

# Acts 8:1-3

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/acts/acts-8/acts-81-3/>

*Saul the Pharisee begins persecuting the believers in Jerusalem. Everyone but the apostles flee to Samaria and Judea. Stephen is buried and mourned. Saul's campaign is relentless.*

In Jerusalem, the number of believers in Jesus had grown to the thousands. People came to the city from its surrounding villages to be healed by the apostles. The apostles ceaselessly and boldly preached that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah, and that He resurrected from the dead.

But in Chapter 7, the deacon Stephen was stoned to death. The Sanhedrin (the ruling council of 70 Pharisees and Sadducees, and the high priest) put him on trial and Stephen gave a passionate sermon about how his accusers were just like the sinful Israelites who kept rejecting their deliverers, rejecting the will of God, and worshipping idols instead. He compared them to the Israelites from the past who killed the prophets for prophesying things they did not want to hear. And when the ultimate prophet came, Jesus the Messiah, they killed him too.

The Sanhedrin had arrested the apostles twice and tried to threaten them into silence (Acts 4-5), to no effect. Now, after hearing Stephen's brutally truthful sermon, they snapped. They carried Stephen outside of the city away from the eye of Roman soldiers or officials, beyond the city gates, perhaps to somewhere remote, and murdered him by stoning him. Their wrath toward believers in Jesus was now unleashed.

There was a young Pharisee named Saul who was present for this stoning, though he did not participate (Acts 8:58). But *Saul was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death*. Saul (or Paul, his name in Greek) gives us biographical information in his letter to the Philippians, long after he believed in Jesus and become a missionary to the Gentiles. Of himself, he writes that he was:

“circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.”

(Philippians 3:5-6)

Elsewhere, later on in Acts, he describes himself:

“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in [Jerusalem], educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today.”

(Acts 22:3)

Gamaliel was the Pharisee who spoke sense to the rest of the Sanhedrin when they wanted to kill the apostles, arguing that if the apostles were not from God, they would fail on their own, and if they were from God, then it would be foolish to stand in their way. Saul was a student of this

wise teacher. Though originally from Tarsus, he grew up in Jerusalem, learning from Gamaliel ([see map](#)). He followed the Law strictly, blamelessly, and was so zealous for the Pharisee cause, he became a persecutor of followers of Jesus. Saul/Paul's persecution of the followers of Jesus begins here, after the stoning of Stephen: *Saul was in hearty agreement that Stephen deserved to die.*

Thus, with the "first shot fired," the oppression against the early church begins in full force: *And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.* The regions of *Judea and Samaria* would be the countryside outside of the major city of Jerusalem. *Judea* was the southern portion of Israel, and *Samaria* the northern portion ([see map](#)).

*Some devout men buried Stephen*, perhaps including the apostles, which they would have done at the risk of their own lives. His body was possibly left to decompose wherever he had been stoned outside of the city. *The devout men* heard of his death and rushed to find him, burying him, *and made loud lamentation over him.* This is a reversal to how the apostles responded when Jesus was crucified, which was to go into hiding. The disciples now exhibited great courage.

*But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.*

Saul's zealotry is for the way that he thinks Judaism should be. He views Christ and His followers as heretics and enemies of the Jews. The Pharisees descended from the period of the Maccabees, who defended Judaism from being annihilated by Greek rulers. They had zeal to defend the faith. Paul is consumed with the same zeal, except in this case it is ill-founded.

Saul/Paul is immediately effective, instituting a *great persecution* against the church in *Jerusalem*. So effective that the believers fled Jerusalem, and *were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.* At last count, the church had five thousand men (Acts 4:4) though more had been added since this figure (Acts 6:7). But now that the Pharisees and Sadducees were waging open war on believers, the church in Jerusalem was shattered, and spread like shards of broken glass.

People escaped Jerusalem, to *Judea and Samaria*, where the power of the Temple was not so great. *Judea* was the southern province of Israel, while *Samaria* was the province directly to the north. Galilee, where Jesus and the apostles originated from, was north of *Samaria* ([see map](#)). For now, the believers have fled from the city of Jerusalem and are hiding themselves elsewhere in Israel. The *apostles* remain. The church will recover in Jerusalem, even reaching membership of thousands of believers again (Acts 21:20). For now though, with Saul spearheading a *great persecution*, the *church* is reduced to the *apostles* only.

Saul's course of action is straightforward and lacking in any legal due process: he and his soldiers (perhaps the Temple guards, but possibly just mob volunteers) went throughout Jerusalem *entering house after house, and dragging off men and women to put them in prison.* Every believer he could find was forcibly removed from their *house* and thrown into *prison* simply for believing in Jesus. Even *women*.

## **Biblical Text**

**Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.**

**And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.**