

## THE GOSPEL SPREAD THROUGH PERSECUTION

Acts 8:1-40 (Key Verse: 4)

*“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.*

In today's passage we are going to learn how the gospel of Jesus Christ spread through ordinary men and women like you and me. The men and women were persecuted and scattered because of the gospel, and yet they preached the word wherever they went. Therefore, we are going to learn how these believers could continue to preach the very same gospel that they were being persecuted for. Furthermore, we are going to learn the manner in which the believers shared the gospel and how the people responded to the gospel. I pray that God may be with us all to receive one word, so that we too can respond to persecution differently and continue to preach the gospel to campus students, our friends, family and to the ends of the world.

The passage today begins after the death of Stephen who was stoned to death by the members of the Sanhedrin as we learnt from last week's message. Now today we are informed of a new character, Saul, a very zealous Pharisee who supervised and approved the killing of Stephen. Saul was stirred up by the words of Stephen, and in **verse 1b-3** it says: *“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. **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. Godly men buried Stephen and they mourned for him, they were moved by his words and attitude when he died, saying: *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”* But for Paul and his company, this was not the case, rather they were stirred up all the more and wanted to destroy the Christian church completely. And so they started a violent movement dragging out Christian believers (men and women) out of their homes and throwing them in prisons, persecuting them. They did all this so that they the Christian believers can stop with the speaking of the name of Jesus.

As a result, many of the Christian believers, men and women scattered all over Judea and Samaria, and the apostles remained in Jerusalem. At this point it seemed like the church had collapsed, it seemed like the scenery after Jesus' death when the apostles were left in a room in Jerusalem. For the men and women, it seemed like they have lost so much because of this church, separated from their families, loss of jobs, children forced to leave school, living a life on the run. For Saul and his company on the other hand, it seemed like they had finally won and destroyed the Christian church.

This indeed seemed like a tragic time for the Christian church, to the naked eye it seemed like the church was falling apart. However in parallel to this event something magnificent was taking place. Let us look at the **key verse 4**: *“4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.* The people were not scattered just to disappear into thin air, but like seed were scattered in Judea and Samaria to preach the gospel, planting Jesus in the people's hearts. After the day of the Pentecost the Christian church grew so magnificently, and Satan wanted to destroy it by using men like Saul to persecute the church. Satan failed, instead of destroying the church, persecution became a window of opportunity for the church to spread the gospel to Judea and Samaria. Just like the early, we also might experience some persecution of some sort, we might experience life situations that make it difficult for us to follow Jesus and continue to participate in the ministry. We might be going through a tough time in our studies, and think maybe we should put church aside, we might be having financial problems, family problems, demanding jobs which just pulls us away from serving God.

When the men and women of the early church were persecuted and scattered, they preached the gospel wherever they went. Like seeds, they planted Jesus Christ in the people's hearts wherever they went. How could they do this, when they had somewhat real problems like job losses, separation from their loved ones. How could they preach the very same gospel they were persecuted for? Firstly, they could do this because they had Jesus in their hearts, they had found great treasure in Jesus. They remembered daily what Jesus has done, the gift of eternal life, the washing of one's sins and living a life free of suffering and torment from the power of sin and death. And so, the men and women who were just like me and you were moved to share this good news with all people, in Judea and Samaria.

Secondly, in **Acts 1:8** Jesus said: *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* The men and women could preach the gospel wherever they went, because of the word that Jesus had spoken. Through persecution, Jesus fulfilled what he had spoken, and moved by the Holy Spirit the men and women preached the gospel wherever they went.

How exactly did the men and women preach the gospel wherever they went and what was the result? To understand this let us look at the journey of Phillip, who was one of the men who scattered when the church was persecuted.

**Firstly, they spread the gospel by proclaiming the messiah.** Let us look at **verse 5-8**: *"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."* When Phillip went down to Samaria he proclaimed the Messiah, he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Phillip proclaimed salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ, who was crucified on the cross for the forgiveness of sins of all mankind. And so, at the hearing of Phillip, who with power proclaimed Jesus Christ, and performed many signs, they paid attention to him. Impure spirits came out of many, the paralyzed and lame could be healed, and great joy filled the city. All this happened when Phillip proclaimed the Messiah.

Furthermore, when Phillip preached the messiah in Samaria, he could drive out deception in the land for there was a man named Simon who practiced sorcery or magic we can call it. This man had some powers which definitely did not come from God, but Satan and yet all people, high and low paid attention to him and said: *"This man is rightly called the Great Power of God."* It is when Phillip proclaimed the Messiah that people's eyes could be open and were freed from deception. Today many people, young and old are living under so much deception, they are tormented by the sudden explosion of sangomas, and all sorts of spirits. Because of all these things many people are wondering around tormented by the power of Satan, sin, and death. What this people need is to hear and receive the gospel of Jesus Christ to be freed from this deception and torment.

