**The Aftermath of Stephen’s Stoning**

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

 I’d like to begin with the story of a stoner—but not the kind who throws rocks when someone is stoned! These days a “stoner” is what people who smoke pot call *themselves*. And one day one of them walked into an appliance store and asked the owner, “How much for that TV?” The owner replied, “I don’t sell stuff to potheads like you.” The stoner left, but came back a week later saying, “Okay, I quit smoking pot. Now how much for that TV?” The owner replied, “You didn’t quit, and I *still* don’t sell stuff to potheads like you.” The stoner replied, “You got me, I didn’t really quit. How could you tell?” The owner said, “Because that’s not a TV, *that’s a microwave!”*

Well, we may *never* know the aftermath of the stoning of that stoner, for it doesn’t sound like he had any intention of giving up on smoking pot. Of course, the stoning of Stephen was an infinitely more *serious* thing, as we talked about in our last article. And as we’re about to see here in Acts 8, it kicked off a huge wave of *persecution* against the church. Speaking of Stephen’s death, we read:

 **“And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1).**

Now as you may know, the “Saul” here is *Saul of Tarsus,* the man who later became the Apostle Paul, the apostle of the dispensation of grace. As you may also know, he started out in life as an *enemy* of the Lord. His career as an enemy began just a few verses earlier in Acts 7, where we saw Luke describe Stephen’s stoning by saying that those unsaved Jews

**“…cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, *whose name was Saul”* (Acts 7:58).**

Now as we mentioned in our last article, Jews in those days were always tearing their clothes off if they got good and mad at somebody, as we see when later they got good and mad at Paul himself:

**“…they cried out, *and cast off their clothes,* and threw dust into the air” (Acts 22:23).**

And here in Acts 7:58, they were *murderously* mad at Stephen.

 But now, at first glance it looks like Saul was nothing more than a hatcheck boy, holding the clothes of those unsaved Jews so that their long flowing robes didn’t get in the way of the hurling of their stones. There’s just some things that it’s easier to do with bare arms.

 I grew up shooting pool, and I can remember seeing pictures of billiards legends like Minnesota Fats and Willie Mosconi. In those pictures, they were always wearing *suit coats—*probably to try to dress up the image of pool players. And I used to be a pretty good shot—but I can’t shoot straight in a suitcoat! And the Jews evidently felt that they couldn’t throw rocks straight in long flowing robes, so they laid them at Saul’s feet.

 But I think it is possible that they didn’t lay their clothes before him because he just happened to be standing there. I think it is possible they did it because he was the *instigator* of Stephen’s death, the driving force *behind* his murder, and they were laying their clothes at his feet to *honor* him—the way your cat honors you by laying the mouse he killed at your feet.

 If you’re wondering why I might think that, it is because of what Saul wrote later after he got saved:

 **“*I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren*, my kinsmen according to the flesh: *Who are Israelites…”* (Romans 9:3,4).**

Did you ever wonder why Paul felt so *strongly* about his countrymen? Well, perhaps it was because he was the driving force behind Stephen’s murder, and as we saw last week, his murder was the reason God closed the book on the nation of Israel. Well, if you were responsible for God closing the book on your nation, do you think maybe you’d feel like Paul did? I think I would.

 We see *more* proof that Saul was more than just a hatcheck boy when Acts 8:1 says that Saul was “consenting” unto Stephen’s death. You see, to *consent* to something means to *agree* with it, and *give your permission* to let it happen. It used to be you’d hear about a father giving his consent to a young man to marry his daughter.

And the Bible uses the word consent that way as well. Do you remember what happened when Daniel was told to eat meat that Jews weren’t allowed to eat?

**“Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel…give us pulse to eat…So he *consented* to them in this matter, and proved them ten days” (Daniel 1:11,12,14).**

As you can see, when Melzar *consented,* it means he agreed to let Daniel eat something other than the diet he was supposed to be feeding him.

 So when it says Saul was “consenting” unto Stephen’s death, that means he agreed to let it happen. And listen, when you’re fixing to kill a man, you don’t ask the hatcheck boy if he agrees it’s the right thing to do. The implication is that Saul was already a voting member of the Jewish council that had just tried and convicted Stephen.

