

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

## Scattered Seeds

### Acts 8:1-25

**Intro:** In [ch7](#), Stephen was dragged before the Sanhedrin to answer for some scurrilous accusations. He had been accused of speaking against Moses, God, the temple and the Law; aspects of Judaism that the Sanhedrin claimed to hold dear. In his response to the accusations, Stephen didn't attempt to defend himself or his words. He used the opportunity to show these men from their own history and Scripture that Israel had always been resistant to the work of the Holy Spirit as a nation and as the current representatives of the nation, they were still resisting God's work and God's will. Stephen laid out a truthful and reasonable argument but the Sanhedrin would not listen to truth or reason. They dragged him into the council chamber and then they dragged him out of the city and executed him.

We might look at Stephen's untimely death as a tragedy for the church. He was the obvious leader of the new band of deacons appointed and authorized by the apostles. He was taking the Gospel message into Jerusalem and was seeing some wonderful results from it. He was winning souls, performing signs and wonders and defending the truth of the Gospel against all nay-sayers. But, his young ministry was abruptly cut short and his death might seem sort of meaningless at first glance. His ministry also seemed to end in failure – there were no immediate conversions from the Sanhedrin. In fact, all his speech seemed to produce was more persecution against the church.

Although it hadn't been written yet, the principle of [Rom 8:28](#) was still in effect, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Notice this verse doesn't say that all things work together the way we think they should or expect them to. Stephen's ministry was great but the stand he made for truth against the Sanhedrin needed to be taken. They needed to hear what he had to say and he needed to say it. The rulers of Israel needed to have one last opportunity to accept or reject the truth. Sadly, they choose to reject it and the fall out from that was initially devastating to the church – but not for long. Stephen willingly and obediently accomplished God's will for his life and his death accomplished more than he could ever have seen.

**1-3** – The death of Stephen was the signal for a widespread outbreak of persecution against the church in Jerusalem and all who claimed to be followers of Jesus Christ. This persecution was led by Saul, a young man who was there at Stephen's execution and gave his approval to his death. There'd been persecution before but it had been limited to the Apostles. Now, the enemies of the Gospel were unified in their hatred of believers and Saul, the agent of that persecution, became the first great and truly deadly enemy of the church. Things were getting bad for the Christians.

So, Stephen's death was just the beginning; the floodgates of persecution were now opened against the church. But, instead of focusing on the fact of the persecution, we should notice what the persecution resulted in. Vs1 says they believers were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. They had to get out of Dodge and head for the hills! The trouble for them in Jerusalem was so great that there was just no hanging around to see if it would die down. Luke tells us that Saul made havoc of the church, a verb that describes a wild animal mangling its prey. The tense of the verb is imperfect which means Saul didn't just start to ravage the church; he ravaged it and kept on ravaging it. He was making trouble and would continue to make trouble – until God stopped him.

Luke doesn't go into detail here of the extent of Saul's action against the church but we do learn more from Paul's own personal testimony elsewhere in Scripture. He persecuted believers "to the death" (**Acts 22:4**); entering into houses and synagogues (**Acts 22:19**). He had Christians imprisoned and beaten (**Acts 26:9-11**) forcing many to blaspheme (renounce their faith). He even pursued believers to foreign cities to arrest them and drag them back to Jerusalem to be punished. He said he was exceedingly enraged against them and I think he was correct but we must not think that Saul was particularly evil and just hated Christians or anything to do with God.

On the contrary, Saul was a devout Jew who was zealous for the Law. He really believed that persecuting believers was one way to serve God so he did it with a clear conscience. He was obeying the light that he had but, when God gave him more light, he obeyed that and became a Christian! Later he would say that his persecution of the church was done ignorantly in unbelief (**I Tim 1:13**) but God showed him mercy and saved him from himself. Just think of it, of all the enemies arrayed against the church in

these last few chapters, Saul of Tarsus is the last person on that list we would have chosen to become the great Apostle to the Gentiles! Clearly, Stephen's death affected him spiritually.

**4** – In the end, the trouble Saul made for the church was ineffective. He was determined to destroy the church but the more he tried, the more the gospel spread. This was because those who were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria planted the seeds of the gospel everywhere. This persecution did to the church what wind does to seeds; it scatters them and allows them to produce a greater harvest!

There are 2 different words for scattered in Greek. One means dispersed so the item is gone, like scattering ashes in the ocean. That's not the word used in **vs1** and **4**. This word means scattered in order to be planted. It's exactly like the Hebrew word jezreel, meaning "scattered" but also "planted." It's what God did with Israel, scattering them around the world because of their sin; but He also brought them back and planted them in their land. The disciples were scattered as a result of the persecution. But all the leaders did by scattering the disciples was to plant them in the places to which they had been scattered, for there they preached the word. These weren't "formal" missionaries as we know them; they were more like "accidental" missionaries who just talked about Jesus wherever they went.

