1 Timothy 3:13, "For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith."

In chapter 7 Stephen does what Peter did earlier in Acts. He uses an inquisition as an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel. *Stephen preaches a masterpiece of a sermon...* He surveys Jewish history to show how God was always up to something new - yet each new initiative was met with Jewish resistance. Call his sermon, **a panoramic view of Jewish stubbornness.**

Stephen begins in verse 2, “And he said, “Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said to him, ‘*Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.*’ God spoke to Abraham while he still lived in Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization.

Mesopotamia was the birthplace of paganism. The early Mesopotamians worshipped the moon-goddess.

Which reminds me, *if they found insects on the moon what would they be called?* That’s easy, “*lunatics.*”

Stephen's point is that God went right into a pagan land, and picked out a man to father His people. *God did a new thing!* He’s always doing fresh works.

“Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father (Terah) was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell. And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even *enough* to set his foot on. But even when *Abraham* had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him.”

Abraham died with only a promise. He was a pilgrim from the time God called him to move, to the time God called him home - *a stranger in a strange land...*

And this is true of every life lived for God. The Lord doesn’t want us getting comfortable in this world.

We're all on a spiritual pilgrimage. And to avoid spiritual stagnancy, God keeps us in transition. He's always wanting to do new things in us and through us.

But to the contrary, the Jews of Stephen's day were stuck in a 1500 year rut. Resistance to the changes God had in mind had created a spiritual deadness.

The believers in Jesus were alive! They were full of the joy and the power of the Holy Spirit! The Christians had become *fanatics*, while the Jews were still *static*.

Verse 6, “But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress *them* 400 years. ‘*And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge,*’ said God, ‘*and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place.*’

Stephen's point is that God uprooted the patriarchs.

The growth of the faith of Abraham's family had stalled out in the Promise Land. Thus, God forced His people down to Egypt, into slavery, to get them leaning and trusting on Him again. A new work was needed.

And with this new work came a new sign. “Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so *Abraham* begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac *begot* Jacob, and Jacob *begot* the twelve patriarchs.” In the first century AD, among the Jews circumcision was the unquestioned mark of God's covenant with Israel. All Hebrew males carried this reminder on their person.

But when circumcision was first enacted it was on an adult Abraham... *Ouch!* Even what the Jews viewed as as *ancient tradition* had at one time been a *new work*.

“And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt.” Stephen recounts the means God used to get Israel to Egypt. It started with an act of rebellion.

Isaac’s sons were jealous of their brother, Joseph. They feigned his death, smeared blood on his colorful coat, and sold him to slave traders in route to Egypt.

“But God was with him and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance.”

Joseph’s story - *from pit to prison to the palace* - is one of the most fascinating in all the OT. Especially when it’s viewed parallel to the life of our Lord Jesus...

Both were rejected by their brothers... Both thrown in a pit (or grave) and left for dead... Both rose again, and ascended to the right hand of their king... and God judged both of their rejections with a famine...

In the days of Joseph there was famine in the land. After the Jews rejected Jesus, a famine engulfed Palestine again. In fact, later in Acts we’ll see Paul collecting famine relief for the Church in Jerusalem.

Verse 12, “But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. And the second *time* Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to the Pharaoh.”

Remember Joseph’s brothers didn’t recognize him the first time they met. It was a second meeting that opened their eyes. And likewise, the Jews failed to recognize Jesus as their Deliverer at His first coming. It’s only when He comes again that they’ll know Him, and repent of their sin, and embrace Him as Messiah.

Verse 14, “Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to *him*, seventy-five people.

So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers. And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, *the father of Shechem*.” Though God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants, the only parcel he ever formally owned was a burial plot. Abraham was indeed a wanderer. He died with nothing but a promise.

“But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt till another king arose who did not know Joseph. This man dealt treacherously with our people, and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose their babies, so that they might not live.”

The Egyptian dynasty of Joseph’s influence was sympathetic toward Hebrews, but it was ousted shortly after he died. The succeeding dynasty were brutal.

They feared Israel's vast numbers. Their Pharaoh ordered the genocide of thousands of Hebrew infants.

So again God did a new work, verse 20, **“At this time Moses was born, and was well pleasing to God; and he was brought up in his father's house for three months.**

But when he was set out, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son.” Exodus 3 recounts how Moses' faithful mom, Jochebed, floated her baby boy down the Nile River in a wicker basket.