 We know for sure that he was a voting member of the council later, for when Paul gave his testimony, he said of himself in those days,

**“…many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, *I gave my voice against them”* (Acts 26:10).**

As you can see, when they were voting on whether God’s people should live or die, Saul gave his “voice” against them. Interestingly enough, that word “voice” is the Greek word for *stone.* That’s our King James translators’ way of teaching us how they voted in those days when deciding if a man should live or die. Judges would give a white stone to vote *life,* and a black stone to vote for *death.* We know this because of what we read in Revelation 2:17:

**“To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, *and will give him a white stone…”* (Revelation 2:17).**

As you may know, *overcomers* in the Book of Revelation are people who will overcome the temptation to take the mark of the beast. So this is God’s way of saying that—in deciding who will live or die *eternally* in that day, He’ll reward overcomers by giving them a white stone, something that will express his vote for life.

 So we know that Saul was *eventually* a voting member of the Jewish council. And when it says here that he was “consenting” unto Stephen’s death, it suggests that he was *already* a voting member of the council that appointed themselves Stephen’s judge, jury and executioner.

 Now there’s something we can learn from how the council got to the point where they felt comfortable *being* Stephen’s judge, jury and executioner. Look how they started out when the apostles began preaching Christ:

**“When they heard that, they were cut to the heart, *and took counsel to slay them”* (Acts 5:33).**

The council started out just *thinking* about killing men like Stephen who preached Christ. Then they took another step down that murderous road just a short time later, when we read:

**“…when they had called the apostles, *and beaten them,* they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go” (Acts 5:40).**

Once they started thinking about killing men who preached Christ, that thought just *festered*  in their minds until it got easier to *act* on those killer thoughts, and they lashed out and *beat* those apostles. And this hatred culminated a few chapters later when they finally slew Stephen, as they’d been thinking about doing all along.

And the thing that we can learn from that is, what you allow yourself to *think about* is what you’re going to someday allow yourself to *do.* And the more you think about doing it, the easier it *becomes* to do it. That’s why you want to be sure to always be “…bringing into captivity *every thought* to the obedience of Christ” (II Cor. 10:5).

Now when Acts 8:1 says that Stephen’s death kicked off a “great persecution,” we know that Saul was *in charge* of that subsequent persecution because of what happened later after he got saved. When that happened,

**“Saul…preached Christ in the synagogues…*Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria”* (Acts 9:19,20,31).**

As you can see, once Saul got saved, that took all the wind out of the sails of that persecution, and stopped it *dead in its tracks.* That means he must have been the driving force behind it, the ringleader, if you will. And this is something for which Paul never forgave himself, as we see when he told the Corinthians,

**“*I am the least of the apostles,* that am not meet to be called an apostle, *because I persecuted the church of God”* (I Corinthians 15:9).**

In writing to the Ephesians, he added,

**“…I was made a minister…*who am less than the least of all saints*…” (Ephesians 3:7,8).**

Paul’s past literally *haunted* him after he became a believer.

But he didn’t let it keep him from serving the Lord! Look what he told the Corinthians right after saying he wasn’t fit to be called an apostle due to his bloody past. Speaking of the other apostles, he wrote,

**“…I laboured more abundantly than they all” (I Corinthians 15:10).**

Instead of sitting around thinking about his past, and feeling bad about it, Paul used it to *drive himself onward* in the service of the Lord, and propel himself forward in God’s work with a ferocity that maybe he *wouldn’t* have had if he *didn’t* have such a dark past.

 Now is there anything you can learn from that? Is there anything in *your* past that haunts *you?* Is there something that you did or said that now you wish you *hadn’t* done or said? You can sit around and mope about it if you want. But if you want to be like Paul, you’ll *use it* to motivate you to serve the Lord. If you’ll learn to look at your past like Paul looked at his, you too might just be able to drive yourself onward in the service of the Lord with a ferocity that maybe you wouldn’t have if you *didn’t* have such a dark past.

 And there’s something else we can learn from this persecution. You see, once they killed Stephen, it made it *a whole lot easier* to kill someone else. And that’s true of any and all sins that we commit. Once you cross the line and *steal* something, for example, it makes it *way* easier to steal other things. They tell me that once you cross the line and commit *fornication,* it makes it a whole lot easier the next time you are tempted to cross that line. And all of this is why Paul wrote,

**“…fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, *let it not be once named among you*, as becometh saints” (Ephesians 5:3).**

With this verse in mind, you’re better off avoiding sin like the *plague* that it is. At the time of this writing, many millions of Americans are doing their best to avoid the coronavirus, a virus that can be fatal. But it is equally important for believers to prevent sin from getting a foothold in their lives by never *once* letting it be named among you.

