

Acts 8 - John Karmelich

Let me open with a topic I touched upon last time. Why does God allow Christians to be martyred? If God's God, He could obviously stop killers in their tracks! There's an idea that we who believe in God have to explain why He allows suffering. Those who don't believe He exists have to explain everything else! I'm convinced He allows suffering and death because we live in a world condemned by sin. I am also convinced our death's ultimately for His glory. I've seen way too many people come to know Jesus or draw close to Him by the suffering and death of others. It this is all there is this life it's a very unfair place to live. The point for us is none of us know how long we get to live, which is a reminder that the greatest use of our time is to use it for His glory!

All of that leads to this chapter. It is in essence, three stories: The first is the aftermath of Stephen, the first Christian to be martyred for his faith. It led to Christians being scattered. That leads to the second story of another of the seven men named in Chapter 6, those in charge of food distribution for desolate widows. His name was Phillip. The story centers on a man he baptizes. Peter scolded the "dipped man" for trying to purchase Jesus' power. Then in the final story of the chapter, Phillip travels in the opposite direction a good distance (because God told him to!) to explain the gospel to lead a foreign dignitary as he was traveling home. Christian history tells us that this man led to the spread of the Gospel in Africa so it was a big deal!

OK John, nice story. We should care because? Again God created us for a purpose. It's to glorify Him with our lives. The Christians persecuted after Stephen was killed led the disciples to flee Jerusalem to the surrounding areas. Back in Chapter 1, I stated how God wanted Christians to be a witness for Him in Jerusalem, Judea (area that Jerusalem is a part of), Samaria (enemy territory) and the world. Realize it took the death of Stephen and the persecution that came from that event to get Christians "motivated" to travel to the other places He wanted them to go! Grant it not all suffering is about getting us to go to other places. Still God uses suffering for His glory with believers. I'm positive of that! What we read in this chapter is how God got the church "moving" to be a witness for Him!

The chapter opens by saying Saul (whose name was later changed to Paul) led that persecution against the church. I'm sure he told this story to Luke and that's how it became part of the bible. Luke wanted to include it to show why God allows martyrs and church suffering! Lots of people were arrested after Stephen was killed (end of Chapter 7) and I'm sure a lot were killed after Stephen due to it!

Since I'm describing how this chapter reads, let me continue: As I said, Paul was involved or lead that first great persecution of the church in Jerusalem. A renown pastor named John MacArthur had a good illustration of what is going on. "Imagine a forest fire starting. You try to put it out by stomping on the flames. It causes the hot ashes to spread so the damage done by stomping on the fire was worse than if that fire just burned on its own." God allowed the persecution to get the disciples "moving". As I said earlier, God told the church in Chapter 1, to be his witness "all over the place". For the church to start moving it required a persecution to get them out of their comfort zone and get going. That leads to the big question, what will it take for God to get us to do His will for our lives?

Anyway, all of that leads to the second story in this chapter. It is about a man named Phillip. Again he was one of seven men like Stephen to be in charge of helping desolate widows. This story has nothing to do with that ministry. He got persecuted along with everyone else in Jerusalem and he went north to go to Samaria. He preached Jesus and did miracles there. There he made the paralyzed and lame people

whole and cast out demons. Remember the book author Luke, wasn't there so he got his information by hearing it from others.

While I'm discussing this, let me take a quick moment to discuss demons. As best I can tell, I've never encountered one, or at least one as obvious as the kind we read in the bible. I've listened to studies by a number of renown pastors, none of which ever obsess on demonology! I've heard each of them recite a story of a demon they've encountered. My view is it'd be obvious, if we ever met someone who fit that description. I like the Roman Catholic Church tradition that one first eliminates every other possibility, before assuming one is demon possessed.

That leads to the question, of Phillip was casting out demons, why were they in the "neighborhood"? I would argue they like to be where the church "action" is, as they are doing their best to stop God's plan of leading people close to Him from happening. That's why Jesus encountered so many of them. Now we'll read throughout Acts of demons being around as yes, they're doing their best to thwart God's plan from occurring. For what it's worth, the stories I've heard of such encounters are horrid enough that it's not something I want to deal with as a regular hobby! Still if I ever have to deal with it, I'm trusting in God to led me to people who would help with such a situation. Other than that I don't obsess on it!

OK then, back to the text. The good news is Phillip was successful preaching the gospel in spite of the opposition he was dealing with. In other words "it was worth the trouble"! That is something we need to remember when we use our lives to make a difference for Jesus. We'll have to deal with stuff as we use our lives for Jesus, but to state the obvious God will win in the end.

All of that leads to the third story in this chapter. As Phillip was working in Samaria, the text will now focus on one particular man who gave his life to Jesus. His name is Simon (no relation to Peter, who is also called Simon) and this guy practiced magic in Samaria and had a reputation as someone powerful. He gets baptized and scholars debate over whether or not this was a mistake! At this point, "the" Peter along with John shows up on the scene. The chapter stated earlier said the disciples stayed in Jerusalem in spite of the persecution. Obviously word got back to them of the many people being converted north in the area of Samaria. (Quick history lesson: Samaria is the northern part of Israel. At this moment in history, Samaria was the land of Israelite "half breeds" mixed in with foreigners, due to Samaria being conquering centuries earlier.) Word of the church growth there got Peter and John to make a trip up to check on Phillip and the church growth. By the way, we don't read of John again in this book. Yes he, wrote his Gospel, his letters and Revelation, many years after the book of Acts ends. My simple point is John the disciple isn't mentioned again in the book of Acts.

Bottom line of this story is Peter chews out Simon (the magician) for wanting to buy God's power as to heal people and to cast out demons. The good news is Simon repents and well, "that' that".

With that said, God's not done with Phillip yet. The final part of the chapter is God telling Phillip to go south of Jerusalem (remember he's north of that city in Samaria). Phillip obeys and immediately we see him on a road that goes from Jerusalem south and actually leads all the way to Egypt. I could just hear Phillip thinking, "Hey God, I got this great ministry going here in Samaria. Are You sure you can't get another person to go do that?" Instead Phillip figured if that's what God wants, who am I to argue?

Anyway, he is walking on that road when he hears an Ethiopian official reading Isaiah out loud. There is a history of Jewish believers in Ethiopia going back centuries to when Solomon met the queen of the country and they had a child together. This Ethiopian was in charge of the treasury of that country. By "coincidence" this guy was reading "Isaiah 53" out loud as he was traveling! He didn't understand the

meaning of that passage. For those who don't know, that chapter along with Psalm 22 are the two best Old Testament "cross accounts"! Phillip heard him reading and he asked Phillip to get in the chariot to explain the passage! Bottom line, that man got converted. Again according to history, that man was the first to hear the Gospel in Africa and it led to millions of conversions there! This chapter ends stating, Phillip was so excited, the "next thing he knew" he was many miles away as his mind was on the story.

So what do I call this chapter? "Living for God's game plan no matter what that means!" Sometimes it means suffering, persecution and even dealing with bad stuff (i.e., demons) but the good news is we're using our lives to make a difference for Jesus. I can't imagine a greater purpose for living!

On the same page where you downloaded this summary is a detailed lesson on Chapter 8. That is on a verse-by-verse basis. To read that, click on one of the other two links on this chapter. You're always welcome to e-mail me and I hope you like this. Thanks, John