The miniature ark got stuck in the reeds, and happened to be retrieved by the Pharaoh's daughter. She took the child as her own and raised him in the palace. It was all orchestrated by God's providence.

Verse 22, **“And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians...”** It's ironic, the Pharaoh who killed the Hebrew babies financed Moses' education, even his room and board. He raised Moses in his own court.

“And (Moses) was mighty in words and deeds.”

First century Jewish historian, Josephus, provides some extra-biblical insights into Moses' upbringing.

According to his writings, while growing up Moses was a beautiful child - with such natural endowments, people would go out of their way just to see him.

Josephus says that as a young man - Moses, a prince of Egypt - led a regiment of the Egyptian army against the Ethiopians, and won a great victory.

Later when God calls Moses at the burning bush to be His spokesman, he balks. And do you remember his excuse? Moses complained, "O my LORD, I am not eloquent... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

Apparently he was selling himself short - for Stephen says Moses was "*mighty in words,*" as well as deeds.

Moses was a powerful, natural speaker. It wasn't *communication skill* he lacked - it was *confidence*.

Growing up in Egypt, Moses had been popular, and privileged, and talented, and intelligent, and articulate, and courageous - literally, on top of the world - *until...*

"Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel."

It may've been a mid-life crisis. Somehow Moses learned he was Hebrew. He wanted to understand his roots and heritage. It's been said, "It's hard to know where you're going if you don't know who you are."

Moses had to find himself, so he retraced his roots.

This is why it's so important that as Christians we make every effort to understand who we are in Christ.

As Moses walked among the Hebrews, he saw, "**one of them suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian.**"

It was an instinctive reaction. An innocent Hebrew was being abused by his Egyptian taskmaster, and Moses took matters into his own hands. He defended him and in the violent confrontation the Egyptian died.

Moses thought the Hebrews would view him as a hero, verse 25, “For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand. And the next day he appeared to *two of them* as they were fighting, and *tried to reconcile them*, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren; why do you wrong one another?’

But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, ‘*Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?*’” Ah-ha! *Twenty-four hours later the news of what Moses did was already public knowledge.*

“Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons.”

In Egypt Moses must’ve sensed God’s call to deliver his people from slavery, but rather than wait on God’s timing and His methods, Moses had taken matters into his own hands. His botched efforts ended in disaster.

Moses had to flee Egypt. He started *a new life with a new wife* in Midian. We’re told he even had two sons.

It’s interesting, after being rejected by their brothers, both Joseph and Moses *moved to a foreign land - took for themselves a Gentile bride - had a family - and then later returned a second time to their people, Israel...*

Both plights beautifully parallel the life of Jesus...

After Jesus was rejected by the Jews He too took a Gentile bride, the Church, and has had many sons.

And like Moses and Joseph, Jesus also will return a second time to His brothers; then they'll receive Him as their Messiah. Stephen is saying God's men and methods change, but His purposes remain the same.

Verse 30 “And when forty years had passed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai.”

Moses' life breaks down into three forty year periods.

First, 40 years in the court of Pharaoh. Second, 40 years on the backside of the desert. And finally, 40 years leading the nation back to the Promised Land.

It took God 80 years to prepare Moses for the mission He had in mind. Apparently, it took a lot of time to mold a Moses... *So why are we so impatient?*

Often, we're too eager. We run out ahead of God. We need to learn our lessons and wait for His timing.

It was DL Moody who noted, “Moses spent forty years in Pharaoh's court thinking he was a somebody; forty years in the desert learning he was a nobody; and forty years as Israel's leader showing what God can do with a somebody who knows he's a nobody.” God had to humble a haughty Moses before He could use him.

Verse 31 is back to Moses' experience at the burning bush, “When Moses saw *it*, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, saying, ‘I am the God of your fathers - the God of Abraham,

the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and dared not look.”

Verse 30 says the Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush, but the voice that speaks to Him identifies Himself as God. And that’s how Moses treats Him. He dares not look on God. He fears God.

The Hebrew word translated *“angel”* simply means *“messenger.”* And I believe more often than not, when *“the Angel of the Lord”* appears in the OT it’s none other than a pre-incarnate appearance of our Lord Jesus. Here, Stephen implies that it was actually Jesus who spoke to Moses from the burning bush!

