

Jesus' Promises Are Unstoppable—Acts 8:1-8—9/21/25

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Last week we waded back into our study of the book of Acts, which recounts what Jesus did & taught through His Apostles & the church.

We reviewed chapters 1-7 with an emphasis on how Jesus is unstoppable, how His plans & purposes will not be stopped.

That was evident in His victory over sin & death as He gave Himself to pay sin's penalty & then rose again & ascended back to heaven.

Recall that Jesus came as God & man to fulfill the promise of a Seed who would crush sin & Satan & save all who trust Him.

Jesus was not the pioneer of some new religion.

He was the hope for all human history who fulfilled His Word.

He is Lord over all history & creation & He is coming again as King.

Nothing can stop Him as He has proven in defeating death.

He sent His Spirit & started the church through the Apostles preaching Him as Lord & Christ, as God & the Messiah, as the King & Savior.

And He is still working through His Word today.

So I want us to recall some ways that Jesus worked to fulfill His Word in the time of Stephen's martyrdom that can encourage us today.

We can be assured & guided with the reality that Jesus has told us both what to expect & how to make a difference in this life.

God's promises in Jesus equip us with life's most powerful weapons.

We'll see that today as we observe 2 ways Jesus' promises are unstoppable as we continue in chapter 8 in our study of Acts.

We'll outline 2 fulfillments of Jesus' own words in the aftermath of the first Christian martyr that closed the narrative of chapter 7.

Although Stephen's death might seem to be a defeat for Jesus' followers, instead it was an advance in His battle plan.

It was a step forward in what Jesus said in Luke 24:47, "*that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*"

That purpose was not stopped by the murderous evil of the Jewish leaders who falsely accused & attacked Stephen.

Rather, as Joseph said in Genesis 50:20—what they meant for evil, God meant for good.

What they did proved God's Word & moved God's people to spread His Word all the more.

Isn't that amazing?—our God is always invested in showing His grace & sovereignty & He often does so in the most unexpected ways.

As we saw last week, Jesus proved to be unstoppable when His name was opposed & outlawed & His church was attacked & tested & even when His witness was martyred.

Those are timely refreshers for us as debates abounded this past week over the impact of the recent martyrdom of Charlie Kirk.

As we've watched responses in our culture to something so obviously wrong, we can learn from the martyrdom of Stephen.

The lessons we learn from what followed Stephen's death are insightful to interpret what we see now & throughout history.

And here's the main lesson—Jesus' promises are unstoppable.

The events of Acts 8:1-8 confirm the accuracy & authority of God's Word & should move us to trust & trumpet His Word ever more.

Turn to Acts 8 with me & let's read that section before we unpack the theology of what we find there.

To get the context again, follow along as I read Acts 7:54-8:8. [READ]

This murder of Stephen was by educated, sophisticated people.

Leaders of the nation planted false accusations against Stephen & fomented hate for Jesus & His followers.

They did it in the name of religion for their political stability.

It was violently evil & yet Stephen showed Christlike love & boldness as he preached repentance for forgiveness in Jesus the Christ.

But his martyrdom did not stop the activists' agenda.

Their unjust action against a godly man did not awaken everyone against their sinister schemes, nor did it end the anger.

To begin chapter 8, Luke tells of the man in Acts 7:57 at whose feet the witnesses laid their robes while stoning Stephen.

We don't know if Saul was leading the charge to murder Stephen or standing by to approve it, but he was certainly further incited by it.

He was incited to greater evil & aggressive persecution.

He acted out of religious zeal as he later said in Galatians 1:14, he was *advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.*

In Philippians 3:5-6, he said he was *a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church.*

Saul was enraged to greater action against the church that Jesus was building in Jerusalem—that is, against Christ's followers.

He did not care about the human life of Stephen.

He did not care about those who mourned the loss of Stephen's life.

That's apparent because he left them no time for grief as he immediately increased in animal-like rage against the church.

Read again that frightful description in verses 1-3 of Acts 8. [READ]

In Acts 22:3, Saul—who was later called Paul—said he was from the region of Cilicia, not from Jerusalem.

So he may have been among those debating Stephen as Acts 6 described was happening before Stephen was false accused.

