

## ACTS 8:1-8

### INTRODUCTION

At first glance Stephen's death may have seemed a waste of a life. Here was a powerful preacher with a clear knowledge and understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures who could have been used by God to bring many Jews to faith in Jesus Christ. Why was it, that one so gifted had such a brief ministry? But there is another question that we must think about. It seems that his ministry ended in failure.

He was killed as a heretic and his death triggered the first persecution against the entire church. But of course he was not a heretic and the persecution, which seems to be a negative thing for the church was in fact something that was really positive because it scattered the church and the believers began to spread the gospel throughout the known world.

The persecution was God's way of moving the church out of Jerusalem into the world in order that the gospel might spread and His church added too. In the words of the early church Father Tertullian "the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church."

This chapter marks another turning point in the book of Acts as the church begins to fulfil its God given mandate in Acts 1:8. In this chapter the church reaches out to Judea, Samaria and even a Gentile is reached.

From now on in this book we see it's the Gentiles that are constantly being reached with the gospel, the gospel came to the Jews in Jerusalem thus illustrating the truth of our memory verse (Romans 1:16) but now the focus slowly begins to change.

### 1. THE PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH (vs. 1-3)

The persecution of the church up to this point had been directed against the Apostles and their associates. As of yet however no persecution had been aimed at the members of the church but this was all about to change (v 1). This persecution was led by Saul (v 3) an academically brilliant Jewish thinker, way beyond anyone else his age and extremely zealous for the cause of Judaism (Philippians 3:5-6).

Saul's aim was to destroy the church of Jesus Christ and he was willing to go to any lengths to achieve his aim. The prediction of the Lord Jesus was beginning to become true for he said, "If they persecuted me they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). As a result of this persecution all the believers were scattered throughout the regions Judea and Samaria except the apostles who were left in Jerusalem. Of course Luke the human author of this book does not mean that every single believer was scattered except the apostles but it is a general statement that shows that many believers had to leave Jerusalem to escape the persecution.

Obviously enough believers stayed in Jerusalem for the church to continue existing there but the church is now for the first time broken up and scattered to different parts of Judea and Samaria.

The fact that we are told that the apostles stayed in Jerusalem tells us that they probably wanted to Pastor the church that remained there, in many ways fleeing was easier than staying but these faithful apostles wanted to remain with the church and they probably also wanted to make sure that Stephen was buried and mourned properly (v 2).

No doubt they also stayed to carry on their work of evangelism for there would be people ripe for the gospel as a result of Stephen's death. His death must have left its mark on the people and it is possible that those who buried and mourned for him were not actually believers. The term that is

used “godly men” could be translated “devout men” and that term is used elsewhere to speak of pious Jews (Acts 2:5).

Perhaps these were friends of Stephen from the Synagogue that he attended and if that is the case then the Apostles would be needed in Jerusalem to try and help these people and many others make sense of what has happened and the only way they could do that is by coming to understand the gospel and that would be the apostles job.

Saul was ruthless in his persecution he went from house to house searching for Christians and when he found some he dragged them off to prison. He did not show any mercy, he put men and women in prison. Of course in doing so Paul sincerely believed that what he was doing was right, he thought he was serving God by having believers put in prison or put to death.

Saul’s intention was not just to harm the church or even hinder the church his stated aim was to see it completely destroyed, this act was to haunt Saul for the rest of his life, even after his conversion, which is why he felt totally unworthy to be called an apostle (Acts 22:3-5, 19-20). This persecution resulted in the church of Jesus church being scattered but God’s plan was being fulfilled for he uses the plan of evil men for his own gospel purposes. You see in Acts 1:8 he commanded his disciples to go into Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth with the gospel.

Here in chapter 8 they are still in Jerusalem, whether they were reluctant to go beyond Jerusalem or whether the opportunity just had not arisen we cannot be sure, so God allows his church to face persecution for his own purposes and as a result the church is scattered which might seem a disaster but the gospel is spread as we will see.

We must remember that what seems a disaster to us may very well be the means God uses to accomplish his purposes. For example in 1949 in China when the national Government was defeated by the Communists 637 China Inland Mission missionaries were told to leave the country. It seems from a human point of view a total disaster and a huge defeat for the gospel and the church.

But as we look back we now know that it was God’s purpose to allow such things to happen and what appeared a disaster has turned out to be a huge blessing. For within four years of leaving China 286 of those missionaries had been redeployed in South East Asia and Japan meaning that more missionaries were employed in those areas and some were having missionaries for the very first time.

But not only that but the national church in China even under severe persecution began to multiply in number so that today the church has 40 or 50 times more members than they did when the missionaries left although I don’t think anyone knows how many Christians there are in China.

The great lesson is that God in his wisdom uses persecution of His church for His own unseen purposes and we must never think that persecution is a total disaster for God’s church. We likewise must never think that when a church is scattered that it is a total calamity, for we do not know what God is doing with his scattered people and only time will tell us what exactly God is doing during times that appear on the surface to be devastating.

Many Christians lamented what happened in China in 1949 and for years prayed for that nation and it’s only in recent years that we have been able to discover exactly what God was doing since 1949. Likewise in our own lives events that seem to be disastrous may well turn out in the long term to be an immense blessing to us individually or as a church. So please don’t judge events as they are happening, let God work out his purpose, history will reveal the true value of what is

happening to Christians today in lands like Iraq, Iran and many other parts of the world. We simply must trust God who is in control of all things.

## 2. THE PREACHING OF THE CHURCH (vs. 4-7)

Although the scattering of the church seemed a tragedy from a human point of view, God was using it for the evangelisation of the world. For even though the believers were scattered and forced to leave Jerusalem they could not be silent for we are told that they “preached the word” wherever they went.