Is this true of us? Wherever we find ourselves—whether scattered by work, education or some other reason—do we consider ourselves planted in that place by God? Do we put down roots and bear fruit for Jesus Christ? That's what these early Christians did. It's because of this activity that even the bad things that had happened to them served to advance the cause of Christ. It worked together for good to those who love God. They may have preferred a different way to achieve the same result but would it have? Not likely. A wise man once said, "It's not what happens to me in life that matters, what matters is my attitude towards what happens to me." I'm sure these believers suffered greatly in the midst of this persecution but the end result advanced the kingdom of God more than they ever could imagine!

**5-8** – If **vs4** is a glorious summary of the unexpected result of persecution, **vs5** and following is a specific example of just one who was scattered. We now see the mantle of leadership passing from Stephen to Philip, who actually begins the church's mission to the Gentiles. Philip begins his

ministry in Samaria, an area and a people with which the Jews have had a long-standing and deep-seated hostility towards, going back to ancient times.

This was originally the Northern kingdom of Israel but the Assyrians had conquered them and carried off most of the Jews into captivity and brought in Gentile people from other conquered areas. The remaining Jews and new Gentiles inter-married and produced a population that was no longer ethnically Jewish. To make matters worse, they built their own temple on Mt Gerizim and rejected the OT, except for the first 5 Books (Pentateuch). Jews looked down on the Samaritans so it was a very novel thing for Philip to lead in evangelizing this area.

How did he evangelize Samaria? He preached Christ to them! There was no canvassing the area to discover their greatest felt needs. Philip didn't organize focus groups to analyze the current trends to see what kind of approach would be best to accommodate the Samaritans religious expectations. No, he went there with a singular purpose and a singular message – to declare the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Why didn't he at least try to adopt some new method for this new mission field? Because he knew the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. It's through the preaching of the Word in formal settings and testifying to the Word in informal conversations that the power of God is revealed and known. That's how God has chosen to reach people. Transformations take place through the preaching of the Word. Philip preached the gospel, and God blessed his teaching.

Philip not only declared God's Word but he also demonstrated God's power by performing miracles. The Apostles were the ones who originally majored on miracles, yet both Stephen and Philip performed signs and wonders by the power of God. But the emphasis here is on the Word of God. The people paid attention to his message because they saw the miracles but they were saved by believing the Word. No one was ever saved just because of miracles.

Great joy- once again, we notice a great contrast. There had been great sorrow and pain in Jerusalem because of the new freedom to persecute Christians but that great sorrow and pain lead to great joy in Samaria. The people of Samaria who heard the Gospel and believed were also delivered

from physical affliction and from demonic control. But the most important thing they were delivered from was the guilt and penalty of their own sins! No wonder there was great joy in Samaria in those days. No doubt Jesus had sown the seed Himself in that area when He went through there in John 4 but now Philip, through his obedience and the power of the Spirit, was reaping the harvest.

The Gospel had now moved from the Jewish territory into Samaria where the people were part Jew and part Gentile. God in His grace had built a bridge between two estranged peoples and made the believers one in Christ and soon He would extend that bridge to Gentiles well beyond that region and include them also. But Philip's ministry in Samaria, as glorious as it was, was not without incident.

**9-11** – Simon was a man who enjoyed a fair amount of local fame. Simon was a miracle worker himself. He had impressed the people of Samaria by his tricks for some time, giving out that he was some great person. The people of Samaria were amazed at the things Simon could do and thus, they believed the things he said. But there is a major difference between the miracles of Simon and those of Philip. In the Bible, sorcery is always associated with occult, magical practices and often with the taking of mind altering drugs. If Simon had any real power, it was from Satan, not God. Simon's sorcery was empowered by Satan and was used to magnify himself while Philip's miracles were empowered by God and were used to glorify Christ.

The title Simon had acquired, God's Great Power is significant. It's was much more than just a stage name, as in Simon the Great. The title actually comes from the Samaritan Targum (their Bible). The "Great Power" is a title used in Samaritan hymns and religious writings as a substitute for the divine name. But how could the Samaritans refer to Simon as if he were God? Simon was able to do amazing things! Now, whether this was magical trickery he had learned along the way or it was true empowerment from a demonic power, we don't know but the effect was the same. The people were astonished by his power so much that they ascribed to him a divine title.