Whatever level his involvement, verse 1 says Saul thought it was good together with others to kill Stephen.

That's a more literal translation of Saul's hearty agreement.

That rationalization of unjust mob attacks spawned further action that same day in what verse 2 calls great persecution.

The day of Stephen's death marked an increase in pursuing & harassing & inflicting suffering on the church.

That's what persecution is—it's chasing after people to oppress them with mental & emotional & physical & financial anguish.

This persecution was against the church as distinct from the Jewish gatherings that largely rejected Jesus.

That church was the only gathering of Jesus' followers that had been numbered by the thousands in Jerusalem.

Yet those believers were being scattered, dispersed like seed thrown to the wind, fleeing throughout the regions of Judea & Samaria.

And the Apostles remained in Jerusalem despite the persecution they had endured before & would face again.

As leaders of the Jerusalem church, the Apostles stayed to shepherd the believers who remained & to continue preaching Jesus to others.

It could have been mainly the Hellenistic believers who were scattered to the nearby regions of Judea & Samaria.

But the scattering likely included Hebrew-speaking believers as verse 1 indicates that all were scattered.

The Apostles & likely their families & others stayed because they knew that the persecution was what Jesus had predicted.

Remember that the Apostles had been beaten already by these same Jewish leaders who had killed Jesus & warned them personally.

They knew they might be the next targets for stoning.

But none of this should ever have been a surprise to Jesus' followers.

Jesus had warned in passages like John 15:20, "*If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you*".

He had said in John 16:2 that "*they will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.*"

And that's why persecution was proof of Jesus' promises & a further reason to trust & follow Him.

So here's a 1st point to phrase that—note #1 that Christ's people were persecuted just as Jesus had said.

The points today emphasize that last phrase—just as Jesus had said—to highlight the trustworthiness of Jesus' promises.

Persecution proved that Jesus' words were accurate & authoritative.

Note #1: Christ's people were persecuted just as Jesus had said.

You can trace that line of reasoning from the OT promises of God cursing those who cursed Abraham's seed & judging the Davidic king's enemies in the imprecatory psalms.

For example, in John 13:18-20 after Jesus had revealed that one of His disciples would betray Him, he linked it those who opposed David & the Davidic promises in Psalm 41:9.

John 13:19-20 records that Jesus said, "*it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'he who eats my bread has lifted up his heel against me.'* From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He."

In other words, Jesus predicted His betrayal based on the theological pattern of the enemies of God & His promises.

So when God's preeminent promise was present in Jesus & was opposed, Jesus had told them to expect it—to expect such enemies.

From Jesus' death to the persecution of His followers, Jesus had predicted it.

Jesus had warned & prepared His people so that even the pain of persecution could be used to deepen their faith in Him.

In John 15:25, He quoted the phrase from Psalm 35:19 & 69:4—they hated Me without a cause—to help His disciples make sense of Him being hated so senselessly.

And in that context in John 15, He also told them in verse 18 that: *If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.*

Remember Peter's preaching in Acts 2-3 explained how the Christ being killed was PROOF that Jesus was the Christ rather than a reason to question or doubt that Jesus was the Christ.

And similarly, when the church faced persecution, it was PROOF of Jesus' promises rather than a reason to question or doubt Him.

Do you follow that logic & how it makes sense of persecution?

The trustworthiness of Jesus meant Stephen's martyrdom could clarify their convictions & strengthen their faith.

It anchored some to take the risk of loudly lamenting his burial & others to continue meeting in homes for teaching & prayer.

The term devout in verse 2 may indicate that those who were not yet Christians as in Acts 2:5 were part of public mourning over Stephen that likely also included believers.

All those mourning him took a risk because it was forbidden to mourn the execution of a criminal [Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:6].

And it is likely these mourners included Jews who saw the mob violence as wrong & maybe even mourned in protest.

But in contrast, verse 3 says Saul persecuted the church like a wild animal tearing its prey as that word ravaging depicts.

Since Saul could not stop the Gospel, he burst into houses where Christians gathered as in Acts 2:46-47.

He mercilessly hunted Christians in their gatherings, breaking & entering & then dragging both men & women to prison.

