

I. THE GOSPEL SPREADS THROUGH PERSECUTION

A. In the beginning of the NT Church the believers lived in Jerusalem and the church grew in that city, but the presence of large numbers of Christians began to make the Jewish leaders angry.

1. The Jewish leaders first attacked the leaders of the church, especially the Apostles.

- a. First, Peter and John were imprisoned and then threatened after the miracle at the Beautiful Gate.
- b. Then, all the Apostles were imprisoned, but they were released by an angel; then the Jews beat them.
- c. Then, one of the first seven deacons, Stephen, was stoned to death. He was the first NT Christian martyr.

2. Soon, the anger of the enemies of God's people was directed to all the members of the church.

- a. In those days, the Jewish leaders entered the homes of Christians and arrested and imprisoned them.
- b. Some were even put to death for the name of Jesus. It was a difficult time to be a follower of Jesus.
- c. This led to many of the believers (except the apostles) leaving Jerusalem where it was no longer safe. They travelled into the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria and brought the Gospel. Thus the Gospel spread.

B. One place where the Gospel was preached was in Samaria [Remember how the Samaritans were enemies of the Jews, but remember, too, that Jesus had commanded that the Gospel be preached also in Samaria].

1. Philip, one of the seven deacons, an evangelist preached in Samaria.

- a. Philip did many mighty miracles in Samaria by the power of Jesus: he cast out devils, healed the sick and the lame. These miracles were proof that his message had God's approval (Acts 8:6-7).
- b. Many people believed in Jesus among the Samaritans, so much so that the church in Jerusalem sent Peter and John, and they laid hands on the Samaritans who then received the Holy Spirit [Every time the Gospel went to a new people, the Samaritans and, later, the Gentiles God gave the Holy Spirit].
- c. One man among the Samaritans was very impressed that by the laying on of the Apostles' hands people received the Holy Spirit. His name was Simon. He had been a sorcerer, and he tried to buy the power of giving the Spirit with money. Peter rebuked him sharply (Acts 8:18-24).

2. In the middle of a very fruitful period of preaching among the Samaritans, Philip received an unusual command. "Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza which is desert" (Acts 8:26).

- a. Philip may have been puzzled at this command. Stand in the desert! To whom will I preach there? But Philip obeyed the Lord and waited. Soon he heard the noise of a chariot and then he saw a chariot.
- b. The chariot belonged to a very important servant of the Queen of Ethiopia. He was her treasurer and was returning from Jerusalem where he had been worshipping. He was reading aloud from a scroll.
- c. The Spirit said to Philip, "Go near, and join thyself to this chariot" (Acts 8:29).
- d. As Philip ran to meet the chariot he heard the man reading from the book of Isaiah the prophet, chapter 53. He asked the man if he understood, and was invited to sit in the chariot. And Philip preached Jesus. The man believed, was baptized and went home to Ethiopia rejoicing.

II. THE CONVERSION OF SAUL OF TARSUS

A. Saul of Tarsus was the worst of the persecutors of the church. We last saw him holding the coats of the men who stoned Stephen to death.

1. Saul was a very religious Pharisee who believed that the followers of Jesus had left the true God and that the religion of Jesus must be destroyed.

- a. Saul hunted for followers of Jesus, arrested them, and had many of them put to death.
- b. So filled with fury was he against the followers of Jesus that he was not satisfied to destroy them in Jerusalem. He went to the high priest and asked for permission to go as far as Damascus to arrest them.
- c. Here is what he said about himself: "I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities" (26:11).

2. One day as he was making a journey to Damascus the life of Saul of Tarsus was changed forever.

- a. As he journeyed a bright light from heaven shone all around him and he heard a voice from heaven.
- b. "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" said the voice (Acts 9:5). Who art thou, Lord? asked Saul. "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," answered Jesus from heaven.
- c. Saul was terrified and amazed. Here was Jesus, the one He wanted to destroy, speaking to him from heaven. So, it was true. Jesus was alive? Would Jesus kill Saul? What did Jesus want with him?

