

Bible Reading Challenge 43: THE CHURCH – FROM JERUSALEM TO SAMARIA

There's great excitement, great joy, and great fear in Jerusalem: the Spirit is at work and the gospel can't be stopped! Imagine how frustrated the religious leaders are—in spite of everything they do to stop it, the message of the gospel keeps growing stronger. This is a good place to ask, just what is the gospel? A lot of people, even Christians today, think they know, but their ideas may be a little fuzzy.

The gospel is the next, and next-to-last, big phase in God's redemption plan. First He called Abraham to be the father of a people set apart. Next he grew Abraham's family into a nation, led them out of slavery, gave them the Law, and brought them back to the land He promised Abraham. His presence rested on the Tabernacle, and later on the Temple. He provided kings to lead them, then prophets to instruct them, but they failed again and again to keep His law and be a light to the Gentiles. This was all part of the plan; when the time was right, Jesus appeared to take the sins of God's people on himself and pay for them in full. That's the Gospel for everybody, not just the Jews: we can't get to God, but God has come to us, and redeemed us from our sins with His own blood.

His people are now called "the church." Was the church perfect? We'll see right away that it wasn't. Have you ever heard that "the church is full of hypocrites"? Or, "preachers just want power for themselves"? We'll see two examples of those complaints this week; hypocrisy and pride have troubled the church from the beginning. And there are problems with organization, too: not everyone is being treated fairly. All these challenges are met in a way that honors Christ. But then something terrible happens: one of the brightest stars of the church, a brilliant mind and a talented speaker, is killed! What will happen now?

But that's part of God's plan too. At the end of this week's reading, we'll see the gospel carried southward in a chariot, and spreading northward into Samaria, and finally planted like a seed in the stubborn heart of a young man named Saul

Reading for this week: Acts 5-9

Further references: Acts 22:4-5, 26:10-11

Key Verse: So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. Acts 9:31

Questions to think and talk about:

1. Find all references in these chapters about the church growing. Is there a cause given in each case? If so, what's the cause?
2. What is the sin of Ananias and Sapphira? What is the sin of Simon (8:9)? Do you see these kinds of sins in the church today?
3. How was Stephen's trial similar to the trial of Jesus? What were the accusations? (See Mark 14:63-64, Matt. 26:59-60). What does this say about Stephen? (See John 15:18-21)
4. Stephen mentions Abraham, Joseph, Moses—what did they all have in common? What did Joseph and Moses share with Christ? (Hint for parents: **rejection**) Why does Stephen make such a big deal about the Temple? (See 6:13)
5. What is the result of Stephen's death? (See 8:1)
6. How can you see the Holy Spirit at work in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch? Name three specific ways.
7. What does the Lord predict about Saul in 9:15-16?

Activities:

- Add the words **gospel** and **martyr** to your vocabulary cards.
- Pretend you're Stephen—what kind of defense would you make? Write a short defense of the gospel.
- Research the ancient history of Ethiopia—how long has the gospel been there?
- Draw Saul in his lonely Damascus room and add "thought bubbles" showing what might have been going through his head those three days before Ananias came to him.