He later spoke of his senseless rage in 1st Timothy 1:13 by saying he was *formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor*.

In Acts 22:4, he said he had "*persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons.*"

In Acts 26:9-11, he said, "*I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.*"

Think about that—why would someone do such things to people he did not even know?

Why would he be so furiously enraged & want to people put to death?

Have you ever wondered that about those who kill Christians?

Understand that Jesus' repeated answer is that the world will hate you if you follow Jesus & preach Jesus because the world hates Jesus.

So 1st John 3:13 says, "*Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you.*"

Think of it—we naturally ALL hate correction at one level, don't we?

We are naturally proud & defensive when we are told truth & we often REACT—we do it & we see our kids do it, don't we?

We rationalize & make excuses & don't appreciate being exposed.

We may not say it, but we may secretly wish that truth-speaker would get out of our faces.

Of course, that's not good for us & by God's grace, we overcome it as believers & receive correction & want to grow, but beware of that.

And as we are aware of that battle in our own hearts, let it remind us to be compassionate with those who are still lost, enslaved to their sins & trapped in darkness.

So do not be disheartened when it happens to you or assume that someone who is hated & persecuted has done something wrong.

In today's comfort-loving, people-pleasing, false niceness, people assume that hurt feelings or emotional reactions indicate that a truth-speaker has been too bold or harsh or insensitive.

Feelings become the standard rather than keep truth as the standard.

We cannot let people's responses determine right & wrong.

But that's a bad assumption because Jesus Himself was raged against & killed even though He spoke everything perfectly & never sinned.

And Jesus promised that His followers would be hated & that living for Him & ministry in His name would be opposed.

So we should not be surprised when that happens & we should not blame the messenger when unbelievers react to the message.

Stephen did not deserve persecution merely because of the way he spoke to the Jews & their leaders & we should not follow such lines of reasoning when truth is opposed today.

Do not succumb to that kind of truth-squelching perspective.

And realize that the devil's agenda is to silence truth by FEAR.

FEAR is the enemy strategy—to get you to fear speaking truth, fear upsetting anyone or being attacked verbally or violently.

We can even be tempted to fear that our own kids won't like us or won't appreciate us giving the discipline they need.

But Jesus told us what would happen ahead of time so that we would not fear, but rather that we would believe, that we would trust Him.

And if we trust Him, then we know to OBEY Him, to simply do what He said, to follow His Word & leave results to Him.

We see His trustworthiness even in the existence of persecution & that's all the more reason to trust Him & obey Him & not allow fear to control us or to silence us or to deter us from what He said He uses.

And as we understand these truths, we should ask another question—we should wonder why we are not persecuted more.

Since Jesus said persecution will come against His followers, we need to ask what we are doing wrong if we never face opposition for Him.

Maybe nobody bothers you because you don't say anything.

Maybe you are so much like the world and so silent about the truth that unbelievers assume you are content leaving them lost in their sins.

Are you?—Are you ok with standing silently by as people walk in darkness on their blind, enslaved march into fiery torment?

If that's you, that's not a good thing—that's not good for unbelievers headed for hell & it's not good fruit in your life.

Do not allow fear to steal the joy of evangelism & faithfulness & even of watching God transform the lives of others.

And listen—just because opposition to the truth can be expected does not mean that conversions to Jesus cannot also be expected.

Remember who this man Saul became when Jesus saved him—he was terrible, the worst persecutor—but God saved him.

Not only was Saul saved, but he became the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Jesus can save even those who seem most opposed to Him.

God can overturn the most grievous evil to bring about glorious good.

After Christ had saved Paul, he lamented the evil he had done.

In 1st Corinthians 15:9, he later wrote that he was *the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle because [he] persecuted the church of God*.

But just as Saul doled out much persecution, he later endured much persecution as a follower of Jesus.

When Jesus saved him, Acts 9:16 says Jesus said He would “*show him how much he must suffer for*” Jesus’ name’s sake.

In his later defense of his apostleship in 2nd Corinthians 4 & 11, this same Paul wrote of many frequent sufferings.

So as we trust Jesus’ promises of persecution, we also trust promises of salvation & transformation through the Gospel.

