

# **BIB204 NT2 Early Church**

## **Unit 2a**

### **Stephen's Martyrdom and Paul's Persecution of the Church**

Presented by the



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Hello. This is Unit 2 of our course, The Early Church, NT2. And last week, we walked through the text of the Book of Acts, covering Pentecost to persecution, the beginning of that persecution. And that's where we're going to pick up. So we're going to pick up in Acts 8 and, arguably, verse 1. And we'll walk through it. In this unit, I'm hoping to look at the spread of the gospel as a result of the persecution because that's what Luke is conveying through his writing. It's not persecution for the sake of persecution. The believers are scattered, in fact. But in that scattering, the gospel is spread. And in the midst of the spreading of that gospel, even in the period of hard persecution, Saul (he will be called Paul later) is converted. He has an encounter on the road to Damascus in the region of Syria, which is radically transformative where he is concerned.

So let's begin. If you would please open your Bibles to Acts 8. What we read first off is "And Saul approved of his execution." That is, Saul agreed with the stoning death of Stephen. He was standing right there. If you look back at verse 58, we read, "Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Saul approved of all of that. That's verse 8:1a. Saul approved of his execution. On that very same day, we read that a great persecution arose. So, "And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison." So the church experiences persecution, driven in part by the zeal of this man Saul. Saul will recount this period in his life several years later in the letter to the Galatians. And I just want to read it to you, just so that we can add some immediacy to the narrative. It is a passage that many, I suspect, would be familiar with.

He says in Galatians 1:11 and following. He says, "For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers." So what we see there is he tried to destroy the church. That was his intent. And as a result of this zeal, he was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries, which would explain chapter 9. He secures letters from the high priest and he heads to Damascus to bring back believers, people of the Way, bound to Jerusalem.

But here at the early stage of this period of persecution, back to Acts 8, there's a great persecution against the church, and so the people of the church are scattered outside of Jerusalem, because at this point, they are concentrated in Jerusalem. They're all going to temple. They're all still ensconced within the cradle, the tradition that we call Judaism. They look just like any other Jew. There is cultural uniformity, sameness of outlook and aspiration. It's just a new thing that these folks are doing. But with the death of Stephen, given that Stephen is one of the first, if not the first, to realize the ramifications of the gospel and to begin to explicate that with respect to the meaning and significance for the Law of Moses and what that means in terms of Israel's history infuriating his contemporaries in a Hellenistic synagogue that caters to Hellenistic Jews, leading to his execution outside of the city.

So right now, up until this moment, they all look the same, just different teaching. There was room in Judaism for that, certainly, but not to this extent. And now, that has been proved. So they are scattered outside of Jerusalem now into the countryside of Judea, into the hill country, into other towns that surround Jerusalem. There’s an outbreak of persecution. They have to go into hiding, some of them, I’m sure. But they also scatter beyond Judea. They are driven into Samaria, which is the center part of Palestine, which is where those Samaritans lived, that the Jews have a longstanding argument, quarrel with. They’re driven into Samaria. Only apostles remained in Jerusalem. And we read in verse 2 that “Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him,” which is to say that believers took Stephen’s broken body and they buried it and they cried their eyes out. They lamented over him. They lamented at the tremendous loss. And it was a tremendous loss for the church because he has a singular testimony in the pages of the Book of Acts. So they make great lamentation over him. What’s Saul doing that’s a contrast? Verse 3. Saul is ravaging the church. He’s entering house after house. He’s going door to door. He’s dragging off men and women. He’s committing them to prison, preparatory to trial by the Sanhedrin.

