

## 20—Acts 8.1-8—The Scattered Church and the Scattered Seed

- I. Introduction
  - a. A farmer knows more than most just how helpless he is to make a crop. He is dependent on rain and sunshine, neither of which does he have any control over. Yet, his job is to till the ground and plant the seed. He cannot make it sprout. So, he waits.
  - b. The common practice around here when planting corn is to go by seed population. Depending on how good the field is an average population around here is 30,000 seeds per acre. I recall several times at harvest that the yield was around 200 bushels per acre. Notice the increase: one bushel of corn is about 80,000 seeds. Multiply that by 200 puts you at 16,000,000 seeds. From 30,000 to almost 16 million is incredible!
  - c. If the Lord turned fishermen into fishers of men, surely he can turn us farmers who plant corn into farmers who sow the seed of the gospel!
  - d. Let's notice how the Lord caused this to happen among the church in Acts 8. A very unexpected way.
- II. Main Point
  - a. Great persecution caused the church to scatter and as the church scattered, they scattered the seed of the gospel which resulted in the salvation of many which resulted in great joy!
- III. Outline
  - a. There came great persecution
  - b. Those who were scattered sowed the word
  - c. There came great joy
- IV. Exposition
  - a. This little section begins and ends with the same word which blocks it off in a way for us to see the point very clearly. There came great persecution comes first. How it ends is really not so unexpected. The process to get there is.
    - i. The martyrdom of Stephen sets in motion what Luke calls great (mega) persecution against the church.
      1. There had been other skirmishes with arrests and a flogging but this has escalated to the point of intentional targeting of the church. This will continue throughout the book of Acts and it has been ever since to some extent.
        - a. Jesus prepared his disciples for this. He told them beforehand that it would happen. He taught them how to respond. They observed how he responded to suffering.
        - b. So, while the Holy Spirit gives strength in the midst of suffering, the disciple needs to be taught as well.
          - i. Paul said this to Timothy in (2 Tim. 3:10-12) <sup>10</sup> You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, <sup>11</sup> my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra-- which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. <sup>12</sup> Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.
          - ii. Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit but that doesn't mean he had not worked hard to learn and discipline himself by devoting himself to the apostles' teaching and prayers and the fellowship of the saints.
          - iii. Look, there are reasons people are good at certain things and it's not all talent. If that were true, then most of the Titans football players would have just sat around all summer and skip pre-season camps.

1. Tiger Woods didn't become good at golf by watching the PGA tour. He started playing professionally in 1996 at the age of 20.
2. 26 years of golfing. He hits at least 500 golf balls a day. If he has never taken a day off in those 26 years not to mention all that he did prior to turning pro at 20, he has probably hit almost 5 million golf balls.
- iv. What's my point? It takes more than an hour at church to be a fruitful disciple of Christ. It takes discipline and hard work. It takes other people like Paul did with Timothy. Stephen's and Paul's and Timothy's do not happen overnight nor automatically.
- v. We need to give ourselves and avail ourselves to discipleship relationships, devoted to the reading and hearing of the word, prayer, fellowship, and the worship of our King Jesus.
- vi. Surely a life with purpose means something to us. For much of our lives we don't have to guess what we are here for. We all have the same purpose and mission—glorify God and make his glory known to others. We only need to discover where we carry that out.
2. The Christians thus far in Acts had a mission field in Jerusalem. But Jesus had called them to more when he said in (Acts 1:8) "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."
  - a. It began in Jerusalem but Jesus promised that they would be witnesses well beyond Jerusalem.
  - b. Who was going to these places? How and when would they go? Where?
  - c. Our text this morning answers these questions. Verse one tells us.
    - i. Which ones? All were scattered except the apostles.
    - ii. How? By great persecution.
    - iii. When? The day that Stephen was martyred and the great persecution began.
    - iv. Where? In the regions of Judea and Samaria. These were the next two steps.
    - v. We will look at the why at the end.
- ii. Stephen was a faithful witness. His life was not wasted.
  1. There's no report of Stephen's injuries. No bloody details. Simply, he fell asleep and he was buried. But hear this, dear church, persecution did not separate him from the love of Christ.
    - a. (Rom. 8:35)<sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? I might add...stones!
    - b. Let me paint a picture for you with a few of these words.
      - i. Tribulation literally means pressure.
      - ii. Distress literally means narrowness; tight narrow place.
      - iii. Persecution literally means pursuit, chase.
        1. Imagine Stephen being pressed on all sides as he walks down a path that increasingly become more narrow as he goes. And he's being pursued from behind and cannot turn back.
        2. It's like the discovering of Ruby Falls. If you've ever been there, they will show you the shaft that Mr. Lambert crawled down to

