

WEEK 4 of 9

THE CHURCH GROWS INTO JUDEA AND SAMARIA

Acts 6:8-9:31

WEEK FOUR MAIN IDEA

The church moves past the disciples' direct influence, but continues in Jesus' path of suffering.

CHANGES

DISCUSS

Answer whether these changes are positive or negative. When they answer, ask them why, or ask them if it could also be the opposite.

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|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Changing a tire | 5. Changing your name |
| 2. Changing your address | 6. Changing the world |
| 3. Changing your attitude | 7. Changing your social security # |
| 4. Changing a diaper | 8. Changing political parties |

The word “change” can be pretty flexible. It can be positive or negative, depending on your situation or disposition. In Acts 6-9, we see a **series of major changes in how the church grows into the surrounding areas of Judea** (to the south) **and Samaria** (to the north).

The first change has already begun with the last disruption we read about last week – racism against the Greek widows in the church. To resolve it, the disciples changed the leadership dynamic, giving authority to seven deacons to manage this issue.

In the story, **another change is beginning as two of these deacons, Stephen and Philip, take center stage** instead of Peter and John.

STEPHEN

As soon as the deacons are named in Acts 6:5, the focus turns to Stephen and all the “wonders and signs” he was doing in the temple in Jerusalem. In same vein of Jesus and the disciples, Stephen is preaching in the full power of the Spirit and the religious leaders conspire against him and arrest him.

At his trial, Stephen preaches an amazing sermon that ends with a piercing indictment against the Jewish leaders:

Acts 7:51-53

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

So far in Acts, this is the third long sermon recorded (Acts 2 and 3 previously). Each time this happens, **many people come to faith in Jesus and the church grows**. This time, however, there is a big change:

Acts 7:57-58

⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ 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.

Before, the leaders feared the outcome of hurting the disciples, now they are making Stephen the first martyr. **Ironically, it has the same effect:**

Acts 8:1

And Saul approved of his execution. 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.

Stephen’s execution is actually the catalyst that moves the church into Judea and Samaria. Not only was the church scattered, it was also fiercely persecuted:

Acts 8:3

But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

We will pick Saul’s story back up later, but for now **his actions show us what persecution looked like – going into people’s homes and dragging them to prison** for believing Jesus is the Messiah.

DISCUSS

What kind of effect would it have on the American church if this type of persecution came around today? Answers will vary; just get them discussing.

During this big change of scattering and persecution in the church, Acts focuses in on another deacon named Philip:

PHILIP

Acts 8:4-8

⁴Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. ⁶And 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. ⁷For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸So there was much joy in that city.

OBSERVE

How do the crowds react to Philip's preaching in Samaria? It seems as though everyone in the city was paying attention to Philip

Philip goes into the town of Samaria with the gospel in the power of the Spirit, and revival breaks out across the whole city. But then a curious thing happens:

Acts 8:14-17

¹⁴Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, ¹⁵who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

Even though the Samaritans believed, Peter and John needed to lay hands on them for them to receive the Holy Spirit.

Here is something to think about: over the past few weeks, we have looked at how the Holy Spirit confirms the work of God in people – confirming the 12 disciples in Jerusalem as a true work of God (Acts 2 and 3), and confirming the deacons' gospel message (Stephen in Acts 6 and Philip in Acts 8).

DISCUSS

What kinds of things could the Holy Spirit be confirming by directing the apostles to lay hands on the new Samaritan believers? Let them think through this a little. Push gently for a response or two.

There are a few possible answers:

The Spirit confirms for the Samaritans that this is a true work of God.

The Spirit confirms for the apostles that God is working in Samaria.

The Spirit confirms for everyone that the church goes beyond Jerusalem.

Samaritans who believe the gospel marks another **big change for the church: people outside of Jerusalem are now disciples of Jesus**. This, in part, is why the Holy Spirit needed to confirm it.

GROWING BY “PHILIPS”

And the Holy Spirit is not done with Philip. He sends him down to Judea, where he preaches the gospel to others.

Moreover, it is not just Philip who is scattered all over the region and preaches the gospel. **What is happening with Philip is happening to many of the 5,000+ believers who were in Jerusalem**. This is important to note because **it is not the apostles that are spreading the gospel, but others whom they have discipled**.

DISCUSS

Who was it that preached the gospel to you when you finally believed?

Look for answers, but don't press if people just want to think about it.

Now consider who preached the gospel to them? Again, look for answers, but don't press.

What most of us will find is a long list of “Philips” who were faithful to show others the gospel just as they were taught it. This is one way the church grows and changes – with ordinary people following an extraordinary Spirit.

GROWING BY “STEPHENS”

However, what we find in Acts is also true today – you can't have “Philips” without having “Stephens.” Put another way, expansion and persecution go hand-in-hand.

The stoning of Stephen in Acts 7 was like an explosion in an oil refinery that continues to burn today. The next great bearer of persecution is one of the great persecutors himself – Saul of Tarsus.

When Jesus first appears to Saul, his life is turned upside down and he is sent to a man named Ananias. In Jesus' instructions to Ananias, he gives him perspective on who Saul is going to be:

Acts 9:15-16

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Notice the emphasis on “how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” This falls in line with other things Jesus told his disciples:

Matthew 5:11-12

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

John 15:20-21

²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.

From the life of Stephen, Saul, and many others throughout history, God has consistently used suffering in the lives of people to reach the ends of the earth.

EVIDENCE OF STEPHEN

DISCUSS

In what ways do you face suffering or persecution as a disciple of Jesus?

This can be an uncomfortable question, but see if anyone will answer.

It can feel confusing to answer this question. On one hand, you don’t want to say something too light (like missing out of some golf tournaments due to Sunday commitments). On the other, many of us don’t face serious persecution, especially compared to disciples in Asia or Africa.

For right now, let’s embrace the “mid-grade” persecution. Between jail and missing golf tournaments, there are ways to embrace persecution:

Becoming stigmatized among your friends for sharing your story

Facing a demotion or termination at work because you won’t follow them in sin

Losing connections with family because they don’t want a Christian influence

DISCUSS

Can you guys think of more “mid-grade” persecution? Try to think of some examples in your own life to help you along.

The comfort of the church growing by “Stephens” is that our suffering and persecution is not in vain. There will always be hostility toward the gospel in our world, but we can be confident that God will use it to bring life and hope to more people.

EVIDENCE OF PHILIP

The comfort of the church growing by “Philips” is that we do not need to go through another authority to get to Jesus. The Spirit used the disciples to reach Philip, the Spirit used Philip to reach others, and the Spirit can use us in the same way.

Previously, we asked about the “Philips” in your life – ordinary people who spoke the truth of Jesus to you.

CONSIDER

Who might be some people that you are a “Philip” to? If they answer, great; the aim is to get them thinking.

PRAY

Let’s spend some time in prayer for all the believers facing persecution this morning – “mid-grade” or otherwise.

Pray for strength to withstand.

Pray for strength to press on in the face of serious opposition.

Pray for courage and boldness.