They did not go to another place and hide in fear of their life but they continued to do what they did in Jerusalem proclaiming the gospel message to others. The word translated “preached” comes from a Greek word from which we get our word “evangelism.” It means to proclaim the gospel. Everywhere these believers went they evangelised. Now this of course does not mean that it was only the Christians who were gifted preachers that were scattered but every believer spoke God’s word obviously not always in formal settings although no doubt there were some gifted people able to preach in that way as today there are men gifted to preach. But the main point that is being made here is that wherever the Christians went evangelism took place.

I wish we could get away from the idea that evangelism is some sort of organised event like the gospel concert that is coming up. That is evangelism that this church is engaged in collectively, but everyday each one of us should be involved in evangelism. We do that by speaking God’s word wherever we are as the opportunities arise.

Now this means that every one of us is called to do the work of evangelism no matter how young or how old we are, we are all able to proclaim Christ. We might not feel that we are particularly good at it, and we might not think that we have any great gifts for it, but the reality is that everyone of us can speak of Jesus Christ, and all we are asked to do in the bible is to do that.

Simply tell people what you know of Jesus Christ, tell them of our own personal experience of the salvation that He gives to sinners. Every one of us can at least do that. So evangelism should be taking place every day, unstructured and unplanned evangelism but as opportunities arise in our homes and at work or in our community we ought to seek to evangelise, we ought to seek to tell others about Christ.

If we were doing that more frequently and really praying for opportunities to evangelise then perhaps when our more formal church evangelistic events came around, we would have more people to invite to them.

In verse 5 Luke focuses on one man as an example of the sort of preaching that went on and also as a model of faithful evangelism. Philip becomes a key figure for the rest of this chapter, this is the Philip who was chosen as one of the seven and given the task of distributing the food to the needy widows.

He was a man full of the Holy Spirit and is given the title of Evangelist (Acts 21:8), so he must have been given specific evangelistic gifts. Philip goes from Jerusalem to a city in Samaria and he starts to proclaim Christ there. Now it was not easy to go to Samaria because there was hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans that had lasted for about 1000 years. Perhaps he would never have naturally chosen to go there but that is where he ends up as he flees the persecution taking place in Jerusalem. Once again we have to be amazed and perhaps even laugh at how God works his purposes out for the benefit of His church and for His own glory. The word “proclaimed” here means he did it publicly and as the Samaritans like the Jews were looking for the coming Messiah (John 4:25), Philip starts where people are and proclaims the Messiah to them.

I think this teaches us that we must start where people are when presenting the gospel to them. Sometimes we might need to demolish some of their long established beliefs before we can present Jesus as the Saviour of sinners.

With others we might have to start right at the beginning with creation in order to show the type of God that we are presenting before we can present Christ. The key to evangelism is to know whom you are speaking to. Where are they coming from and what do they really believe, which is not always the same as what they say they believe.

Of course good evangelism involves listening to people, getting to know them and learning how they think. But once we have done that and know something of their mindset and thinking we must always seek to present Christ to them. Convincing people that evolution is wrong or that there is a God is not presenting the gospel to them. We must present Christ as the Saviour of sinners; we must present him as the crucified and risen Saviour and Lord of sinners.

It is clear that the Holy Spirit was at work through Philip because they paid close attention to what he said. They knew that what he was proclaiming was true because he performed many signs, which as we know by now are a sign that his message is authentic, and that Philip is an authentic messenger of God.

The miracles where impressive evil spirits were exorcised and many who were unable to walk were healed. The point being made is that God is powerful and just as God is able to free people from the power of evil spirits and heal them from physical disabilities so he is able to do the same spiritually for any of these Samaritans who will trust in him as their Messiah.

That is true today. The Sign gifts are no longer with us but the power demonstrated in this incident is the same power that can free sinners from their bondage and heal them. Every sinner is in bondage to sin, we are unable to free ourselves and the only person who has power to do so is Jesus Christ and He does it through his death and resurrection on our behalf. Every sinner needs to be healed from their sin and the guilt that sin leaves and the only person who can do that is Jesus through His death on behalf of sinners.

That is why we must proclaim the gospel and do the work of evangelism. There is no other hope for sinners, they will remain in bondage and in need of spiritual healing unless Jesus Christ frees them and cleanses them from their sin. We have the answer to the greatest problem that mankind has, sadly many don't know that and don't understand that, but the reality is that only Jesus is able to do for them what they need.

Unless you and I tell them the gospel who else is going to do it? How else are they going to be set free? So let me encourage us all no matter how young or old we are no matter how outgoing or shy we are to make every effort with God's help to proclaim Christ to those that we meet. Let us pray that God will give us opportunities to do so and pray that we will know the help of the Holy Spirit so that He will enable us to find the right words and will make our words effective.

Now although I said that the sign gifts are no longer with us today we must still show people that we are authentic by our lives. This world is sick of religious hypocrisy and it is looking for reality, therefore our lives ought to be lived in such a way that people can see that we are not merely religious people but that we are really God's people changed by the power and grace of God.

Sadly today what Christians say and what they do often do not match up and therefore dishonour is brought to our God and our message is often not taken seriously. What we need more than anything else is real authentic Christian living so that people will see Christ living in us, so that when they do, they will listen to us and take our message seriously.

Philip's words and actions were effective because there was much rejoicing in that city presumably because of the miracles that had taken place and ultimately because many had accepted God word (v 14) and had been transformed by the power of God. That is what we must pray for and indeed in faith expect.

We must live real consistent Christian lives before people and we must proclaim Christ as the opportunities arise and then we must pray to God that he will give the increase.

When that happens then there is great rejoicing and families and communities and cities are changed and transformed by the power of God.

Amen.