



## ***Persecution & Growth***

A narrative about the persecution the early church faced and it's surprising growth.

## ***THE BIBLE***

Acts 6-8

*Prepare for the Story*

## **ICEBREAKER**

- *Share about a time of incredible personal growth. What was the catalyst for the changes that you made?*

*Rewind the Story*

Can someone highlight what has happened in the story so far ...

- Hour of Darkness – The crucifixion of Jesus
- Resurrection – The return of the King
- New Beginnings – Jesus' Ascension & the birth of the church
- Signs & Wonders – The miracles of the Apostles

*Hear the Story*

### **Scene One: Stephen Persecuted**

As the number of believers grew, the apostles struggled to serve them. So they called a group of believers who were respected and full of God's Spirit to help them lead and

serve. The apostles entrusted this group to oversee the daily distribution of food and care for widows. Their help allowed the apostles to focus on prayer and teaching.

One of the people selected to serve was named Stephen. Stephen was a man full of faith and God's power, who performed miracles and healings just like the apostles had been doing.

The rapid growth of the Church caused some Jewish leaders to feel jealous and threatened. So they began to spread lies about Stephen, saying that he was teaching falsely about God.

Soon, Stephen was arrested and brought before the temple leaders. A man stepped forward and gave false testimony about Stephen, saying, *"He's been teaching that Jesus will return to destroy our Temple and change God's laws given to Moses!"*

As the religious leaders stared in anger at Stephen, his face began to glow like an angel. The High Priest demanded an answer from Stephen, shouting, *"Are these accusations true?"*

Filled with God's wisdom, Stephen replied, *"Brothers, listen to me. God was revealed to many of our ancestors: Abraham ... his grandson Israel ... Israel's son Joseph ... then Moses. But our ancestors refused to listen to Moses. So, God raised up more voices – Joshua, King David, and others. But your ancestors didn't follow them and turned away from God again. They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Messiah - Jesus – the one who you betrayed and murdered!"*

Enraged by Stephen's accusations, the Jewish leaders shook their fists at him. Ancient Jewish law called for the execution of a false teacher by stoning them. So they dragged Stephen outside of the city and hurled stones at him to kill him. As they did, Stephen prayed, *"God forgive them for this ... Jesus, receive my spirit."* Then, Stephen died.

One of the young religious leaders who stood by and supported the killing of Stephen was named Saul.

### **Scene Two: The Church Scatters**

Saul was a respected religious scholar of his day who began a movement to persecute anyone who believed in Jesus. In Jerusalem, Saul went house to house, dragging men and women to prison. He was determined to destroy the early church.

This caused many of the followers of Jesus to leave the city for outlying areas. Only the apostles remained in Jerusalem. But the believers scattered; they continued to share about Jesus everywhere they went.

Because they scattered, Saul went to the High Priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus so that if he found any who belonged to "the Way" (which is what the first church called themselves), he could be allowed to take them as his prisoners back to Jerusalem.

### **Scene Three: Philip and the Ethiopian**

One of the believers who left the city was named Philip. He traveled to the city of Samaria to tell everyone about God's Kingdom and Jesus the Messiah.

Crowds gathered to listen to Philip because they were eager to hear what he had to say and to see him perform miracles.

Philip healed many who suffered from mental and physical illness. This brought great joy to the people of Samaria. Many chose to believe in Jesus and were baptized, immersing themselves in water after confessing their sins. Baptism was an important ritual to signify forgiveness, new life, and a sign of commitment to living in God's ways with God's people.

Later on, one of God's angels spoke to Philip, saying, "*Go south on the road toward the city of Gaza.*" This was a wilderness road, far less traveled by the public.

Along the way, Philip saw a man from Ethiopia traveling down the road. The man was in charge of the Queen of Ethiopia's treasury and was a very wealthy man himself. He had been in Jerusalem to worship at the Temple and was returning home. The man sat in his chariot reading the writings of the prophet Isaiah.

Philip felt God's Spirit prompt him to speak to this man, so he ran alongside the chariot. "*Do you understand what you're reading?*" Philip asked the Ethiopian. "*How*

*can I unless someone helps me?"* the man replied. Then he asked Philip to step up into the chariot with him.

The Ethiopian read aloud this passage from Isaiah:

*"Like a sheep, he was led to be slaughtered, and like a lamb in front of his shearer, he stood silent. In his humiliation, he was denied justice. Where are his descendants? His life was taken from this earth."*

After hearing the passage, the Man asked Philip, *"Was the prophet who wrote this talking about himself or someone else?"*

So, beginning with the scripture from Isaiah, Philip shared with the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus the Messiah. As they traveled along the road in his chariot, the Ethiopian said to Philip, *"Look! There's some water! I should be baptized!"*

He ordered the chariot to stop, and he and Philip walked down into the water. There, Philip baptized the Ethiopian man. When they came up out of the water, God's Spirit took Philip away, and the Ethiopian man never saw him again. The Ethiopian continued on his way home, filled with thankfulness to God.

Philip found himself in another city and continued to share about Jesus everywhere he traveled.

#### *Retell the Story*

- What happened as the number of believers grew?
- How did Stephen get into trouble with the Jewish Leaders?
- What did Stephen say?
- What happened to Stephen?
- Who was there when Stephen was stoned to death?
- What was Saul doing?
- What was Philip doing?
- Who did he speak with?
- Who was baptized?

## Discuss the Story

- What is your first reaction to this story? How did this story make you feel?
- What stood out to you from this story? What did you notice for the first time?
- What from this story made you wonder?
- Why do you think Stephen was arrested and brought before the temple leaders?
- How would you describe Saul?
- In the face of great persecution, what would it have been like to be a part of the church in this story?
- Did you hear anything that reminded you of *other* stories?
- From this story, what did you notice about humans?
- From this story, what do you notice about God's character or His qualities?

## 1) SCATTERED

The persecution of the early church was an attempt to stop this new movement, but when the new believers were forced to scatter, it helped “the way” of Jesus spread further. Why do you think this happened? In your opinion, was this by accident or by design?

## 2) THE PERSECUTED CHURCH



Use the QR code to the left to watch a short video about the History of the Persecuted Church. What has your experience been regarding being persecuted for following Jesus? What effect do you think being persecuted can have on your faith?

## 3) DISCIPLESHIP

Philip’s interaction with the Ethiopian official is a great example of what discipling someone can look like. Who has God used in your life to help you find and follow Jesus? What are some barriers for us to disciple other people? Who has God put in your life that you could begin to disciple?

## Pray

God,

*We are amazed that even in the trials and tribulations of life, You find a way to work things towards our good and Your glory. Keep in the front of our minds those who suffer and struggle just for following your way. Give us courage not to privatize our faith but to prioritize helping the people You've put in our lives find and follow You.*