find the falls. At some point there was no way to turn around. I suppose he could have backed up and that is where the illustration fails. But what he discovered was worth it.

3. Beyond comparison is what Stephen found. What did he find? (2 Cor. 5:8) <sup>8</sup> Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

- a. He made it home to be with the Lord!

2. Now, we see in verse 2 that some devout men buried him and made great (mega) lamentation over him.

- a. The identity of these men is uncertain. Luke's way of identifying Christians takes about 10 different ways at this point in Acts. "Devout men" is not one of them. In fact, back in Acts 2:5, the same words are used of those devout Jews who lived in Jerusalem that were listening to Peter preach on the day of Pentecost.
    - i. My feeble conclusion is that they are devout God-fearing men who had yet to believe and be baptized but who heard Stephen's speech and watched how he died and found it appalling and compelling.
    - ii. They are, like Joseph and Nicodemus, publicly identifying with this Christ follower.
    - iii. This was risky for them. Did they repent and believe? I have a guess.
    - iv. But they are in stark contrast to Saul in verse 3.

- iii. They lamented but Saul was ravaging the church.

1. "Was ravaging" clearly describes the ongoing attempt to destroy the church.

- a. Let's not forget, that Stephen was stoned to death for speaking the truth. Something Saul will learn later. But Stephen did not murder anyone. He was serving widows their daily food. He was doing signs and wonders among them. He was caring for those in need. Indeed, he was doing the very things the Jews were not doing. They were known for devouring widows houses not feeding them. They took their last coin while Stephen gave.

- b. What drives a man like Saul to destroy the church?

- i. We know his is an educated man. He later says this: (Acts 22:3-5) <sup>3</sup> "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. <sup>4</sup> I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, <sup>5</sup> as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.
        - ii. The dark side of knowledge is that it can cause one to be puffed up and zealous about the wrong things.
        - iii. People will do extraordinary things for the things they believe.

1. I saw a video of some protesters blocking road on the beltway in Maryland. They were protesting climate change. A parolee was behind the line and begged them to open one lane so that he could get to work because if he didn't, he would be breaking his probation and would probably be arrested. They did not let him through.

- a. “The problem of loving big broad abstract ideas like ‘humanity’ or ‘the earth’ is that it absolves you of having to love actual real people right in front of you.”
    - 2. We can love our church and the bible and still fail to love our neighbors. Real people. Right in front of us.
  - iv. So, knowledge is one reason. Another is advancement. Notice what Paul said in (Gal. 1:13-14) <sup>13</sup> For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. <sup>14</sup> And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.
    - 1. Advancement is not evil. But advancement with dead bodies in your wake is.
    - 2. This zealous drive caused Saul to enter house after house dragging off men and women!
      - a. This sounds like the annihilation of the pagan nations in the Promised Land.
      - b. They are committed to prison and we already heard Paul say he persecuted the Way to the death! He admitted he was violent.
- b. That leads us to our second point. Those scattered went about sowing the seed of the gospel.
  - i. Verse 4 actually begins with a “therefore.” That means the persecution resulted in the scattering of the church. And where the church went so did the mission to be witnesses.
    - 1. How did you expect this to happen? Exponential growth in the church spilling over into the surrounding places? They had that already. Devoted to the word and the apostles’ teaching? Not that either. Arrest? Flogging? Miracles? Success everywhere they went?
      - a. I don’t think anyone could have planned that great persecution would cause this to happen. Certainly, we can see why persecution caused it. We just would not have used that to make it happen.
    - 2. This is a common thread throughout the history of the church. Where the church suffers because of Jesus and the gospel, she continues to grow.
      - a. Someone said, “The wind increases the flame.” (Bengel)
      - b. “Tertullian, one of the early Church fathers of the second century coined the term, “the blood of the martyrs is seed for the church.” No doubt, anytime the church has faced persecution, she has always increased. The early Church was greatly persecuted yet there was an incredible harvest of souls. There seems to be a connection between martyrdom and the harvest. God had to sow his only son to reap the world.” (CT article)
        - i. A seed that falls into the ground and dies and bears much fruit. Indeed, there is a connection to persecution and harvest. Any farmer knows that.
    - 3. If suffering causes growth, what’s causing the decline and closing of churches? Why is the church in America and other nations not growing in the midst of freedom?
      - a. Gallup reports: Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999.
      - b. U.S. church membership was 73% when Gallup first measured it in 1937 and remained near 70% for the next six decades, before beginning a steady decline around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
        - i. Decline amid freedom hasn’t always been the case.