Just as we trust 2nd Timothy 3:12 that *all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*, we also trust Romans 1:16 that the Gospel is *the power of God for salvation*.

We also trust that “*the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*” as 1st Corinthians 1:18 says.

As 1st Corinthians 1:23-24 says, “*we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*”

Our faith can deepen when Christ’s people were persecuted just as Jesus said, as we noted as a 1st point.

And as a 2nd point, our faith can also deepen when Christ’s preaching was spread just as Jesus said.

Note that as a 2nd lesson after Stephen’s martyrdom—2ndly, note that Christ’s preaching was spread just as Jesus said.

1st, Christ’s people were persecuted just as Jesus had said.

And 2nd, Christ’s preaching was spread just as Jesus had said.

We know that Christ’s preaching through His Apostles had spread around Jerusalem as the end of Acts 4 reported.

And we know Jesus predicted in Acts 1:8 that they would be His *witnesses both in Jerusalem & in all Judea & Samaria & even to the remotest part of the earth*.

So don’t miss the locations in Acts 8:1—the believers were all scattered where?—throughout the regions of Judea & Samaria.

Those are the adjacent regions beyond Jerusalem that Jesus predicted.

And read verses 4-5 to see what happened there. [READ]

Point #2—Christ’s preaching was spread just as Jesus had said.

Do you see that link?—persecution caused scattering, but that scattering spread the Good News of Christ to where He said.

Do you see how Jesus’ promises are unstoppable?

Jesus’ plan & purposes & Word & Gospel will not be stopped.

And be clear that the term in verse 4 is not the idea of preaching a sermon—it’s the word for evangelizing—they evangelized the word.

They proclaimed the good news of the Word.

They shared the Gospel of the Word everywhere they journeyed.

They spread the glad message of the Word as they went.

And so began the next phase of the church being established from Jerusalem to Judea & Samaria as Jesus predicted in Acts 1:8.

Yet note in verse 4 that this was first through nameless multitudes of believers who were that scattered.

It was by all kinds of believers transformed by the Gospel with diverse gifts & callings who scattered to share God's Good Words.

So don't miss the exponential power of faithful evangelism by every single follower of Jesus.

That's how you follow Jesus' plan for changing the nation & world.

The Gospel is the greatest power that you can unleash.

And such Gospel expansion does not require any grand plan made by men or endorsement by governmental authorities.

It happens by believers like you proclaiming the Good News of the Word, speaking the Gospel, announcing it from the Word.

Though he was not one of the Apostles, Philip did so & he was later described as an evangelist in Acts 21:8.

This Philip was one of the 7 with Stephen in Acts 6 that verse 5 here says was proclaiming the Christ.

That was in *the* city of Samaria, which may have been the capital city or the city by Mount Gerizim where the Samaritans set up worship.

Recall that the northern kingdom Israel had broken from the southern kingdom Judah after Solomon & later built a city called Samaria under King Omri as 1st Kings 16:24 says.

When the Assyrians defeated & exiled that kingdom in 722 BC, 2nd Kings 17-18 describes the Jews left there mixing with Gentiles both ethnically & religiously & then not welcomed after the exile in Ezra 4.

But like Jesus in John 4 with the Samaritan woman, Philip did not let the divisions stop him from speaking of the Christ there.

Philip went down in elevation to that area though it was up in the sense of moving northward from Jerusalem.

And verse 5 uses a different word for Philip's preaching than the word for evangelizing that was used in verse 4.

It's the word for a herald or official reporter or announcer of news.

It's the word for preaching or proclaiming & the object of Philip's public decree was simply the Christ.

He was telling people of the Christ, speaking about the Christ.

And obviously from all that was preached before this, he was pointing to Jesus as that Christ, as that promised Messiah.

Christ's preaching was spread just as Jesus had said—that's point #2.

That was the beginning of obedience to His words in Matthew 28:19-20, to make disciples of all the nations.

As He said in Luke 24:47, *repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*

That's what was happening, just as Jesus had said—despite persecution & even because He used the persecution to start it.

So we can trust His promises & obey Him & follow His clear method for turning the world upside down.

