**Strength in Suffering - Acts 8**

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A final look at Stephen - a man full of the Spirit of Wisdom.

**Acts 7:55-60**

**55**But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. **56**“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

**57**At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, **58**dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

**59**While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”**60**Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

It was a bad sad day for the young church in Jerusalem. One of their own, a powerful Godly brother was stoned to death for his faith right in their own neighborhood.

After that it got worse…

ACTS 8

**8:1 “**And Saul approved of their killing him.”

This incident is the first time Saul (The Apostle Paul) appears in the Bible. Luke makes a point of telling us that Saul/Paul was a trusted associate of those who stoned Stephen, he “approved of their killing him.” Saul/Paul’s conversion is one of the most miraculous developments in the early church. He not only stops persecuting believers, he goes on to become a primary leader, writer and martyr in the first few decades of the church. He went from “breathing out murderous threats” (Acts 9:1), to writing the most tenderhearted and loving scriptures toward the church in the entire Bible; examples. - “love is patient, love is kind” (1st Cor. 13), “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted,”(Eph 4:32),

…and our memory verse from last series…1st Corinthians 16:14 “\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_ \_\_\_\_\_”. *(Do everything in love).*

### Then the Church was Persecuted and Scattered

“1b On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

**2**Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.

They pick up Stephen’s body and honored him with a proper burial. “They mourned deeply for him.” They were devasted at the news of this dear powerful, godly, brother being publicly stoned to death for his faith.

In addition to that, great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. They were all marked for the same fate as Stephen. Everyone except the Apostles had to flee the city, and were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (surrounding regions).

**3**But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”

This appears to be a quick and decisive end to the movement of the early church. It had just gotten going, with thousands in attendance, and now it is being snuffed out and disbanded.

Saul was executing a plan to “destroy the church”, they were persecuted, chased out of Jerusalem and *scattered*.

Where were they scattered to?

The first verse of the chapter tells us they were *“scattered throughout Judea and Samaria”*

In the first Chapter of Acts, Jesus tells them that they will be His witnesses, where?

### *Acts 1:8 …Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the Earth, and that’s where they ended up. They were scattered, yes, but the gospel went with them and spread throughout the entire region.*

### Philip in Samaria

**4**Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. **5**Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. **6**When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. **7**For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. **8**So there was great joy in that city.

### Meet - Simon the Sorcerer, an egotistical charlatan

**9**Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, **10**and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is rightly called the Great Power of God.” **11**They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. **12**But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. **13**Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

**14**When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. **15**When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, **16**because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. **17**Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

**18**When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money **19**and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

**20**Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! **21**You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. **22**Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. **23**For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”

**24**Then Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.”

Simon’s heart was not right before God. He tried to buy his way into God’s power, while he was bitter and captive to sin.

Simon was convicted of his sin and pleaded for mercy from the Lord.

We don’t know the outcome, but we know that God is rich in mercy and forgives whoever comes to him with a contrite heart. Simon the Sorcerer stands as a reminder that there is no way to purchase or manipulate God’s power, we need to come humbly before the Lord and submit our way to Him.

**25**After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.

### Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

**26**Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” **27**So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”).

This man was from Ethiopia, a country in East Africa near the Arabian Peninsula. He was a eunuch, so he could work very closely alongside the Queen. She had the title “Kandake”, some versions of the Bible call her name “Candace”. There has been a strong community of Jews in Ethiopians many generations. Some say it began from a union of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, but that is not written in the Bible. (I’ve met several Ethiopian Jews in Israel)

This Ethiopian man was likely a very dark, wealthy, African man who travelled in a caravan. He was definitely Jewish, because he had just come from worshipping in Jerusalem and was reading the book of Isaiah when Philip met him.

This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, **28**and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. **29**The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

**30**Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

**31**“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

**32**This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
    and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
    so he did not open his mouth.  
**33**In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.  
    Who can speak of his descendants?  
    For his life was taken from the earth.” [[Isa.](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%208&version=NIV#fen-NIV-27210b) 53]

**34**The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” **35**Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

**36**As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” **[37]*Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” The eunuch answered, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”***

**38**And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. **39**When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

The only requirement for baptism, according to Acts 8, is that you believe with all your heart that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah) and the Son of God.

Baptism is a formal proclamation that you are a believer.

*Our Baptism classes are short and to the point - (July 27th on zoom, for an Aug 6th Ocean Baptism).*

It is for many a starting point for discipleship, for others a solemn formal declaration of a growing faith.

This man went from unbelieving Jew in one moment, to a baptized rejoicing believer the next. He likely rejoiced all the way back to Africa and brought the gospel with him.

**40**Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.”

(He apparently just disappeared and reappeared in Ashdod, and preached up the coast of the Mediterranean)

The early church was beginning to understand the “Theology of Suffering”.

That means that God allows hardships to exist in our lives to draw us closer to him, to make us stronger in our faith and to give Him glory.

*Suffering is not always consequences of our bad choices or even sin.*

Sometimes God allows suffering in our lives and uses our trials, our struggles and even our enemies for His purposes.

He sometimes uses our sufferings to direct us toward our purpose and destiny.

Just like Joseph said to his brothers after revealing that he was Joseph whom they tried to kill:

**Gen. 50:20** *“you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people”*

I have had many experiences through life, where people acted or spoke evil against me. Sometimes damaging my opportunities, or reputation. Sometimes even resulting in the loss of relationships or even jobs.

Each time, God moved me on from “Glory to Glory” to a better place and closer and closer to my purpose and destiny.

[That’s why I am here with you today. Right where God wants me to be]. ***: )***

“What is meant for evil, God uses for His good”

It must have been hard for the early church to understand. They were under severe persecution. Their family and friends are being hauled off to jail for being believers. Some were even martyred.

While this was happening, there were also amazing miracles and church growth were taking place all over the known world through the early church, but it involved suffering by those who were doing the work of God.

For you and I, our suffering is nowhere near that, but it is still suffering. We still feel pain, loss, grief and sometimes defeat.

I am not sure why God let’s some of the awful things take place on the earth, but I am not God, He Is.

Remember these things when you experience suffering;

* His ways are higher than ours, his thoughts are wiser.
* We never suffer needlessly, there is always a purpose.
* Nothing can happen to you, unless God makes it happen, or lets it happen.

Scriptures to meditate on;

**Romans 5:3-4** “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, **4**and endurance produces character, and character produces hope”

**James 1:2-4** Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, **3**because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.**4**Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

**1 Peter 4:12,13,16,19** *“***12**Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. **13**But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 

**16**However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

**19**So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

Next time you are suffering, feeling persecuted or are facing the attacks of the adversary in;

Your health,

Your relationships,

Your Finances

Your job,

Anything that you are battling

Ask God to help you fight your battles. Ask him to give you strength and endurance. But also ask him to give you a glimpse of the eternal glory your suffering are achieving. You may find that His purposes for your suffering, far outweigh the pain and irritation of the suffering itself.

**2 Cor. 4:17-18**

**17**For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. **18**So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.