- c. These numbers are probably pretty generous. Statistics are complicated. Dishonesty has always been a problem.
- d. So, if suffering didn't cause it to decline what is causing it?
  - i. Sin is the large category. The church hasn't obeyed Jesus, the Head of the church.
  - ii. Thom Rainer offers some suggestions in his book: *Slow Erosion, The Past is Hero*, The Church refused to look like the community, The Budget moved inwardly, the Great Commission became the Great Omission, The Preference-Driven Church, Pastoral Tenure Decrease, The Church Rarely Prayed together, They had no clear purpose, The church obsessed over the facilities.
- ii. Whatever it is, we know what needs to be done from what follows in our text. Suffering pushed them out of Jerusalem. And as they went, they sowed the seed of the gospel.
  - 1. Verse 5 says "Philip went to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ."
    - a. We didn't discuss this back in chapter one, but you probably have some idea of just how bad the Jews thought of Samaritans.
      - i. I think this is an actual place and it alludes to the ancient riff the two kingdoms have had for centuries.
      - ii. Samaria was the capital city of the northern kingdom. When Jesus says, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem the center of worship and the temple which is in Judea or Judah, the southern kingdom and then Samaria which is essentially the northern kingdom, he is saying all of Israel and then to the ends of the earth!
      - iii. Samaritans were considered half-breeds. They had been exiled by Nebuchadnezzar and eventually he sent people to settle in the land. Later he sent priests to Samaria to teach them how to worship the God of that land.
      - iv. As some of Israel returned, they mixed with these people and there you have the riff.
      - v. They didn't consider them to be Jews.
    - b. My point is, the Jews of Jerusalem didn't like the Samaritans but Jesus sent his church to them. He came to save sinners. These were sinners that no one liked. But the church takes the gospel to all people.
      - i. Notice what happens in (Acts 8:6) <sup>6</sup> And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.
      - ii. Jesus sent his church to us. And we his church are sent to people who are not like us.
      - iii. Buildings are great but the ministry is out there! We come here to be equipped for the work of the ministry out there. In our homes. In our workplaces. Among our neighbors. The people across the tracks. All people! Different people.
      - iv. But that's not comfortable. We must decide if we are going to remain comfortable or not. Obedience will require discomfort. The church that is not comfortable grows.
- c. Why? The last point. That is the pattern of this text. That is the pattern of the Bible. That is the pattern of our history. There came great persecution—those who were scattered went about preaching the word—there came much joy in that city.

- i. When they heard the word and saw the signs-- (Acts 8:7) <sup>7</sup> For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.
- ii. How does it end? Joy!
- iii. Harvest is certainly grounds for celebration. It's long dark night and morning dawns. Or a cold, long winter and spring comes! Death to life!
- iv. Do you want to see joy in the city? On the hill? Around the corner? Joy only comes where salvation comes.

V. Response

- a. Would the Lord bring persecution to move us into other communities? And if we go, will the gospel go with us?
- b. Faith comes by hearing! The good news must be shared! The nations be glad and sing for joy because salvation has come!