Note the dramatic contrast: Philip is bringing the message to Samaria that God had become man in Jesus Christ. But, they already had their own

incarnate deity in the person of Simon the magician – God’s Great Power. It’s a basic principle in Scripture that wherever God sows His true believers, Satan will also sow his counterfeits. In this case, he already had his counterfeit in place. Simon had been making a magnificent impact on the area for some time. This may be the very reason God called Philip to go to this location: to confront this man with the truth.

**12-17** – Surprisingly, there wasn’t a big showdown between Philip and Simon. Instead, for the first time in his life Simon saw a power that really did what it seemed to do. He’d been doing tricks. He’d been fooling people and knew that he had only been fooling them. Suddenly Philip was doing the real thing, not operating at all like Simon had been operating, not trying to draw attention to himself but rather pointing to Jesus Christ, and it was through the power of this Christ that real miracles were being done.

It seems Simon was convinced by Philip’s preaching and amazing miracles to the point that he declared belief, was baptized and became a follower of Philip and his ministry. Was Simon’s conversion real? Who knows? It appears to be and both Philip and the arriving Apostles accepted his statement of faith. This was necessary because, as human beings, we can’t see into another person’s heart. All we can do is judge based on a credible conversion and then wait for the fruit to be revealed. That’s what Philip did.

**18-23** – If Simon had been impressed by the power of Philip then the power of Peter and John must have blown him away completely. Simon was so impressed by the Apostle’s ability to convey the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands that he was ready to shell out some serious dough to possess that ability for himself. Now, Simon’s sin wasn’t in his desire to possess the power of the Holy Spirit; his sin is found in the way he wanted to acquire that power into his life. Simon’s sin stemmed from a false notion of the Holy Spirit. He thought the Holy Spirit was merely a power that could be bought or sold. He wanted to control the working of the Spirit and he regarded the Holy Spirit as merely a power he could use as he wanted, instead of as a Person who should be ruling his life.

Simon didn’t really want the Holy Spirit for himself, he just wanted the ability to impart the power of the Holy Spirit to others as he saw fit. This ability would give him a lot of spiritual authority. He wanted to possess spiritual power for personal ends. Thus, his name has been used to refer to the act

of buying or selling church offices or privileges – simony, because it is done in the same spirit as Simon. This is the idea that God’s blessings can be bought; that we can pay God for what we want from Him. You might think that this practice went out with the Dark Ages but it is alive and well in church today, if only in a slightly different variety.

There are quite a few churches that consider the Holy Spirit as a power to be tapped into. If you want to have power in your life; the thing to do is to get more of the Holy Spirit. They’re not thinking of buying the Holy Spirit but they are thinking of ways to get more of this power. If we have it, then we can use it in our lives to overcome our problems, live victoriously, or whatever. But, The Holy Spirit is not an “it.” The Holy Spirit is a Person. He is God. When we get that clearly in mind, then we can see that the object of our relationship to the Holy Spirit is not that we might have more of Him so that we can use Him, but rather that He might have more of us and use us. Simon didn’t understand this, and neither do many believers today. (“Come get some!”)

Peter’s response seems harsh but it was necessary to get Simon’s attention. Did Peter believe Simon was saved? We don’t know. All we do know is that Peter used some of the same terminology Jesus used on him when he refused to let Him wash his feet. Peter knew that the bitterness and sin Simon was harboring in his heart would prevent him from growing in his faith, if in fact, he had a true, saving faith.

**24-25** – How did Simon respond? “Pray...for me!” Peter had told Simon to pray. He was to repent of his wickedness and pray to God. So when Simon replied by saying, “Pray for me,” he wasn’t being pious at all but quite disobedient. His response is a cop out. He’s refusing to do what he’d been told he should do and was passing the buck to Peter.

Do we do that? Do we pass the buck for our spiritual growth to other people? Do we pass it off to the pastor? Lots of people try to do that. They think that somehow the pastor can solve their problems. He can’t. He can’t even solve his own problems, let alone yours. If you’re sinning, if you’re falling short of God’s Word and God’s will for your life, you are the one who must repent of the sin. If prayer is needed, you’re the one who must pray. The Bible says it’s our “iniquities” that separate us from God. It’s because of our sins that He will not hear us (**Isa 59:2**). If you have sinned, you must

confess it and repent of the sin; then your fellowship with the Father will be restored and you can pray. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9).

In every church where there really is the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord will cause the Gospel message to be spread abroad. It doesn't necessarily take severe persecution, although it could happen. Thankfully, God has granted us the unique ability to serve Him freely, willingly and effectively in our own society and culture. He never meant the Gospel message to be like a nut shut up in a shell or like ointment enclosed in a box. The vessel that contains the Gospel message must be broken so that the precious perfume of the message of God's love can be poured out to sweeten the air. 😊