

The works of the devil over-ruledActs 8 vv.3 and 4.

The devil is the great enemy of God and of His service. For the devil there is no hope of mercy, and he knows it. Therefore the prince of darkness is full of unbridled hatred. Again and again he tries to cut off the works of God. He tries to tempt God's people to sin; and if he does not succeed in this, he tries to destroy them. His aim is to wipe out the church of God upon earth. But in this he will never succeed. The gates of hell shall never prevail against God's church. That is the divine promise which is given to the Church here below.

Often the devil is so blinded by hatred in his unscrupulous wrath, that he does the most stupid things. Frequently his very anger against God and His Church is used as a means of spreading abroad the Kingdom of God.

The flourishing Christian church in Jerusalem was like a thorn in the eye of Satan. So therefore he will attempt to destroy this first church. The devil ~~is~~ unleashes a great persecution.

Saul, the young man, who had looked after the coats of those who had stoned Stephen, is devastating the church. He is the tool of the prince of darkness. Like a beast of prey Saul goes through the streets of Jerusalem. He forces his way into the homes of the members of the church, pitilessly dragging thence men and women and hands them over to the Sanhedrin, which has them cast into prison.

So then, it is not surprising that they nearly all flee. Only the apostles remain in Jerusalem, but the rest make good their escape. The whole church is scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.

There it is then, the devil's work has succeeded! The first Christian church is scattered and it is all over! ...

Yes, so it may appear, but such is by no means the case. The work of God is not finished, it is but just begun.

The fleeing Christians could not possibly remain silent about the grace of God which filled their souls. Wherever they came they preached, in the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the forgiveness of sins. And the Lord blessed the simple words of these fleeing Christians. Many of those who dwelt in the cities and villages of Judea and Samaria were converted unto God through the Holy Spirit's work, who granted them a renewed heart.

Do you know what really took place? ... If, for instance, there stands in a

room a bucket full of water, then the water remains in the bucket only. But if someone should throw into it a large stone with all their might, then the water would be splashed in all directions, and the whole room would become wet. This is just a very simple example. Probably you can now see what I mean by it.

Before the persecution there was but one congregation, namely that in Jerusalem. There the Word was preached, but not elsewhere. Then the devil cast the stone of persecution into that congregation, with the result that it was scattered. After the persecution churches were instituted all over the place, and the Name of Jesus Christ was preached far and wide. Before the persecution only Jerusalem was filled with that Name, but after the persecution the whole of Judea and Samaria was filled with that Name. The devil intended extermination but he achieved expansion. Instead of the power of hell winning anything, it lost a thousandfold. Now you can understand it, can you not? ... It is not difficult now.

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Acts 8 vv. 3-25.

One of the escaped Christians came to the city of Samaria. This man's name was Philip! He was one of the seven deacons. He had therefore been a brother office-bearer with Stephen.

And just read what God's Word tells us: "(he) preached Christ unto them."

The Gospel is brought to the despised and hated Samaritans. That would not have happened, had the persecution in Jerusalem not driven Philip out.

His preaching in that country is not without fruit. The Samaritans listen attentively to Philip's ardent words. Furthermore by his hand signs and wonders are also wrought. Those possessed, are released from the power of the unclean spirits which dwell within them. Palsied and crippled folk who come to Philip are healed of their afflictions and disabilities. There was great joy in the city.

Now there lived in the same city where Philip was thus engaged, a certain man named Simon. He was a sorcerer, or in other words an instrument of Satan. This man performed all sorts of witchcraft and sorcery, and because of this he had great influence among the Samaritans. He used sorcery and gave the impression that he was some great one. The Samaritans still believed the deceiver and they thought that he was the Messiah. They said that Simon was the great power of God.

But when Philip arrives there and preaches the true Messiah, when Philip truly

works great miracles, then Simon's influence disappears. Through Philip's preaching the inhabitants of Samaria no longer believe Simon. Now they see the great difference between the witchcraft of Simon and the powerful signs and wonders which take place, through Philip, in the Name of Jesus of Nazareth. The Lord works through His Spirit in many hearts, and numerous Samaritans, both men and women, believe in the Lord Jesus, and are baptised.

Thus in this city also there is instituted a flourishing Christian church.

Even Simon is baptised, and the former great sorcerer joins the church. Is he then also called of God and converted, and does he truly believe in the Lord Jesus as his Saviour? ... Alas, no! For a moment he is convinced in his understanding of the truth of the preaching. He is always in the near vicinity of the devout deacon. He sees the many signs and wonders which take place and he is amazed at them.

The tidings of the blessings which have attended Philip's preaching in Samaria, reach Jerusalem also. The apostles hear that a church has been formed in Samaria. They send Peter and John to the city, to see how it is prospering there, and to regulate matters.

The apostles set forth, and very soon arrive in Samaria. They see and hear the great wonders of God. They rejoice. When the church is assembled, they pray for the Holy Ghost. Then they raise their hands and spread them in an attitude of blessing over the assembled multitude.

At that very moment the Holy Ghost is also poured upon the believing Samaritans, just as on the first day of Pentecost it had taken place at Jerusalem. In all probability they did not there hear the sound as of a mighty rushing wind, nor perhaps were cloven tongues as of fire to be seen upon their heads, but certainly ? they spake in strange tongues the wonderful works of God.

Simon, the sorcerer, is standing there, and he sees what happens in dumb amazement. He thinks that through the laying-on of hands this wonder takes place; he imagines that Peter and John pour out the Holy Ghost. How foolish he was, was he not?

The outpouring of the Holy Ghost is a gift of God! The two apostles are but a means in God's hand.

Jealousy creeps into Simon's depraved soul. O, if he could but do that.

Restlessly he feels within his pockets. Do you know what he decides? He is going to try to bribe Peter and John. He offers them money, and enquires "Give me also this power that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost."

Peter looks upon him indignantly and answers sternly: "Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. ... Thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee."

Simon is greatly shocked to hear these words.

"Pray ye to the Lord for me," he asks, trembling, "that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me."

How did it end with Simon? ... If we can believe the stories of other writers, then it ended very badly with him. Those writers say, that he remained until his death an enemy of the true people of God. The Bible, however, has nothing further to say of him.

When Peter and John have regulated everything in Samaria they return to Jerusalem. On the way they preach God's word in various Samaritan villages.

This chapter teaches us of God's over-ruling power. The ragings of the devil were used of the Lord for the increase of His Church. The prince of darkness did not achieve his object.

But it also teaches us that hypocrites also creep into God's Church. The Lord save you from hypocrisy, for never forget, that though we may indeed deceive men, we can never deceive God. That is because men can only see the outside, but God looketh upon the heart.

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