

Acts 8:1-25

Teresa

Last week – where race meets grace, Today: where pain meets possibility – Leadership When the Going Gets Tough

In chapter 8 - Church is growing like crazy. – The Jewish leaders don't like it, so they start putting pressure on the followers of Jesus, and where we're at – chapter 7 – they put so much pressure, they murder one of them, a young man by the name of Stephen – whose job initially was to give out money and food to those in need – and he became a powerful force in the Christian movement and was killed because of it.

So the plot twists where it says – the organizer of Stephen's death was a young guy named Saul, who was a rabbi – young and intelligent, but aggressive rabbi, who did not like the Christian movement.

So that's where we're at. When rocks were thrown at Stephen, he didn't respond by throwing rocks back – he got down on his knees, praying for his killers – and looking like Christ as Christ welcomed him into heaven.

Stephen shows us that the way we respond to pressure is very important.

This week we're going to talk about this – **sometimes it takes a shove to get us to move.** Sometimes it takes a shove – so that's where we're going to go.

PRAY

1-8

3 – “destroy” – think of a wild boar rampaging through a garden, or a guerilla army sweeping through a town and devastating it.

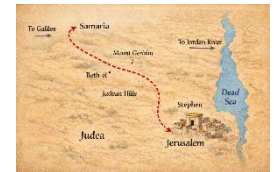
8 – “joy” – it doesn't just say there was joy among the believers, but there was joy in the city. If good things are happening among us, the city looks at us and says, “I may not believe what they believe, but I'm glad they're here.”

Here's what's neat about chapter 8 – you get to see the ways God works, even in persecution.

So after the death of a young, innocent follower of Jesus named Stephen at the hands of the Jewish council and the organization of this young, aggressive rabbi, the Book of Acts takes a sharp turn.

It goes a different direction, and fast. We go from martyrdom – and that same day, persecution of the church started in Jerusalem, and from that we see evangelism.

So some of the Jews stayed in Jerusalem. These are the local, hometown Jews who spoke the same language.. But those from outside the area – the Greek-speaking Jews – are targeted, and pushed out of the city.



But here's the thing – those from the outside, are better equipped than anyone, to reach those outside. Therefore, God has a plan, even in the worst of times.

So – the persecution is driven by a single individual – this antagonist named Saul. He was a younger man who led the charges in the street.

He kicked in doors, walked in, drug out men and women who proclaimed to followed Jesus, and he started to persecute them and throw them in jail.

Saul's opposition to the outsider Christians scattered them away. And here's what's interesting - these are not the pastors, the elders,

the ones that walked with Jesus for 3 years – this is the second generation followers of Jesus. These were the regular church folks – just the volunteers and the ones who did the day to day work of the church. And one of those was a guy named Philip.

Philip was one of the 7 that was chosen to help the Apostles do the day-to-day operations of the church. He gathered money to be distributed to the widows so they could eat. He took care of the poor.

Philip was also an outsider – he wasn't raised in the traditional Christian home, around people who did all the things church people did – he was an outsider (and he spoke their language).

Because he was an outsider, when he went to the area of Samaria, he fit in perfectly, and they responded well to him.

That area was not a spiritual area. Nobody went through Samaria, not only because it was dangerous and isolated, but because there was animosity between the Jews and Samaritans.

And so - there are some of you in this room that were not raised in a Christian home where you went to church every Sunday – and every single one of us have unique experience, things that have happened to us, life experiences that we don't need to shy away from or not be proud of – we use these life experiences and God will place us in positions where we can minister to people that other people can't.

And so the mission of the church wasn't just carried by professional apostles – it belonged to everyone.

So in a bureaucracy, the people at the top control everything. But in a movement, EVERYBODY is leading, EVERYBODY is participating – and what happens is multiplication and growth.

And so look at how God works. And I'm not picking on those of you who were raised in church – I was raised in church – we need everybody. You have a demographic of people you can reach. We stand on your shoulders. But there are people that you can reach others can't.

That's a good thing. God uses all the things that have happened to us to advance his kingdom.

Sometimes – whether you were raised in church or weren't – pain will push us into places we would have never chosen. But it's only when we are in those places that the power of God is manifested.

And so when you find yourself in a place you never wanted to go, the power of God shows up in ways you could have never imagined. (Is that true for anyone here)?

That's what happened with Philip and these early believers.

He doesn't have a “raised in church” experience, but he's so gung ho – he goes into Samaria, praying for people, casting demons out of people – I like what the Bible says that they are “screaming” as they leave people – that had to be scary.

