



The Book of Acts
Bringing in a New Dispensation
The Gospel vs. Sorcery
Acts 8:1-11

Verse 1 —

And Saul was consenting unto his death. The Greek word **consenting** carries the idea of pleasure. The same word is used in Romans 1:32 where Paul describes those with reprobate minds and take part in fornication and wickedness:

“Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.”

Saul was **consenting** with pleasure **unto** the **death** of Stephen. It may indicate that Saul had influence even and was part of the decision to kill Stephen. If the Sanhedrin voted, we are not told, but if they did, was Saul part of the voting body? We made an assumption last time that Saul’s mentor, Gamaliel, was likely taking part in Stephen’s execution, although we can’t be definitive—the passage doesn’t identify or mention any dissenters in the group. So we might assume Saul was falling into lockstep with his mentor.

There are now multitudes **at Jerusalem**, who are a part of the Jewish assembly/ekklesia (translated church in the English Bible) and there was **great persecution**. **Great** is the Greek word, *meGas*. **And they were all scattered abroad**. Does the use of the word **all** mean all who were being persecuted, or all of the Jews in the church? It is obvious that **all** did not leave the city. We know the apostles stayed (can we assume, in hiding?). Again, we have to make an assumption that a certain part of the church was persecuted and that **all** of those were scattered. Why were some persecuted and others not? Luke does not tell us. Were the Jewish leaders rounding up the church leaders, and the leaders were **all scattered**? Whoever was scattered, verse 4 states they preached the word.

It's worthwhile to explore the concept of church gatherings in the New Testament and how they might differ from the church today. In the early Christian church, believers often met in smaller groups within homes, as seen in passages like Acts 2:46 and Romans 16:5. These intimate gatherings allowed for mutual support and the sharing of spiritual gifts.

However, it's also important to acknowledge that the New Testament doesn't explicitly forbid large assemblies. The focus is more on the nature of the gathering and the purpose behind it, rather than the size of the congregation. As believers, we can find value in both large and small gatherings, as long as they rightly divide the word of truth, 2 Timothy 2:15. (Those church assemblies today are often difficult to find).

As we seek to understand and apply biblical principles to our lives and our church, it's essential to approach the text with humility and an open mind. While the New Testament provides a rich source of wisdom and guidance, it's also helpful to consider the cultural and historical context in which it was written. This is all a part of rightly dividing. Ultimately, our goal should be to create environments where people can gain a knowledge of God's Word, regardless of the size of the gathering.

But after the scattering, it appears there were no more large assemblies, and in fact, we never see large assemblies like this again in the New Testament. If we think the New Testament model for churches is a large building with thousands of people, that just isn't the case. I am not saying that large churches are in and of themselves non-biblical, just that they are not the model we see in the New Testament.

The church was **scattered...throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria**. This is the beginning of the fulfillment of Jesus's prophecy of Acts 1:8. Jesus spoke directly to the apostles about being His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth. While all those being persecuted were scattered **except the** apostles, they would eventually follow. Likely the apostles remained in Jerusalem to tend to those who were unable to flee; there was a remnant left in Jerusalem. They still were called to be witnesses to those in Jerusalem. They did not give up on Jerusalem but did eventually, according to tradition, move on to other parts of the world. There was work to be done.

We will see in verse 14 that Peter and John are first to leave and head to Samaria (at least for a short visit) where the Samaritans had received the Word of God. By the time Saul is converted on the Damascus road in chapter 9, the twelve are still in Jerusalem.

Verse 2 —

Devout men made...made great lamentation over him (See Acts 2:5), those who were waiting in expectation for the Messiah to come. For example, in Luke 2:25, Simeon was a *just and devout man, waiting for the consolation (the comfort) of Israel (Isaiah 40:1-5)*.

We can't help notice that the apostles do not appear to be present at Stephen's burial. There are several factors that could explain why the apostles were not present, but we can only speculate about them. When Jesus was buried, the apostles are not present either (See Luke 23:50-56). There, they were afraid, I don't think that was the case here. It is true that the apostles were likely aware of the risk involved in openly identifying with Stephen, as his stoning was a clear sign of the growing hostility towards the early Christian community.

It is plausible that the apostles, out of concern for their own safety and the future of the Christian movement, chose not to attend Stephen's burial. This does not necessarily imply cowardice but rather a strategic decision to preserve their ability to continue spreading the Gospel.

Furthermore, the apostles might have felt that their presence at the burial would draw attention to themselves and potentially endanger the entire Christian community. By not attending, they could avoid

further confrontations with the Jewish authorities, allowing them to continue their ministry in a more discreet manner.

It's also important to note that the early ekklesia was not limited to the apostles. The **devout men** who buried Stephen could have been other members of the community who were willing to take the risk and honor Stephen's memory. This act of bravery and solidarity demonstrates the depth of commitment and faith among the early believers.