 Now when the members of the church hightailed it out of the city of Jerusalem and fled to Judaea and Samaria, that makes it sound like they were obeying the Lord’s instructions in what’s called The Great Commission. In one of Luke’s versions of this commission, we read:

 **“…be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all *Judaea*, and in *Samaria*, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).**

But when we studied that verse, we saw that the Lord was telling them that they couldn’t move on to Judaea and Samaria until all Jerusalem was *filled* with God’s salvation, like the Lord told that Gentile woman who asked for His spiritual help:

**“But Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be *filled:* for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs” (Mark 7:27).**

Once Jerusalem was filled with God’s salvation, He planned to use the Jews in Jerusalem to reach Judaea, Samaria, and the Gentiles in the rest of the world. And someday that’s how it will go down, as Isaiah predicted:

**“…the LORD…*hath redeemed Jerusalem*…and all the ends of the earth *shall see the salvation of our God”* (Isaiah 52:9,10).**

As you can see, Jerusalem was supposed to be redeemed before the rest of the world saw God’s salvation. And if all Jerusalem was redeemed here in Acts 8, stoning Stephen was sure a funny way of showing it.

 No, the saints who left Jerusalem weren’t carrying out the Great Commission. They were *running for their lives* from the persecution that arose after Stephen’s stoning. So when Acts 8:1 says that all the saints were scattered abroad “except the apostles,” that means they were *the only ones* obeying the Great Commission. They were the only ones staying in Jerusalem trying to get Jerusalem redeemed. They weren’t being unfaithful, as some say, and they weren’t being racially prejudiced against the Gentiles, as some also say. They were the only ones brave enough to be faithful to the Lord’s instructions *even at the risk of their lives.*

Now as we read on, we see something that happened *before* all the believers scattered and left Jerusalem:

 **“And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him” (Acts 8:2).**

Now there’s a reason why the Bible takes the time to mention that they buried Stephen. It was because his burial was symbolic of the burial of Israel’s chance of ruling the world in their kingdom. Do you remember what the Apostle John wrote about overcomers in the Tribulation?

 **“…they lived and *reigned* with Christ a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4).**

Now this reigning with Christ and all the rest of His kingdom saints in Israel in the kingdom will still happen someday after the Rapture, and after the Tribulation that will follow the Rapture. But that was an opportunity the Jews turned down when they stoned Stephen.

 And that’s something we see symbolized in Stephen’s burial. Do you know what Stephen’s name *means?* It means *crown.* So when they buried Stephen, it symbolized the burial of their opportunity to rule with Christ in the kingdom, and do what John described in Revelation 2:21:

**“To him that overcometh will I grant *to sit with Me in My throne…”***

Now as you can see, Stephen’s burial was carried out by “devout” men (Acts 8:2). The word “devout” just means someone who is *devoted* to God. And this goes to show you that devotion to God can be shown in many different ways. Here they expressed it by burying Stephen, instead of leaving his beaten and bloodied body laying out for the buzzards and other critters and varmints to devour.

 You may be wondering how that made those men *devout*, since even unbelievers bury their dead. If so, don’t forget that when they stoned Stephen, that made it clear that the gloves were off when it came to how Israel’s leaders were going to be treating the Lord’s followers in the future. And if you showed up to bury the guy they killed, do you think maybe they’d start looking at *you* with murder in their eyes? I mean, if you take a man that they *dishonored* by stoning him and *honor* him by burying him, you can expect they might come after you you as well. You’d have to be pretty devout to give a brother a decent burial knowing that.

 But what an example this is of how there are many different ways to show *your* devotion to the Lord. If you can’t think of any, I’ll bet your pastor can! Every pastor knows that 90% of all the work that is done in a local church is usually done by 10% of the people. Every church has floors that need to be swept or vacuumed, as well as bathrooms that need cleaning and mopping, and grass that needs cutting, etc., etc., etc. If you’re not afraid to get your hands dirty, you can be as devout as those men who dug the hole to bury Stephen.