He's praying for people who are demonically possessed and demons are coming out screaming coming out.

He was praying for people who couldn't walk, and they would walk. People who were sick and they were getting healed, all by the power of the HS.

And a lot of people think these things don't happen anymore – well, go with me to West Africa and sit and listen to the stories, and come back, and tell me what you think. But more than that – talk to some people right in our city, who will tell you they were healed by the power of God! Hear the stories in this room, of deliverance from

demonic oppression, spiritual forces of darkness that sought to take them out.

Professional counselor in my office couple of weeks ago – she said that some problems are spiritual problems that come through demonic influences, and they can only come out by prayer.

But here's what I want you to know – God is still doing mighty, powerful and miraculous things.

And that's what drew a lot of people to the Christian movement – seeing people delivered from demonic oppression. Seeing people healed physically – that caused a lot of people to follow Christ.

But listen – that is all secondary to the message of Jesus. The works of Jesus are secondary to the message of Jesus.

And so the purpose of the miraculous is to draw attention to the soul saving knowledge of having a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Next part – verse 9-13

9 – one thing about it – you never see a humble magician. It's never, "Oh, hey, I'm not that good, but come see me anyway.")

Here's where we get into interesting stuff. There was a guy in Samaria who was an occultist – it means he had connections to demonic power. This man was so famous, and so well known, that authors like Justin Martyr, who came along a little bit later, and Tertullian – a second century Christian historian, they wrote about this guy. They claimed that even people in Rome knew who this guy was. He was very well known, and they considered him so powerful with sorcery, that he was nicknamed "the great power of god."

This guy, Simon, was very well known. He was a profit-motivated sorcerer who obviously demonstrated works of power among the people.

So as Philip came into town, Philip starts casting demons out of people, he starts healing the sick and the people who've never been able to walk, and he sees this. (And not only that, people are being baptized into following Jesus Christ), all at the hands of this young guy named Philip.

So Simon sees that (he's losing followers because though he had great power, Philip's power is greater), and it says that even Simon believed, and Simon even got baptized. (his star is fading fast, so he's like, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em)."

And at first we're like, "That is awesome, especially this guy that is involved in demonic work, becomes a follower of Jesus – that is amazing!" But we're about to learn that his conversion is not genuine – he didn't mean it.

What that teaches us – belief in Jesus, and even the belief in the Holy Spirit and His power, does not mean that we are saved. And so a lot of people – especially in Southern Christianity – says, "well, I believe." But James, the brother of Jesus, said, "Even the demons believe and tremble."

So just saying that you believe in Jesus, just acknowledging that He is all powerful, does not mean we are saved. It is living a life that honors Jesus Christ. It is having a relationship with Jesus that saves us. Grace through faith.

And so what happened to Simon – Simon just got caught up in the emotion of it all.

Simon was more attracted to the power that the disciples had, to the crowds that were gathered around Philip, than he actually was about following Jesus Christ.

Now listen – if we're not careful, we can do the same thing. We want the benefits of what the church community gives us – we see the

good works the church does, the benefits of being part of the community, we get wrapped up in the emotion of it, my friend just got baptized, I'll do it too – and we get wrapped up in the emotion, the music – or the consumerism of it – “I can get free counseling.”

Essentially we can start looking a lot like Simon, and we don't know what it truly means to follow Jesus Christ.

And look where this goes – 14-17

The original 12 apostles hear what's going on in Samaria – people are coming to Christ in droves – people are giving their life to Christ, people are getting healed. Philip is doing this amazing work!

So they decide to send Peter and John – the older and more experienced Christians – to make sure everything was hearing good theology, that the church was getting proper root and growing in a healthy way. The reason why they did this (and this isn't a knock on Philip): Philip was younger, and he was less experienced.

He lacked the wisdom and the spiritual authority that Peter and John had – so they send in the older, more experienced Christians.

When Peter and John got there (it gets interesting here) – a lot of people decided to follow Jesus – they had been baptized – but they did not have the HS.

So let me clear that up – here's what I believe:

This was a unique circumstance where the apostles conveyed to them VISIBLE manifestations of the Spirit – like speaking in tongues.

In Act 2 – on the Day of Pentecost – the coming of the Spirit was accompanied by outward manifestations of the Spirit - tongues of fire came to rest on them.”

And now as the Gospel moves out to Samaria for the first time, the same thing happens here. And this conveyed to the Samaritans that they were not second-class believers. Now they had unmistakable EVIDENCE that the spirit of God was also given to Gentiles.