And of course, what he will also say later on in the Book of Acts, and I would like to take you there briefly, just to add color and depth to the story, the narrative. Please come with me to Acts 26 where Paul tells of what he did against the church. He has another dimension, another feature, another aspect of the storyline. If you look at Acts 26:9, he said, “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.” What’s interesting about this historically is that the Sanhedrin really had no authority to put anyone to death. That was left to Rome. So there were executions that were unsanctioned by Rome as near as we can determine, given the historical context in the 1<sup>st</sup> century as it relates to Palestine. That is why Jesus was taken before Pilate. That was done quasi-legally, one might suppose, but it did have the legal aspects to it. He was tried by the Sanhedrin, but they didn’t put him to death. They beat him. They ripped out his beard, but they did not kill him.

But here, the outbreak of persecution is so severe. It is furious. It is intense. And what Paul is basically admitting to here is that he cast his vote against people, believers, early believers, Jewish believers, to die. So in that respect, one might suggest that Paul may have broken Greco-Roman law. That’s Paul. He’s just one individual. The Sanhedrin, in particular, broke the law, which would mean that these believers were killed undercover. It wasn’t something that was done in the open. It wasn’t broadcast. They were simply put to death and no one was the wiser. Rome could have cared less, one might suppose. But that’s what Paul is saying here. “I cast my vote against them.” They were sentenced to death. “And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.” Of course, to be fair, it is also possible to read the text as though Paul cast his vote against them that they were worthy of death but that, in fact, they weren’t put to death. That is a possible reading, to be sure, of this particular passage in Acts 26:9 and following.

Back to Acts 8. So Paul drives off men and women. He commits them to prison (verse 3). And what we read in verse 4 is that the scattering leads to the spread of the gospel. “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.” So people are scattered into Judea, into the hill country of Judah. They go as far as Samaria. And wherever they go, they spread the word. So the word now is spread out of Jerusalem. Now, it’s important to see the connection with Acts 1:8, which I will have you turn to briefly. This is what Jesus

said before his ascension. He did say in verse 8, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” But of course, up until the moment that Stephen was martyred and persecution broke out, they were all in Jerusalem. And now the word of the Lord Jesus Christ, the resurrected Lord, is being fulfilled via persecution. And this is a clear theme in the Book of Acts, the earliest historical document of the church.

So Philip proclaims the Christ to the Samaritans. Verse 6, “The crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.” Now, Philip, it’s necessary to contextualize him. If you come with me to Acts 6, you can see the connection right off the bat. Take a look at verse 5. The congregation is pleased at what the apostles say about picking seven men of good reputation. “They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip,” and other names that you see in the remainder of the verse. But Philip is one of the seven, and so it’s significant that Philip goes to Samaria and proclaims the Christ to them. And you’ll notice that he does wonders. He casts demons out. He heals those who are paralyzed or lame. They believe the word that Philip preaches concerning the Christ. So you sort of see Philip doing some of what Stephen must have done prior to his martyrdom. There is some continuity there in terms of the narrative, in the body of the narrative.

So verse 9 of chapter 8, “There was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great.’ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.”

So there was a man named Simon. He had practiced magic in a particular city in Samaria. He said he himself was somebody great, and everyone considered him to be great. They called him a power of God. He had amazed people with his magic. So this is an individual who is a practitioner of what is expressly forbidden in the Old Testament: the practice of magic, the practice of sorcery. So this individual, Simon, is a sorcerer. He is in touch with powers that he has no business being in touch with. And he has amazed the people of his city. But then when he hears Philip, he believes and he is baptized. And he sees Philip work these signs and he is utterly amazed. Probably amazed because Philip doesn’t have to ‘wind up’ the way he, Simon, does. Philip simply works by faith. He declares something to be so, and because he has apostolic authority conferred upon him, he is basically a representative of the twelve at Jerusalem. Signs of wonders are done through him because it has been sanctioned through them. I’ll say more on that in a few minutes.

So, “The apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God (verse 14). They sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” So the apostles hear that Philip has got converts in Samaria, and they go to Samaria, to that particular city to lay hands on them so that these people might receive the Holy Spirit. And in the next segment, I’ll discuss the ramifications and the significance of all of that.