 Now if you’re not sure what “lamentation” means (Acts 8:2), to *lament* someone means *to wail out loud* to express the grief associated with death. In the Bible, there were actually people who you could *hire* to do your lamenting for you, as we see when God told His people in Israel,

**“…the God of hosts…saith thus; Wailing shall be in all streets…Alas! alas! and they shall call the husbandman to mourning, *and such as are skilful of lamentation to wailing”***

**(Amos 5:16).**

*Berean Bible Society’s* business manager Pastor Jim Tollar used to serve as a missionary to Kenya, and he says that professional mourners like this are still a common thing in Kenya and other parts of the world.

 Now while the saints got busy honoring Stephen by burying him, Saul got busy *dishonoring* the saints by persecuting them:

 **“As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison” (Acts 8:3).**

Now that word *havoc* is only used here in Scripture, but our translators picked an interesting word to define what Saul was doing to the church. That word finds its roots in *falconry,* sometimes called *the sport of kings.* If you want to go hunting for rabbits or squirrels, or even quail or pheasant, you can get your shotgun and dog and go if you want. But if you want to hung like a king, you can launch your hawk into the air and have *him* do all the hunting and killing for you.

Hawks have beaks that are *tremendously* powerful, but they don’t use them to kill their prey. When they swoop down on a rabbit or quail, they *crush it* with their equally powerful talons. That bird or varmint is dead long before the hawk lands and starts tearing into it with his beak to eat it—or handing it to you as his master, so you can reward him with some kind of reward or treat.

 And that seems to me to be a *perfect* description of what Saul was doing to the church. First of all, we know he hunted believers down just like the hawk would locate a rabbit. Look what Paul said about himself in describing his life as a persecutor of God’s people:

**“I persecuted them *even unto strange cities…”* (Acts 26:11).**

Then after Saul hunted those believers down, he would *crush* them, and likely bring their bodies back to the council for some kind of reward. Paul later testified,

**“…ye have heard of my conversation in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: *And profited in the Jews religion…*being more exceedingly *zealous* of the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:13,14).**

Paul says he “profited” in the Jews religion because he was “zealous.”And he defines what he meant by that word *zealous* when he described his unsaved self as

**“…an Hebrew of the Hebrews…*Concerning zeal, persecuting the church…”* (Philippians 3:5,6).**

So Saul was profiting by his zeal *in persecuting the church.* That sounds to me like the Jewish council had put a *bounty* on the heads of Christ’s followers. So when Saul would hunt down and kill a believer, I believe he brought the body back to his “masters” on the Jewish council for a reward, just as the hawk would bring the prey he had killed to his master for a reward in falconry. The men on the council were the ones who gave Saul the authority to *conduct* those manhunts, as we see when he later reminded Israel’s leaders,

**“…the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: *from whom also I received letters unto the brethren,* and went to Damascus, *to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished”* (Acts 22:5).**

And when Paul would return to his masters with prisoners and dead bodies, they would reward him with the treat of filthy lucre. No wonder our translators chose that word *havoc* to describe Paul’s villainous ways!

 And when Acts 8:3 says that Saul entered every house “haling” men and women, that word *haling* means to *pull* or *draw* someone *by force,* as we see when the Lord said,

**“When thou goest with thine adversary to the magistrate, as thou art in the way, give diligence that thou mayest be delivered from him; *lest he hale thee to the judge,* and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and the officer cast thee into prison” (Luke 12:58).**

In those days, magistrates would *drag* you off to jail, suggesting that Saul haledbelievers *by dragging them out of their houses* andcommitting them to prison.

Now knowing that a ruthless persecutor like that was running amuck in those days, you’d think that believers would be so fearful for their lives that they’d never again name the name of Christ. But such was not the case, as we see as we read on in our text:

 **“Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word” (Acts 8:4).**

Now what pastors and Bible teachers often say about this verse is that these believers were carrying out the Great Commission *in spite of* Israel’s refusal to get saved and be the channel of blessing that God wanted them to be. But don’t forget what the Great Commission *said:*

**“Go ye therefore, and teach *all nations…”* (Matthew 28:18).**

**“Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel *to every creature”* (Mark 16:15).**

And that is *not* what *these* believers who fled Jerusalem were doing! We know this because sometime later we read of them,

**“*Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen* travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, *preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only”* (Acts 11:19).**

Does that sound to you like they were preaching the Word to *every* creature? It sounds to me like they were preaching the Word to none but *Jewish* creatures.