And what's the method?—it is through the Word, evangelizing with the Word, through proclaiming Jesus as the Christ.

That happens through every believer wherever we go, even when going happens from scattering because of persecution.

As we see that emphasis evangelizing & proclaiming the Word & the Christ, understand the importance of that in your life.

You are to be an announcer of the Good News.

The ministry of the word from each of us is what God uses to unleash His power & spread His glory & to transform lives.

See that emphasis & trust His word & spread it.

Let that motivate you to share the Gospel & pray for Gospel spreading & support Gospel ministry here & around the world.

Invest in knowing the Word & the Christ from the Word so that you can report & teach & explain & counsel & reach out.

That is the greatest way to love people & to change the world.

Train yourself in the Word & treasure Christ & speak of Him.

And do so knowing that the NT was proven just as the OT had been as we see next in verses 6-8 so read those. [READ]

Since the Samaritans believed the first five books of the OT written by Moses, they had an expectation of a coming restorer.

Deuteronomy 18:15-19 spoke of that prophet greater than Moses & the Samaritans of that time claimed to seek the same God as the Jews.

The Samaritan woman in John 4 spoke of such a Messiah or Christ as she spoke to Jesus & spoke about Jesus to others.

So Philip's proclaiming of Christ registered with them as he corrected their errors that neglected rest of the OT & Davidic promises.

As this new revelation of the Christ spread from Jews to this next people group, God authenticated it by signs Philip did.

Those signs proved Jesus' power over the spiritual & physical world as people were freed from demons & healed of disabilities.

As during Jesus' ministry, some demons cried out as they left those they controlled. [Mark 1:23, 26; 3:11; 5:7; Luke 4:33, 41]

And we're not told a formula or method Philip used, only that he preached the Christ & also likely prayed as the early church did often.

Such demonstrations of divine power were not to be sought in themselves, as we'll see next in the narrative of Simon Magus.

Jude warns of the pride of presuming to have such power when even Michael the archangel called upon the Lord to rebuke the devil.

Yet Philip did do such signs of power like what Jesus had done in His ministry & through the 70 in Luke 10 & through the Apostles as we've studied in Acts. [2:43; 4:30; 5:12-16; 6:8]

In that foundational period of new revelation, God was leaving no doubt that these messengers could be trusted as carrying His Word.

We find such attestation of the message & messengers at each step outward to new groups in Acts.

The Samaritans were half-Jews, even though they were divided from the Jews as John 4:9 said of them not having dealings with each other.

So this was a step from the Jews to half-Jews before the later step to the Gentiles.

And each step was attested by signs alongside the preaching of Christ.

Since the NT had not yet been written, God was proving His work as the mystery of the church was being unveiled.

And the mystery of Jews & Gentiles coming together was drastic.

That raised questions about laws of separation from the pagan nations & more & so God had to prove that this was from HIM.

God was showing that He was moving, building this new mystery called the church that He would later reveal more about.

This new body of believing Jews, Gentiles & even Samaritans coming together was not yet revealed.

Yet that's what God was moving toward as the Gospel spread.

So He was proving His work through signs by His leaders.

Jesus was building His church not merely in Jerusalem with Jews, but also in Judea & Samaria with others of mixed Jewish backgrounds.

But note that what set the people free was the Gospel of Christ, not the signs that proved the messengers of that Gospel.

Philip proclaimed the Good News of Jesus the Christ just as we do today & Acts 8 tells of many Samaritans lived changed forever.

And the result, as verse 8 says, was much rejoicing in that city.

The spread of the Gospel produced the fruit of great joy among people & I pray that motivates us all to spread that joy as much as we can.

As we see Christ's power demonstrated to prove His Word, I pray we see yet another reason to trust Him & speak of Him.

We have more reason to trust the Scriptures as divinely inspired & authoritative & sufficient for knowing & sharing Christ.

We treasure & share Christ from His Word as those who know (1) that Christ's people were persecuted just as Jesus had said & (2) that Christ's preaching was spread just as Jesus had said.

I pray those truths from this text encourage & embolden you to seek & speak of the Lord Jesus Christ from His Word.

And if we can lead you to salvation in this Christ, let us know.

Pray with me as we close.