Here's why that's important - the Bible does not say, “Because you haven't spoken in tongues, because you haven't been baptized in my specific church in my specific denomination, you're not saved.” That's bad theology.

You cannot enter into heaven without the Holy Spirit. So whoever has entered into Christ has the Holy Spirit with them.

So the point of Peter and John going to Samaria was to confirm the Gospel. AND – it was also a unity issue. They come to verify what is going on to make sure that as the Gospel moves out into new areas, people are keeping in sync with the care values of the Gospel.

And so Philip was the less experienced, younger Christian. And he submitted to the more experienced older Christians. (This didn't diminish Philip.)

When he submitted to spiritual authority, that didn't make him less. God blessed him and made him extremely influential, and we're still talking about him today, 2000 years removed.

18-19

And so the apostles pray for these people – and they received the Holy Spirit.

Simon saw this, and he wants that power, not only for himself, but to convey it to others. And here's why he wanted it – because Simon knew he could make a profit out of it.

He knew he could say after the apostles left, “Yeah, you can have the HS – it'll cost you \$50 bucks.”

Isn't that crazy? How many times have you stayed up at night and watched those jokers on TV, right? Hey, put your hand on the screen – and also send in \$19.95 and you'll be good.

It's been going on forever – and still goes on.

And so Simon offers to purchase the ability to administer the HS. He says, "I don't want to follow Jesus, I just want all the power, I want to be able to profit, and I want all the attention of being a Christian, without any of the devotion of being a Christian. I WANT GOD'S POWER, I REALLY NEED HIS PRESENCE WITH ME.

Ans it's easy to judge Simon, but we can also be guilty. In fact there's a term – "Simony" – derived from Simon, which is the act of purchasing or selling church privileges for power. This still happens.

So not only in our day and age do we have pastors that live in 4-million-dollar homes like they're rock stars, but we also have congregations that are so selfish and self-serving that all they want out of church is for them to benefit.

If not careful, we can have leaders and congregations that look like first century Simons. And that's not good.

Last part – and Peter gets a little sassy right here – 20-24

So the true heart of Simon comes out, and Peter looks at him and calls him on it – "your heart is not right, you've been baptized, you follow us around and do all the right Christian things, but there's something wrong with your heart."

And we learn from that, that we can get the external looking right – have the right bumper sticker, the tattoo, dress the part and go to the right church – all the externals – and still have something wrong with our hearts.

So Peter looks at Simon and says, "Here's your problem: you're poisoned by bitterness, and you are enslaved by iniquity."

You know, you can be angry for 3 days, but you can be bitter for 30 years.

But what this tells us – his fundamental attitudes were out of harmony with those of God.

His disposition led him to bitter results, so he's wretched and captive to sin.

Iniquity is not just sin, it is being immersed so long and so deep in sin, that you don't even know what's right anymore. You don't know what's right and wrong, you don't have a moral compass.

So Peter calls him out, and after that Simon says, "Please pray for me." It doesn't seem to be because he cares about what God thinks about him, it's because he doesn't want God to zap him – he doesn't want to die.

And what he needs to do is repent (which means not just to feel bad about something – but to go a different direction).

I was reading a book on trust this week, and it asked the question, "What if trust is broken?"

TRUST IS NOT BUILT IN THE APOLOGY; TRUST IS BUILT IN THE CONSISTENCY OF ACTION AFTER THE APOLOGY HAS BEEN ISSUED.

That's what it means to repent. Posting on FB is worthless unless you follow through.

Apologize Thoroughly! I am sorry. It was my fault. What can I do to make it right or solve the problem?

Then, forgive and be forgiven. Let it go.

If you do no more than apologize, you haven't changed.

You run your mouth all the time, spreading stuff around you have no business telling – and you say, “Man I'm sorry,” and you turn around and do the same thing tomorrow. That's not repentance. You need to pray about that.

True repentance is to pray about that and walk a different direction.

Until we do that, we have not repented, and therefore we not completely reconciled with God. We have an issue.

Last verse - 25

And so because things are going well in Samaria, Peter and John preached in a number of villages. (Men like John – who earlier asked Jesus if he should call down fire upon the Samaritans – Luke 9:51-55 – is now sitting in circle with Samaritans teaching them the Gospel).

This is kind of like the way our kids change us - Have you noticed that? These second-generation leaders changed them. And now the first-generation leaders are following in the footsteps of the second generation. (We've got to be able to change and admit we don't always have it right.)