‘Then the LORD said to him, “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.

I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt. This Moses whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush.”

Again, God works in a new and unexpected way. His deliverer was the very man the Hebrews rejected.

And the mistake the Jews make with Moses, they repeated with Jesus! He too was rejected by Israel.

Verse 36, *“He brought them out...”* And who is *“He”*? Stephen is speaking of **the Angel of the Lord.**

Look at verse 35, Stephen is saying Moses was sent out by the hand of the Angel in the bush - *that is Jesus.*

It was the power of Jesus who worked through Moses to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt. He writes “*after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years.*” Jesus was the source of Moses’ miracles!

Jesus engineered the plagues on Egypt, parted the Red Sea, sent manna from heaven, and brought water from the rock... Ironically, the traditional Jews Stephen is addressing are rejecting the same Jesus who’d been so instrumental in the development of their history!

Again Stephen points to Jesus in verse 37, “*This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, ‘The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.’*”

Stephen quotes Deuteronomy 18... The “*prophet like me*” that Moses predicted, was none other than Jesus.

“*This is he (that is, Moses) who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected.*” The angel that revealed God to Moses on Mt. Sinai was Jesus.

Yet the Jews rejected Him then, as they were now.

“*And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’* During the forty days Moses was atop the mountain with God, receiving the Law, Israel’s faith waned.

They desired a god they could see. So they asked Aaron to forge an idol.

This was ironic, for the true God had just shown His superiority over idols! The ten plagues God used to pry loose the grip of Pharaoh from the necks of His people was a direct assault on the idols of Egypt. God proved His superiority over the Nile-god when He turned the water to blood, the fertility goddess when he sent the frogs, the sky-god when the hail fell, even the notion of a divine Pharaoh when his firstborn was struck dead.

That now, just days later, the Hebrews would be clamoring for Aaron to make them idols - and take them back to Egypt - is nothing short of astonishing.

“And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets...” Here’s an insight Stephen provides that we don’t read about in the Law of Moses. Not only did Israel bow to the golden calf, they worshipped the stars, *“the host of heaven.”* They became astrologers!

The Jews looked to creation for guidance rather than the Creator. With no faith, they lived in the darkness.

Here Stephen quotes Amos 5:25, *‘Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, images which you made to worship; and I will carry you away*

beyond Babylon.” Moloch was the god of the Moabites. Remphan an Egyptian demon.

It seems barbaric to us today, but Moloch was a hollowed-out statute that could be stoked with fire - *like a burner on your stove*. Moabite parents would then place their babies in its arms, to appease Moloch’s anger and attempt to coax from him a plentiful harvest.

We shutter at the callousness and brutality of the ancients. Yet modern society is just as evil. Parents today abort babies on the altar of convenience, career, or choice. Moloch worship is still around, it just goes by names like “*a woman’s right*” or “*family planning*.”

And notice, Stephen now speeds up his survey of Hebrew history... Israel's idolatry lingered for nearly a thousand years until God turned His people over to the world's most notorious idolaters, the Babylonians.

In verse 43 Stephen mentions that the Jews were carried away “*beyond Babylon*.” Jerusalem fell in 586 BC, and the Jews were deported to the birthplace of idolatry, Babel - where they lived in exile for 70 years.

Its interesting this was the vaccination that cured Israel of its idolatry. In Babel they developed such an abhorrence for idols they never again followed them.

But upon their return to the land the Hebrews had a new problem - no longer *idolatry*, but now *hypocrisy*.

Verse 44, “*Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, which our fathers,*

having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David...” Remember Stephen had been accused of disrespecting the Temple - and the Tabernacle was its predecessor. To speak against either was tantamount to blasphemy against God.

The Jews were proud of their Temple. They thought of it as a sign of God’s favor. As long as the Temple stood, Israel was assured of blessing. But Stephen is about to show them why this was a false assumption.

The Tabernacle stood until David, *but then God did a new thing...* verse 46, David inquired about a Temple.

David “*who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built Him a house.*” David was a man of war, and thus God didn’t want him building the Temple. He left that to his son.

