

## Growth Anyhow

Acts 7:54-8:8

July 23, 2023

Last week we read about the election of deacons and why that was such an important part of keeping the church together. This week we're going to hear more about what happened to two of those deacons: Stephen and Philip. We're also going to hear what God did, anyhow.

The rest of Acts 6 tells us that Stephen was a man full of God's grace and power, and that he did "great wonders and miraculous signs" among the people. That naturally attracted attention, just as it did with Peter and John. And like them, Stephen also was brought before the Sanhedrin, and asked to explain himself. But unlike Peter and John, Stephen doesn't confine himself to a bare minimum of a defense. Stephen goes through the whole of Jewish history, and ends his speech by saying, "Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

What do you think the Sanhedrin thought of that?

Our Scripture lesson for today picks up at Acts 7:54 and continues to chapter 8 verse 8. Hear now the word of God.



<sup>54</sup> When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> 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. <sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

<sup>57</sup> At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> 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.

<sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> 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.

8 And Saul approved of their killing him.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup>Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. <sup>3</sup>But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

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

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. (TBTG)

Wait, what? We start with a stoning, move through terror and banishment, and end with great joy? That's not what we'd expect! And the church back then must have had emotional whiplash! This passage focuses on the experiences of two of the deacons; and their experiences affected not only the church of their time, but also the church for all time. So let's look in more detail at Stephen and Philip.

Stephen, as we heard last week, was a Hellenistic Jew, meaning that he'd been raised in Greek culture. He was very well trained in Scripture, well enough to recount Genesis, Exodus, and part of First Kings, to make his point that God is greater than what happens in the Temple. He was definitely NOT one of those people who say, "We've never done it that way before!" He was more of a "Move fast and break things" kind of guy.

He basically said, to the Sanhedrin, in the Temple, "God is doing a new thing, and you are getting in the way!" He quoted Isaiah to back up what he said. And, he said that God had already sent the promised Messiah, who was the very same Jesus they'd condemned for blasphemy not long before. Stephen's vision of Jesus as the Son of Man – which was who Jesus had said he was to the Sanhedrin – that was the final straw. The learned scholars and political leaders were so angry that they threw their own procedures away when they threw those stones.

Philip was also a Hellenistic Jew, as Stephen was. He also had been raised in Greek culture and was very well trained in Scripture as Stephen was. But his personality was very different from Stephen's. Philip was not a "move fast and break things" kind of guy; he was more of a "when life gives you lemons, make lemonade" kind of guy.

So what does Philip do? Well, when he's forced to leave Jerusalem, he goes to a city in Samaria. Now Samaria wasn't physically very far away, maybe only a long day's walk for a man. But politically and socially, Samaria was VERY far away. Samaritans regarded Judeans as enemies. Understandably, because 150 years before, the Maccabees had destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim. Judeans saw that as a good thing, because God should have only one temple – the one in Jerusalem. The Samaritans? Not so much! They considered that their temple went back to Moses

and therefore predated even Solomon. Maybe Philip was remembering what Jesus said about loving your enemies, when his fellow Jews kicked him out.

And there in Samaria, Philip told anyone who would listen that Jesus was God's Messiah; and he backed up what he said by driving out demons and healing the lame, just as Peter had done in Jerusalem, and just as Jesus himself had done throughout Galilee and Judea, and at least once in Samaria. The Samaritans listened. They didn't fold their arms and scowl and say, "I don't know about THAT; that's not how we do things around here." On the contrary. The Samaritans listened carefully and were filled with joy as they accepted the word of God. The church began its worldwide expansion in a Samaritan city, through a man who had been forced out of his home. And that worldwide expansion includes every Christian living outside of what's now Israel. Philip made some mighty fine lemonade out of the lemons that Saul, among others, had given him – lemonade that we are still drinking today.

Which brings us to Saul, who has not yet become Paul. Saul is introduced to us as a zealous uprooter of what he saw as blasphemy. In his mind, it wasn't enough just to stone a spokesman; you also had to get rid of everyone who shared the spokesman's belief. So it's ironic that though he thought he was stamping out this Jesus movement by arresting every follower he could get, he was in fact causing it to spread outside the walls of Jerusalem. When the Christians were forced out of Jerusalem, they brought their faith with them wherever they went - to all Judea and Samaria, and from there, to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus had said that they would in Acts 1. And the result of all of this was joy. Remember, "there was great joy in that city", not only the city in Samaria that Philip went to, but in every city and town that welcomed the good news about Jesus.

Terrible things happened to the church in its infancy in Jerusalem. And yet, though the persecutors caused harm, God worked through them for good in ways they would never have imagined. Because of the persecutors the church was forced out of the Temple, which had been its early incubator. That turned out to be a blessing in ways that the persecutors couldn't have imagined. The first blessing was that the faith spread to all the places where the Christians went, like with Philip going to Samaria. The second blessing of being forced out was that Christianity didn't get wiped out when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 67 AD. Though that war caused immense suffering and wholesale slaughter, Judaism itself survived, because it had been in existence for more than a thousand years at that point; and Jews lived in many other places throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean world other than in Jerusalem. But Christianity had just begun. Had it not been forced out of Jerusalem early on, to take root in other countries, it would have been destroyed when Jerusalem fell. We might not be here today if our distant ancestors hadn't been forced into the world outside of Jerusalem. This is just one more reason to thank God for all that he has done for us and for everyone.

So what do we learn from all this? We learn that God can bring about growth anyhow. Even in the midst of problems. Even if one of the deacons is killed by an angry mob. Even if the mother church shrinks and our fellow church members are scattered far and wide. God can bring growth anyhow. And the growth God brings, bears the fruit of joy.

We who are here at West Valley today are fortunate. We live in America; nobody is dragging us out of our homes and throwing us in prison. Christians are still persecuted to this day in many other countries in the world; but not here. There are no laws preventing us from talking about Jesus anywhere we go. We certainly aren't going to be stoned by an angry mob for saying that we see Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

And, yes, we have our share of problems. Our church used to be large but now it's small; our church used to be younger but now is older. Volunteers move away or pass on to glory. But those problems are certainly not unique to West Valley. Religion News published an article last year about churches in Northern California, saying that many more churches are closing than are being started; and the property of an existing church is often sold for commercial purposes. The majority of churches in Northern California now are even smaller than we are. We are actually ahead of the curve because we are thinking now about the best way to ensure that there will always be a witness to Jesus Christ here at this location. We are going to make sure that this property doesn't get sold for commercial uses. Plenty of other churches in our region didn't make those choices while they could. <https://religionnews.com/2022/03/15/thousands-of-churches-close-every-year-what-will-happen-to-their-buildings/>

AND. God can bring about growth anyhow. If God can bring explosive growth to churches in sub-Saharan Africa, God can bring growth here in California. If God can bring growth to churches even in Muslim countries where Christians are still thrown into prison, then God can also bring growth here in Silicon Valley. We don't know the details of how God might bring growth. We don't know what exactly God has in mind for us. Of course not; we are not capable of knowing the mind of God. But we do know that the church planters feel strongly called to be here, and have experience with Alpha groups, with church start-ups, and with Asian culture. And we also know that God is very much at work in our midst here and now. The testimonies that we share with one another make that very clear.

God can bring about growth anyhow, no matter what; and the fruit of God's growth is joy.

Let's pray.