

THE LIFE OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

INTRODUCTION

- A. The Book of Acts
1. Written by Luke, 60-62 A.D.
 2. Background of Luke
 - a. He was from Antioch of Greek background.
 - b. He was a physician, Colossians 4:14, *Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas.*
 - c. It is believed Luke wrote the his Gospel and the Book of Acts while in Rome with Paul during his first imprisonment.
 - d. An epitaph of Luke from an early source, *He served the Lord without distraction, having neither wife nor children, and at the age of 84 he fell asleep in Boeotia (central Greece), full of the Holy Spirit.*
 2. Purposes
 - a. To give an historical account of the spread of Christianity.
 - b. To demonstrate the source of Christianity's power, the Holy Spirit.
 - c. To confirm Paul's apostolic status.
- B. Saul's hatred for Christianity was based on doctrinal issues.
1. Jewish tradition stressed the need for national purity so messianic blessing would come.
 2. Christian doctrine undermined the position of written and oral law and religious leaders.

AT STEPHEN'S STONING, ACTS 7:54 - 8:3

- A. Persecution begins with Stephen (7:54-8:1a)
1. Church leaders responded to Stephen's speech (note 7:1-53) (7:54), ***Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.***
 - a. Introduction to Stephen.
 - 1) He was a leader of the church in Jerusalem, chosen to serve the physical needs of the people (Acts6:1-7).
 - 2) He was mature (Acts 6:10), *But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.*
 - 3) He became the first Christian martyr.
 - b. The leaders were overcome with hatred for Stephen and what he taught.
 - 1) The members of the Sanhedrin were convicted and offended.
 - 2) The murder of Stephen was possibly an act of mob violence since the Sanhedrin had no legal authority to execute a person without permission from the occupying Roman government.
 2. Stephen looked toward heaven (7:55-56), ***But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."***
 - a. Stephen was fully-controlled by the Holy Spirit.
 - 1) Acts 6:8, *And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.*
 - 2) Acts 6:15, *And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*
 - b. He received a vision of the throne room of God.
 - 1) This vision is similar to visions given to Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and John.
 - 2) Jesus was standing beside God the Father, not seated, Mark 16:19, *So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.*
 - a) This may imply Jesus' activity as mediator between God and man.
 - b) Also, it may be that Jesus is preparing to welcome Stephen into heaven as the first Christian martyr.

- 3) He called Jesus the Son of Man.
 - a) This was a title of Messiah which Jesus used for Himself in the Gospels.
 - b) He used it of Himself when He stood before the Sanhedrin a few weeks before Stephen's martyrdom, Mark 14:62, *And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."*
 - c) Stephen was clearly confirming Jesus' claim as Messiah, the Son of Man.

3. The religious leaders responded by stoning Stephen to death (7:57-8:1)
 - a. They would hear no more from Stephen and stoned him outside the city (7:57-58a), ***But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.***
 - 1) The Sanhedrin despised what they considered blasphemy.
 - a) Stephen declared Israel guilty of rejecting the Messiah.
 - b) He undermined their emphasis on oral law.
 - c) He rejected the importance of the Temple.
 - 2) Blasphemy was punishable by death in Israel.
 - a) Leviticus 24:16, *Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.*
 - b) Deuteronomy 17:7, *The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.*
 - 3) Progression of animosity by the Sanhedrin toward Christianity
 - a) A warning, Acts 4:17, *But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.*
 - b) A beating, Acts 5:40, *and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.*
 - c) The stoning of Stephen was probably incited by the Sanhedrin.
 - 1] It didn't have Roman authority.
 - 2] The event did follow Mosaic law since witnesses were there to cast the first stones.
 - 3] Thomas Constable, *Probably it was mob violence precipitated and controlled by the Sanhedrin along the lines of Jesus' execution.*

 - b. The witnesses laid their garments at the feet of Saul (7:58b), ***And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.***
 - 1) Saul participated in the stoning by guarding the garments of those who were throwing the stones, Acts 22:20, *And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.'*
 - 2) Saul was probably in his early to mid-thirties.

 - c. Stephen prayed to God as he was being stoned (59-60), ***And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.***
 - 1) As Stephen was being stoned, he prayed to Jesus.
 - 2) He prayed as Jesus did to the Father, for those who were participating in his execution, Luke 23:34, *And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.*
 - 3) He prayed to Jesus, *receive my spirit*, even as Jesus prayed the same thing to the Father, Luke 23:46, *Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last.*
 - 4) Stephen's soul did not fall asleep but his body, to await resurrection, 2 Corinthians 5:8, *Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*

- d. Saul approved of Stephen's execution (8:1a), *And Saul approved of his execution.*
 - 1) *approved* means to be in active favor not just passive consent.
 - 2) This confirms that Paul's participation in verse 7:58 was not forced on him.
- B. The spread of persecution against Christianity (8:1b-4)
- 1. Persecution against the church scattered Christians throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1b), *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.*
 - a. The execution of Stephen brought persecution that scattered Christians throughout Judea and Samaria.
 - b. They took their faith in Christ with them as can be seen in the use of the word *scattered* which emphasizes sowing seed.
 - c. This is the start of what Jesus proclaimed.
 - 1) Matthew 28:19, *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*
 - 2) Acts 1:8, *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*
 - d. The apostles probably chose to stay in Jerusalem for the benefit of the church.
 - 2. Responses to the persecution (8:2-3)
 - a. Devout men buried Stephen and honored his memory (8:2), *Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.*
 - 1) The Mishnah considered open lamentation for someone who had been stoned as inappropriate.
 - 2) These men must have been believers or Jewish men who believed Stephen did not deserve to be stoned to death.
 - b. Saul became a leader in persecuting the church (8:3), *But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*
 - 1) Saul's response was in direct opposition to that of those who buried Stephen.
 - 2) *ravaging* is only used here in the New Testament. The translators of the Septuagint (Old Testament into Greek) used this word in Psalm 80:13, *The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.*
 - 3) He became uncontrollable in his rage against Christians.
 - a) Acts 22:19, *And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you.*
 - b) Acts 26:11, *And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*
 - c. Those scattered preached the message of Christianity (8:4), *Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.*
 - 1) Persecution does not hinder the spread of the Gospel but enables it to prosper.
 - 2) God is able to work all things together for good.

CONCLUSION

- A. Believers are not immune to persecution.
- B. Persecution strengthens believers and is a witness to unbelievers.
- C. God allows persecution for our good and His glory.
- D. Persecutors of the faith may become the boldest proclaimers of the faith.