Yet God taught David a bigger lesson. Stephen here quotes from Isaiah 66:1-2, “*However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: ‘Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the LORD, or what is the place of My rest? Has My hand not made all these things?’*” Stephen argues, and the prophets support him, that the God of Israel was never confined to a Temple. He is far bigger than a Temple.

The God of Israel made the universe - the earth is just His footstool. No structure can contain Him. And God will continue His work with or without a Temple.

We need to be careful we don't try to confine God to a Temple - *or put God in a box!* Religious folks like to limit God's domain to the four walls of their church.

That's ridiculous! God is Lord over the workplace, and ballpark, and home life, and political arena.

God defies all limitations. Never tell God what He can and can't do. Christians forget that God is bigger than our programs and traditions. He does whatever, wherever, whenever, and however it pleases Him.

Stephen turns up the heat in verse 51. He says to his accusers, "*You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.*" At the time the Jews were the circumcised, and the Gentiles were the uncircumcised.

But Stephen calls these Jews "*uncircumcised in heart and ears.*" They were insensitive - deaf to God.

He calls them "*stiff-necked*" or unbending, inflexible. These Hebrew were resistant to the Holy Spirit.

Verse 52, "*Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?*" **The answer was none.** Every time God *raised up* a prophet the nation tried to *put him down*.

Once, they tried to stone Moses... They sought to murder Jeremiah. On several occasions he was thrown into prison... The Jews killed the Prophet Zechariah in the Temple... And after sticking the Prophet Isaiah in a tree trunk they sawed the man of God in half...

They hated the prophets while they were alive, yet after they were gone, they revered them as wonderful men of God. Israel was a nation full of hypocrites.

And Stephen lets them have it with both barrels!

He says, “And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One...” “*The Just One*” was a term for the Messiah. Stephen is saying the Jews killed the prophets of old who had foretold the coming of Jesus.

And “now (you) have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept *it*.” The Angel of the Lord led Israel. In other places we’re told angels helped convey the Law to Moses. *The Jews had angelic help!*

They knew the truth, but were too stubborn to obey.

It’s amazing, an angel could appear to some people and it still wouldn’t cause them to submit to God’s will.

And how did the crowd standing in the Temple that day respond to Stephen’s sermon? Verse 54, “When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with *their* teeth.” They snarled.

The priests looked like pit bulls in clerical robes.

“But (Stephen), being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” Suddenly, the physical peels back, and Stephen gets to peer into the eternal realm.

He sees God's throne and is amazed. He beholds, "*The Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!*"

Mark 16:19 speaks of Jesus' ascension into heaven. "After the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God." Notice, Jesus "*sat down.*" Every time the NT speaks of Jesus' heavenly, high priestly ministry He is always *seated* at the right hand of the throne of God.

Except here... The assumption is that Jesus was so excited about the faith and faithfulness of Stephen He rose to His feet to welcome him home. Stephen sees the Lord Jesus "*standing at the right hand of God.*"

Verse 57, "*Then they (the Jews) cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord (the rushed him); and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.*"

Apparently, this Saul - a young, upstart rabbi - had been the ringleader of the opposition to Stephen.

"*And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*" In Stephen's final hour, he quoted Jesus in *His* final hour. Stephen maintained a Christ-like attitude of forgiveness to the very end! What a witness this man was for Jesus!

It's been said, "The blood of the martyrs becomes the seeds of the church." It was true in Stephen's case. His death caused the Rabbi Saul to consider Christ...

Chapter 8, "Now Saul was consenting to his death."

And this was the "Saul" who would later changed his name to *Paul - Christianity's greatest champion!*

Isn't it interesting, Stephen's Jewish executioner became Christianity's apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was part of Stephen's legacy. After his testimony Rabbi Saul was haunted by what Stephen had said. He mulled it over. God used it to soften Saul's hard heart.

We're told Saul consented to Stephen's death. The word "*consenting*" can be translated "*voting*." It implies that Saul was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, which condemned Stephen to death.

We know that marriage was one of the requirements of being a member of the Sanhedrin. At the time Paul was may've been married and had children. Yet in 1 Corinthians 7:8 Paul wished everyone was single, as he was. What happened to his wife? Most scholars feel that after he was converted, Paul was abandoned.

Even today, when a Jew converts to Christianity it's still common for them to be renounced by their families and spouses. Paul paid a steep price to follow Jesus.