B. Jesus told Saul to go to Damascus and he would be told what to do.

1. The men who were with Saul heard a voice but did not understand the speech. They led Saul into the city b/c the vision had blinded Saul. He could not see for three days during which he prayed & waited.

- a. In Damascus was a follower of Jesus called Ananias (not the Ananias married to Sapphira). The Lord appeared to him and commanded him to go to Straight Street and ask for a man called Saul.
- b. Ananias knew who Saul was: "Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem ..." (Acts 9:13).
- c. You can understand the fear of Ananias: if the chief of the persecutors is in town you would not want to volunteer to be the one who visits him to restore his sight! But Jesus assured Ananias that Saul was no longer a danger. He was a chosen vessel to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles.

2. After Ananias visited Saul, restored Saul's sight and baptized Saul, Saul began to preach in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah and Saviour of God.

- a. The followers of Jesus were amazed. The chief persecutor was now a follower of Jesus and a preacher of the faith that he once wanted to destroy!
- b. The unbelieving Jews were furious: they expected a man who would arrest their enemies the followers of Jesus. Instead, this Saul preaches Jesus as the Messiah.
- c. The Jews planned to kill Saul but he escaped over the wall of the city in a basket.

III. CORNELIUS AND PETER: THE GOSPEL GOES TO THE GENTILES (That the Gospel should go to the Gentiles was so new and strange to the early church that God gave two remarkable visions to prepare God's people for it).

A. In the city of Caesarea lived a centurion, a Roman soldier in charge of 100 soldiers.

1. This centurion was called Cornelius and he worshipped God but he was not a Jew.

- a. One day as Cornelius was praying he saw a vision: an angel told him that his prayers had been heard.
- b. "Send men to Joppa and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter" (Acts 10:5).
- c. This man, Simon Peter, is staying with a tanner (a man who works with leather and animal skins) whose name is Simon in a house by the sea in the city of Joppa. He will tell you what you must do.

2. So, Cornelius called two of his servants and one of his soldiers and sent them to Joppa.

- a. No doubt, Cornelius wondered who this Simon Peter was, and what he would tell him.
- b. But he knew it must be something very important and he invited all his friends to hear this man when he would come.

B. Meanwhile, as the three travelers made their way from Caesarea to Joppa (about 30 miles) Peter received a vision also. Peter was on the flat roof of the house of Simon the tanner and he was praying.

1. Peter became very hungry and while dinner was being prepared Peter fell into a trance.

- a. Peter saw heaven opened and what looked like a white sheet came down. On the sheet were many different kinds of animals, four-footed beasts, wild beasts, creeping things and birds.
- b. A voice from heaven said, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat" (v. 13). But Peter protested: Peter knew that the animals on the sheet were unclean. As a Jew he could not eat such animals. Was this a test?
- c. So Peter answered, "Not so, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean" (v. 14). But said the voice, "What God hath cleansed that call not thou common" (v. 15).
- d. Three times the same vision occurred, and three times the same command: Rise Peter kill and eat!

2. As Peter was wondering what this vision might mean, there was a knock at the door. The three men from Cornelius in Caesarea were standing at the door. They were asking for Simon Peter.

- a. When Peter asked what they wanted, they explained how their master Cornelius had seen an angel and had sent then to Peter to fetch him. Peter took the three men in and the next morning they set off for the house of Cornelius.
- b. When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house he discovered that they were all waiting for him, keen to hear what message Peter had from the Lord. Cornelius received Peter, fell down at Peter's feet and worshipped him, but Peter said, "Stand up, I myself also am a man" (v. 26).
- c. Cornelius then told Peter how the angel had appeared to him, and Peter understood now that the vision he had seen, "What God hath cleansed that call not thou common," meant that the Gospel is for the Gentiles as well as the Jews!
- d. So, Peter preached the good news of the Gospel of Christ crucified and risen again: "To him all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sin" (v.43).
- e. As Peter spoke the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his house and they began to speak in tongues [another sign that the Gospel was spreading to another group; remember how the Samaritans had spoken in tongues]; and Peter commanded water to be brought so that these Gentiles could be baptized.