When I graduated, I was looking forward to a very good life, a nice car, good job and the likes. However, things did not go as I expected. I was the least paid among my peers who I graduated with, there was this guy who was in my class in final year and we both worked for the same company. But to my surprise I found out he had more benefits than me, medical aid, car allowance and decent salary. Also, that year when I tried buy a small car, within a week I got an accident and it was written off. So, people told me that there is something wrong in my life, my father suggested I go see someone to rid off this bad luck and I believed him. But glory to God for sending Sh. Jacob and Sh. Rebekah into

my life, they proclaimed the Messiah to me, and through one word from **John 14:1** (*Do not let hearts be troubled, trust in God, trust also in me*) I could put my trust in Jesus and repented from the deception of thinking that there is something wrong with my life and I can get help in this world.

Through preaching the word, Sh. Jacob and Shds Rebekah could rescue me from the deep dark evil of this world, just as Phillip rescued the people in the city of Samaria. In verse **12-13** it says: *“12 But when they believed Phillip 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.”* Even Simon, the sorcerer, when he witnessed the power of proclaiming the messiah, which enabled Phillip to perform many signs and miracles he also believed and was baptized too. Because of Phillip, who in the midst of persecution proclaimed the gospel, Samaria accepted the word of God. And the Church in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to Samaria to pray for the new believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit. The people were just baptized in the name of Jesus, so they needed to receive the Holy Spirit so that they too can be filled with power and be used as witnesses of Jesus Christ in Samaria and to the ends of the world. When the people received the Holy Spirit, they changed, power dwelt in them and were ready to be used to spread the gospel further.

Now Simon, who was fascinated by Phillip, was even at much awe when he saw Peter and John laying hands on the people and granting them the Holy Spirit. However, though Simon had believed and followed Phillip, Satan grabbed his heart and filled it with sinful desires, filled it with bitterness and set it on worldly things. Instead of repenting daily at the hearing of the gospel message, Simon entertained his worldly desires, the desire to be praised by the people. And so he wanted to use the things of God to satisfy his worldly desires, he wanted to buy his way to the top in the things of God. This is not how the things of God work, the ministry of God is a matter of the heart, when we come to God, we need to come with a sincere heart to give glory to him not to glorify ourselves. As Christian believers we need to surrender our lives to God and allow him to lead us according to his wisdom and plan. To help Simon, Peter rebuked him in **verse 20-23**: *“....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.”*

**Secondly, the man and women could spread the gospel by following and obeying God’s leading:**

Again let us consider Phillip’s case, let us look at **verse 26-27**: *26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Phillip, “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 had gone to Jerusalem to worship”* While in Samaria, Phillip was leading a very successful ministry with many coming to the faith under his leadership. And now the angel of the Lord came to Phillip and commanded him to go South on a desert road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. Phillip, did hesitate but followed God’s leading. Going down to the desert might have seemed like a small ministry, but Phillip followed God’s leading. Also when Phillip got to the desert, he met the Ethiopian eunuch who was a high profile official who came to Jerusalem to worship. Because of his status as a high official, it might be challenging to preach the gospel, but Phillip obeyed God’s command. And when he heard the man reading from Isaiah, he asked him do you understand what you are reading? Phillip, did not shy away from asking the high profile official this question, for he believed he was led by God. And indeed

when he asked the official this question, it initiated a wonderful Bible study with the official. Even though the man was high profile, Phillip an ordinary man like me and you could help him.

The eunuch read these words from Isaiah in **verse 32-33**: *“32 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.”* The Ethiopian eunuch was moved by these words and could relate, but he was missing very vital information, who is spoken of here. And so, Phillip, started a Bible study with him, revealing to him that it is Jesus who is spoken of here. Phillip revealed to him that just as the scripture outlines, Jesus is the sacrificial lamb for our transgressions. He bore all our shame, and iniquities. Moved by this Bible study, the eunuch commanded the chariots to stop when he saw water and Phillip Baptized him. Through Bible study, Phillip preached the Messiah to the Ethiopian official and the man could receive Jesus in his heart and was baptized.

### **Conclusion**

From today's passage we have learnt how ordinary men and women just like me and you could spread the gospel in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the world. Persecution did not hinder this glorious work of God, but rather it was a key activator that scattered the men and women like seed that planted the Messiah in the people's hearts wherever they went. When the men and women proclaimed the messiah, many people were transformed, they were freed from the torment of sin, they were freed from deception, they were healed from diseases, and many came to the faith.

One of the key directions that God granted the UBF ministry is world mission, by sending university graduates as missionaries to university campuses across the world. When I joined the UBF ministry, I heard and witnessed many Korean missionaries who left their comfortable homes in great economies, they faced many barriers and challenges such as culture, language and getting a simple job. Indeed, their lives were like those who were persecuted and scattered. But God used their lives preciously, through them many could receive Jesus, many could repent and live free of deception and torment by sin and death.

Let us therefore take courage from the early church, let us take courage from the UBF missionaries' lives. Let us come to Jesus sincerely, surrender our lives to him and follow his leading. Let us not see persecution as hindrance, but by faith see it as an opportunity to spread the messiah to the ends of the earth.