Verse 1 adds, "At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria,

except the apostles.” Thousands of believers in Jesus now worshipped together in Jerusalem...

The fellowship was so sweet - the miracles were mighty - the growth was explosive - the grace was attractive - the Spirit's power was tangible and thrilling.

There was *high energy and great harmony*. The Jerusalem fellowship was one happening church!

Yet these believers in Jesus were so buzzed with what God was doing *inside the Church* they had forgotten what He wanted to do *outside the Church*.

They were neglecting Jesus' parting command.

In Acts 1:8 He told them, "**You shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**" The disciples were shaking up Jerusalem, but what about the rest of Judea - and up the road in Samaria? Not to mention, the ends of the earth? Enough with the *fellowship*. It's time to *ship out!*

The church in Jerusalem had become a *holy huddle*.

In **Acts 1:8** God said "**Go...**" - now in **Acts 8:1** He has to shove the infant church out of the nest and force her to fly. God uses a little persecution to get some houses on the market and move a few reluctant missionaries.

In Acts 2 the Holy Spirit cultivated a wonderful fellowship in the Church. But now the Spirit breaks up that fellowship and focuses the Church on evangelism.

Fellowship is important, but never forget, we'll spend eternity with each other. We've only got a few short hours left to reach this fallen world with the Gospel.

Verse 2 “And devout men carried Stephen *to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.*” Church members made sure Stephen got a decent burial.

“As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing *them to prison.*” Saul had “*gnashed*” his teeth, but was “*cut to the heart.*” He couldn’t shake Stephen’s witness, so he tried to strike out against it.

Saul was a proud, stubborn Jew who loved tradition and couldn’t believe God was doing a new work.

Saul was asking, *how can a carpenter from Nazareth eclipse the prized institutions of Judaism? Why would God’s Spirit make His home the hearts of Galilean fishermen, instead of the glorious Jerusalem Temple?*

Saul was stiff-necked. Back in Acts 5 Saul’s teacher Rabbi Gamaliel said if this new movement was not of God it would go away. But it wasn’t. It was here to stay.

It was multiplying and Saul couldn’t stand the thought he could be wrong about Jesus. So he decides to try and put an end to it himself. He mounts a ferocious attack. We’re told Saul, “*made havoc of the church.*” The word translated “*havoc*” is a verb that describes “*a wild animal mangling its prey.*”

Apparently, Saul went berserk with hatred. He turned into the equivalent of a rabid dog. He spent every waking second plotting the extermination of Christians.

“Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” I’m sure when the persecution *intensified* the believers *wondered why...*

Some may’ve thought God had forsaken them; yet God had a reason. He used the persecution to light a fire under them to move them out to share the Gospel.

That’s when “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.” Miracles occurred in Samaria, but first came Christ-centered preaching.

And this is always the first wave of a spiritual awakening - *the preaching of God’s Word*. Mark 16 tells us where the Gospel is preached, signs will follow.

Notice too, here's another faithful deacon taking on greater responsibilities. Like Stephen, Philip also goes from table waiter, to missionary and evangelist.

He heads to Samaria. This was a place where Jesus had paved the way. It was here that He had promised the woman at the well a drink of living water.

Afterwards he stayed two days. And we're told in John 4:39, “Many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him.” Jesus was known in Samaria.

But this was new territory for the Church. The Samaritan people were not considered Jewish.

They were interracial: *part Assyrian, part Jew*.

Judaism had been for Jews, but everyone was about to realize that Christianity is for all mankind. The Samaritans were the first cross-cultural mission field...

Verse 6, “And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.”

Miracles seen in Jesus' ministry - and in the Church at Jerusalem - were now happening in Samaria. God was doing a new work among a new people group!

Notice too, Philip was not an apostle, yet he worked miracles. Don't think God's power is reserved for a select few. *Who knows how God wants to use you?*

Then in verse 8, the result, **“And there was great joy in that city.”** There is always great joy where the *Word of God* and the *Spirit of God* combine to produce the *work of God*. It's been said, **“A church that has the Word without the Spirit will dry up. A church that has the Spirit without the Word will blow up. But a church that has the Spirit working through the Word will grow up.”** And that's what happened in Samaria...

Yet verse 9 begins, **“But...”** No work for God is without its challenges - *including Philip's revival in Samaria*. Next week we'll study the issues he faced...