 And that was true even of the man we read about next in our text:

 **“Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them” (Acts 8:5).**

Now if you forgot who this guy Philip was, he was one of the ones that the church chose to solve the problem that arose back in Acts 6:1-5, when

**“…there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, *and serve tables.* Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, *full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom*, whom we may appoint over this business…and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, *and Philip,* and Prochorus…”**

So in other words, Philip started out his ministry for the Lord *as a waiter,* a man who served tables. But he rose up through the ranks of the Lord’s workers to become an *evangelist.* Now the world has a name for that kind of thing. They call it *promoting from within.* If a supervisor or manager gives a man a job and notices that he is very faithful at accomplishing that job, he will often give the man more responsibility. This is a principle that we see throughout the Scriptures as well, as we see in a parable that the Lord told about what a master said to his servant:

**“Well done, *thou good and faithful servant:* thou hast been faithful over a few things, *I will make thee ruler over many things…”* (Matthew 25:21).**

*Berean Bible Society* president Pastor Kevin Sadler worked his way up through the ranks at BBS in a similar fashion. Some of you may know that he used to be the typesetter for our *Berean Searchlight* magazine and our other publications. But you may not know that early on in hi days with BBS he and his wife were also the custodians of our office facilities. You know what that means, don’t you? It means the man who now sits in the big chair in the big office is the same man who used to scrub the little “chair” in the little office—the bathroom! All because he was *faithful* at doing what God gave him to do.

And here the man who used to wait tables was now out preaching Christ in the city of Samaria. All because he was faithful at the job that God wanted him to do.

Now I’m not disrespecting the importance of the guy who scrubs the little chair in the little room. Where would our churches be without such dedicated members of the Lord’s workforce? If you try to tell me that such believers don’t serve God in an important way, I’ll be happy to set you straight about that. And if you’ll ask, I’ll bet that work like that is available at the church that you attend just for the asking. But I warn you, if you are faithful at your calling, you might just find yourself going to the mission field like Stephen here, who started out waiting tables.

Now as we read on in our text, we see that once Philip got to Samaria, the people there liked what they heard:

**“And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did” (Acts 8:6).**

Now when it says the Samaritans believed “with one accord,” compare that to what the unsaved Jews did “with one accord” in the previous chapter, where speaking of Stephen we read of them,

 **“Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord” (Acts 7:57).**

Do you see the contrast that the Spirit is drawing in this passage with that word *accord?* Jerusalem heard the preaching of Christ *and killed the messenger* with one accord. Samaria heared the preaching of Christ *and believed it* with one accord!

 What you’re seeing here is the fulfillment of something the Lord told some unsaved Jews in Luke 13:28-30:

**“There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob…in the kingdom…*and you yourselves thrust out.* And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God. *And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.”***

Samaria is “north” of Jerusalem. So what the Lord was trying to tell those unsaved Jews was that when He raises Abraham, Isaac and Jacob from the dead to enter the kingdom of heaven on earth that there are going to be Samaritans sitting there in the kingdom with them because they believed on Christ when they heard Him preached. But *the Jews themselves* would find themselves “thrust out” of the kingdom because they *refused* to believe on Christ when they heard Him preached.

 That’s what the Lord meant when He said the last would be first and the first would be last. Samaria was the last to hear Christ preached, but they will be first in the kingdom because they *believed* the preaching of Christ.

 And the blessing of the kingdom wasn’t all that those Samaritans were blessed with, as we see as we read on in the final two verses of our text:

 **“For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed.**

 **“And there was great joy in that city” (Acts 8:7,8).**

As you can see, believing on Christ didn’t just give them the blessing of a bright hope in God’s kingdom in the next life. It also translated to some rich blessings in their present lives as well. And while we can’t expect the kind of healing that God gave those saints in this life, our lives are also rich with the blessing of the God “who giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (I Tim. 6:17), in addition to the blessed hope of spending eternity with Him.

In closing, what we are seeing in these closing verses is an example of something Paul wrote later in Romans 10:16,21:

**“…they have not *all* obeyed the gospel...But to Israel he saith, *All day long I have stretched forth My hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.”***

God may have closed the book on the nation of Israel *as a nation,* but He continued to reach out to *individual* Jews within that nation, men and women who were open to the gospel despite the rejection of their nation.