

Saul Introduced

Acts 7:58—8:8

The stoning of Stephen marks a major change in God's dealing with Israel and with mankind. For the past 1,500 years or so, God had been dealing exclusively with Israel under a prophetic program. The Old Testament lays out many details of Israel's future along with a specific timeline of events. They were under the Mosaic Law and were given specific promises or curses as they obeyed or disobeyed God's commandments (see Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28; 1 Kings 8:22—53; 2 Chronicles 6:12—42). Anyone desiring to come to God needed to become a part of Israel (Exodus 12:48; Numbers 9:14; Isaiah 56:6—7; Ephesians 2:12; Esther 8:17; Acts 2:10). When those who were part of Israel turned away from God by disobeying the Law, they were cut off from Israel, effectively cutting them off from God (Numbers 15:30—31). It was a spiritual death sentence.

Now, under Grace and apart from the Law, we can all come to God outside of Israel (Romans 3:21, 28; 10:12; Ephesians 2:18). There is no longer a distinction between Jew and Gentile. Instead of being held under the condemnation of the Mosaic Law, we are under God's grace (Romans 6:14). Instead of being under Israel's prophetic program, we are under the Mystery as revealed to Paul. All these changes began once Israel rejected the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the testimony of Stephen. We will now start to see many changes coming, including the diminishing of Israel throughout the book of Acts (Romans 11:12) and, at the same time, the building up of the Church, the Body of Christ. The ministry of the Disciples will decrease to nothing as the Apostle Paul takes the stage and stands front and center. It's quite telling to see Peter's name used 56 times in the first half of Acts and not at all after that. Paul is mentioned by name 130 times after Acts 12. There is an obvious change that happens following Stephen's death.

Saul

Saul is first mentioned in Acts 7:58 where he is watching the stoning of Stephen and giving approval of him being put to death. He is shown holding the cloaks of those who were doing the stoning. Saul was a Pharisee who felt threatened by the actions of those who were following Jesus Christ. He could not comprehend that Jesus was the Messiah because He did not fulfill the role of the Messiah, as described in the Old Testament. The Pharisees were waiting for a person who would defeat Israel's enemies and set Himself up as their King. They understood that there was a glorious kingdom coming, similar to what Israel enjoyed under Kings David and Solomon. Many within Israel were hoping for this Kingdom to be set up as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, but they quickly turned away from Him when it was obvious that it would not happen (Luke 19:11—44). This was probably why Judas turned his back on Jesus and betrayed Him onto the hands of the religious leaders.

We know that Saul was zealous in defending the religious aspects of Judaism. He was born in Tarsus, a city in south, central Turkey close to the Mediterranean Sea. He was probably born around the same time that Jesus was born. Although his family purchased their Roman citizenship, they were staunchly religious Jews who adhered to the Mosaic Law. As Philippians 3:5 states, he was circumcised on the eighth day, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He was trained under the well-known Pharisee Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and was zealously guarding the tradition of the Pharisees.

This zeal led him to vigorously persecute the true Hebrew church in existence at that time. This was the Little Flock of Jewish believers who accepted Jesus Christ as their Messiah. It appears from Romans 16:13 that his mother became a believer, along with other relatives.

As with most of the Pharisees, he despised Jesus Christ and anyone who followed Him. He felt He was a threat and His teaching was blasphemous to their understanding of Judaism. This is what drove Saul to persecute the assembly in Jerusalem. This persecution led to the scattering of believers out of Jerusalem into the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria.

If there is any positive thing about this persecution, it is that the gospel was spreading outside of Jerusalem. As Acts 8:4 puts it, everywhere they went they were “preaching the word.” Contrary to what many believe, they were not preaching the Gospel of Grace at this point, because that Gospel had not yet been revealed. They were still preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom. One indication of this is that there were still miracles that went along with the gospel preached, as we see with Philip in verses 6 and 7. At this point in time, Israel had lost the opportunity to go into the Kingdom because the offer was withdrawn with the stoning of Stephen, and the Apostle Paul had not yet been called. Although the nation of Israel had lost the opportunity to accept the Kingdom offer, individuals were still being called to believe that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, and miracles were still being done to prove the message was from God. God always allows individual to believe and receive eternal life, however, when God was dealing with Israel as a nation, they would enjoy blessings or endure curses depending upon where the leadership brought the nation. These blessings and curses were pre-defined by God and depended upon whether or not the nation of Israel obeyed God. While the decisions made by the leaders of Israel affected all individual Jews comprising the nation, each Jew could still make up his or her own mind to believe the gospel. Having lost the ability to accept the offer of the Kingdom did not affect individual’s ability to believe on Jesus Christ as Messiah.

The events that are happening after the stoning of Stephen are confusing because while the prophetic program for Israel is winding down, the Mystery program for the Church, the Body of Christ is taking off. With the confluence of two major programs in the book of Acts, it is sometimes difficult to separate one program from the other. This is why Acts should never be used as a book to determine doctrine. Acts is best understood when Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are contrasted with Paul’s 13 epistles. Acts brings us from Israel’s failure to accept the Kingdom to the formation of the Church, the Body of Christ. Without the information found in the book of Acts, Paul’s letters would be very hard to understand. Most people do not understand Paul’s writings because they fail to see that the book of Acts is bridging between two programs of God; Prophecy and Mystery.

Except the apostles (verse 1)

One notable exception to those who were scattered from Jerusalem were the Apostles. They bravely stayed in Jerusalem even though they were targets of persecution. They were actually adhering to the instructions of Jesus Christ to begin in Jerusalem with the Gospel of the Kingdom (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). Since their job had not been accomplished, they stayed in Jerusalem. God had not yet told them to quit preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, or to leave Jerusalem.

After Israel’s fall, with the stoning of Stephen, the Disciples are still ministering in Jerusalem, and Philip is preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom in Samaria. The message has not changed yet, even though Israel has been cut off from going into the Kingdom. The Apostle Paul has not yet been converted and given the task to reach out to the Gentiles. It’s understandable why it will take years for one program to come completely to an end while the new program to the Gentiles is gearing up.

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