



feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isaiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

After the complaint about the distribution of food to the Hellenistic widows is resolved, Acts 6:7 reports, *"And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."* Now even a great many priests are being converted! There is hope that Jerusalem will accept her savior. But the story then changes dramatically with the stoning death of Stephen. As a result of that event, *"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. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison."* The enemies of the church are emboldened by Stephen's death, wrongly concluding that the movement must not be of God after all since God did not protect Stephen. As recently as 5:13, the early church was experiencing great favor and even reverential awe (*"None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem."*) Now they are suddenly fleeing for their lives from intense persecution. How is Luke shaping his readers in how he tells this story?

Many of the details of the story highlight that God is in control, that this sudden reversal of fortune for the church is not a surprise to God and is in fact serving His purposes. Stephen's powerful apostolic ministry is opposed by Hellenistic Jews just like himself. But when they try to dispute him, *"they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking (6:11)."* This is a fulfillment of Jesus' promise in Luke 21:14-15. *"This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death."* This reference to Luke 21 helps readers to hear the story of Stephen's martyrdom and be assured that this is part of God's plan. Just as Jesus' predictions of his own suffering should have assured his disciples during his crucifixion, here is a prediction of martyrdom.

And there are many parallels between the story of Stephen and Jesus. Both are falsely accused of wanting to destroy the law and the Temple. The mob justice reaction to Stephen's speech reminds us of the reaction to Jesus in his hometown from Luke 4. It is the image of the Son of Man that directly leads to both Stephen and Jesus' death for blasphemy (Luke 22:69-71). And most obvious are the words of Stephen at his death that echo the words of Jesus on the cross. Acts 7:59 *"Lord Jesus receive my spirit."* Luke 23:46 *Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"* Acts 7:60 *And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord do not hold this sin against them."* Luke 23:34 *And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* Stephen is following in Jesus' footsteps.

Unlike Jesus, Stephen is not silent before his opponents. He gives a lengthy summary of Jewish history. One feature of his speech is that he highlights how often God has related to his people apart from what had become the major aspects of Jewish identity, the land of Israel and the Temple. He also highlights how God has chosen leaders in Joseph and Moses who were rejected

by their followers. He hammers on this point in his conclusion in 7:51-53 ("you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you"). Stephen turns the tables on his accusers and claims that the heritage that he is accused of undermining is a heritage of rebellion and opposition to God's purposes. Stephen is being deliberately provocative here, just as Jesus was with the religious leaders. If he had been more conciliatory, he probably would not have been martyred. But clearly inspired by the Holy Spirit, he gives his life to tell these leaders the truth about their standing before God. We know that this is out of a heart of concern for them because he asks God not to hold the sin of killing him against them.

The persecution that follows Stephen's death causes the church in Jerusalem to be scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. The mentioning of these regions recalls Acts 1 and the words of Jesus, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." When it looks like God is losing or is not involved or in control, he is accomplishing his purposes, even through the actions of his enemies. That is ultimate sovereignty. Saul is introduced here as the main persecutor. But before we hear more about him, Luke gives us the story of Philip. With Philip, God is accomplishing his work even in the midst of great persecution.

Philip spreads the gospel both in Samaria, and with the Ethiopian eunuch, to the ends of the earth. Commentators note that Ethiopia was considered to be the end of the earth to the South in the Greco Roman world. The story of the Ethiopian is remarkable for the supernatural activity that is lavished on the conversion of a single African man. He is the first gentile convert, preceding Cornelius in chapter 10. And he is the first individual to experience a divinely orchestrated encounter with the gospel, preceding Saul in chapter 9. And he is a eunuch, which means that according to OT law he was barred from the assembly of God (Dt 23:1). This makes his question upon hearing Philip's preaching even more poignant. "What prevents me being baptized?" He has been prevented from entering the Temple all his life, but he understands that in Jesus he is no longer prevented from entering in.

The conversion of Saul in chapter 9 is the ultimate testimony that with God all things are possible. Who would have thought that the main persecutor of the church would repent and give his life to Jesus? The result for the church is recorded in Acts 9:31, *So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.*

Imagine how encouraging it would be for Luke's first readers to read this story of persecution and God at work in Acts. It would certainly help them to persevere with hope through their own persecution. How does it speak to us? Does it mean that whatever hardships or difficulty or suffering that we are experiencing in our lives will soon be reversed? Not necessarily. There is the noteworthy statement that God gives to Ananias for Saul in 9:15-16. "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." Being a chosen instrument did not mean that Saul would not suffer, in fact it meant he would suffer. This story in Acts is an encouragement to us if our focus is on the work of God flourishing, not necessarily our lives flourishing by earthly standards. May the Holy Spirit help us to view our lives through the lens of being witnesses to Jesus. And may the Holy Spirit personally empower each of us to be witnesses to Jesus.

Pastorally Yours,
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