While the apostles' absence at Stephen's burial might raise questions, it is likely that their decision was based on strategic considerations rather than fear or cowardice. Their primary concern was the preservation and continuation of preaching Jesus as Messiah, and the kingdom gospel, which required them to navigate the dangerous political and social climate of the time carefully. But since the receiving of the Holy Spirit, the apostles have acted with nothing but boldness.

Also, the disciples had not participated in the burying of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Was this because it was more dangerous for the apostle to emerge from hiding than for others?

There are many unanswered questions that deserve more study. But for now, Luke turns our attention back for a brief moment to Saul.

Verse 3 —

As for Saul (We won't hear any more about Saul until chapter 9), in contrast to the devout men, **he made havoc** (destroyed or dissolved) **the church (ekklesia)**. **Haling** (early form of the word *hauling*) **men**, that is, dragging them out of **every house**. Another word we could use was that Saul ravaged the church. It is strong word in Greek that could apply to torture, military devastation, or outrages. Saul's mission seems to be to completely eliminate this group of Jews.

And **women** also were targeted, although as far as Roman law was concerned, women were treated less harshly than men. It would have been common knowledge as to the houses in which they met. **Men and women were committed to prison.**

Just as the disciples had met house to house, now the persecution by Paul takes place from house to house.

The Gospel Spreads

If you read into what come next as our experience of salvation today, then the passage is going to be confusing, and you are going to have to do a lot of twisting and turning in order to make the passage consistent with our gospel of salvation by grace through faith and not of works. What is happening here is a different dispensation—it is an apostolic dispensation, not the dispensation of grace in which we all live in today.

Verse 4 —

The truth about persecution is that it usually causes a movement to grow. In this case the message of Jesus Christ the Messiah spread outside of Jerusalem. **They that were scattered...went every where preaching.** The Greek word for **preaching** is *evangelizo* and is translated as preach, bring good tidings. Therefore, *preaching* they were spreading was **the word** of the kingdom of God—the same as Jesus taught the apostles for forty days after his resurrection (See Acts 1:3).

This is the message they were commanded to teach— I think we can say they were teaching the good news of Jesus as the Messiah, that is, His death, burial and resurrection, but this gospel was also focused on the coming Kingdom of God. It is not **the word** of salvation which we believe today that is given to anyone who believes in Jesus as a gift by grace through faith and not of any works of one's own. This was still a Jewish movement, and it was very works oriented. For a Gentile to be a part of this assembly one had to be a proselyte and adopt Judaism.

This is a gospel of the kingdom that is being preached. The kingdom gospel was consistent: Repent (of sins and believe Jesus is the Messiah), be baptized, and receive the forgiveness of sins. It was a works message. And the part of that message which brought joy to the people was that if they did those things, Jesus Messiah, the one they put to death, would forgive them, and would return immediately to set up his kingdom.

Verse 5-8 —

The ekklesia has been scattered and is preaching the word. Stephen, one of the seven chosen to be an administrator (not a Deacon) in Jerusalem, was the first to be martyred, now another of the seven, Philip is the first to spread the message of Jesus the Messiah outside of Jerusalem.

Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria. Samaria is north of Jerusalem, but in Scripture everything is **down** from Jerusalem. **And preached Christ unto them.** Philip preached the same message as in verse 4. Just like what happened in Jerusalem when the kingdom gospel was preached, in Samaria, **the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake.**

The Samaritans were willing to hear the truth. Jesus had the same kind of experience with the Samaritans in John 4, which is perhaps why they believed so readily.

Phillip's spoken message was supplemented with **miracles** (vs. 6). The miracles validated the message, since Jews sought after a sign (e.g., Matthews 12:38, 39; 16:4, etc.). Jesus is being proclaimed as the national Messiah of Israel rather than a personal Savior. Up to this point the good news of salvation by grace through faith has still not been taught. That message would first be given to the Apostle Paul. The dispensation of grace will come later. Here we are still seeing the apostolic dispensation and the gospel of Jesus coming back to set up His kingdom.

Verse 9-11—

We see similarities and a distinct contrast with Philip in the **certain man, called Simon**. The KJV says he **bewitched the people of Samaria**. We probably think that means casting a magic spell on someone and perhaps that is true (vs. 11), but the Greek word **bewitched** is *existemi*, which is a compound word, *ex* (or *ek*) means *out of* and *histemi* translates as *stand*. We might say *the people were beside themselves*. In other words, they were **astonished or amazed**.

Simon the Sorcerer	Philip the Evangelist
Works magic (8:11)	Works miracles (8:6, 13)
Draws crowds (8:9–10)	Draws crowds (8:6–7)
“Heeded” (8:10–11)	“Heeded” (8:6)
Convinced them he was “the great power of God” (8:10)	Philip performs actual great powers, “miracles and signs.” (8:13)
Simon “bewitches” the Samaritans with His claims and magic (8:9,11)	Philip’s miracles cause wonderment by Simon (8:13).

As God has worked miracles, so has Satan deceived. Remember Moses and the magicians in the book of Exodus (See Exodus 7ff).

Miracles in and of themselves should not persuade us.