And what learn is - Christianity is not an individual sport, it is a team sport – and we do this together.

And so the church was growing – 3000, 5000, 20,000 – and then a guy gets murdered, and some people are like, “I didn't think that was going to happen.” And then a guy named Saul comes kicking everybody's doors down and throwing people in jail.

Did that slow the church down? No. In fact, it made it grow even

faster, and it took it out of just Jerusalem, to where in a couple hundred years it would become a global movement.

Today – there are more Christians than any religion on planet earth, and it all started with a young man named Stephen who was killed for his faith.

It became a global thing, after that persecution.

So here's the thing – we tend to look at resistance in our life as always a negative. There's pressure in my life, things are hard, there's this tension – it's not easy right now – it must be the devil.

And I'm going to tell you – sometimes it's not the devil that is putting pressure on you – sometimes it's God.

And when we always look at tension or resistance as a bad thing, maybe God through tension, through resistance, even through putting us through the ringer sometimes, God may be trying to force us out of our comfort zone.

He may be forcing you out of this job, because there's a depressed individual at the next job that needs you. He may be pushing you out of that comfort zone. He may be growing patience in us. Understanding.

He may be trying to get us to look at things from a different perspective.

Maybe God put that person as your roommate or that person as your boss or that person as your patient or student in your classroom, because God has you there for a reason.

So whenever that pressure or tension is in our life, instead of us saying, “God, what in the world,” maybe we should say, “God, what

are you trying to teach me right now? Why is this pressure in my life?”

Why are you doing this? What am I supposed to learn?

So here's the thing – in times of pressure – and sometimes it may be evil pressure and so pray against that in Jesus' name – but if it's healthy pressure, if we will lean on God's understanding and not our own, pressure will strengthen us. Tension will unify us.

ICE STORM – people are in church today because of it.

You guys ever met someone who's never been through anything hard?

Is that the person you go to for help and counsel – “Hey dude, I know you've never been through anything, but can you help me with this?” (Said no one).

Whenever you go through the ringer, you find the person with the most scars don't you?

Those are the people we look to – we look to people who have some wounds from the battles they've been in.

Here's the last point – everyone of you in this room will receive some tension. God ordained tension. God wants to put resistance in your life – and sometimes very tough.

Here's the thing, though - before resistance comes, before oppression comes – whether God or even the devil – we must be proactive with our faith, or we will crumble under that pressure.

Here comes **Christianity 101** – the most basic teaching I can possible give you – if we are going to stand the waves and winds of life:

1. **We must be praying.**

And not just 911 praying, not just praying when something in our body feels out of wack – not just praying when we feel like we're not going to make our mortgage payment – we don't just be proactive when our wife is walking out the door, threatening divorce – we're not just proactive when our kids get a DUI – we pray before those things happen.

We lay a foundation and build a relationship with God before those things happen.

If your kids are small – pray for their future husbands and wives now! “Send my daughter a good God fearing man one day.” Pray for that stuff now!

And not just prayer – we don't just wait until something bad happens or you receive pressure, you need to be:

2. **Reading the Scriptures.**

(Got call from young lady, visited here, in Kansas City – I'm driving, can you recommend something for me to listen to? Yes!

I watch my wife each morning – putting on makeup, doing hair – drinking coffee – listening to the Bible, 5 minute explanation. Bible Recap with Tara Leigh Cobble - Bible.com

EVERY - SINGLE - DAY!

Listen – we covered 25 verses of this book today. There are almost 1200 chapters, and we only did half of one today, and look at the wisdom in one half of a chapter of this book.

This book is FULL of wisdom – it's full of direction, it's full of knowledge – this is the mind of God put down on paper for us.

Please read it. Don't wait until life is falling apart till pressure is put on you – read this book!

So when that pressure comes, you'll have the wisdom of God in your heart. You'll know where to find some strength, when we read it on the front end.

And the last part of this Christianity 101 message –

3. You need the church.

More and more people say, “I love Jesus, I don't care for the church much.” Did you know the Bible addressed that in Hebrews? More and more as we grow closer to the time of the Lord returning:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another (Hebrews 10:24-25).

You NEED CHURCH.

Don't wait – again – to find Christian community when you're marriage has fallen apart or you've lost a loved one – have Christian community now, because when those things happen, when people hurt you, when people pass away, when times get tough, you have that support structure. You have those people around you who will hold you up and encourage you and pray for you and lift you up, You need that in the front end.

And so Philip – an outsider – didn't grow up with church – let me show you what happened – Acts 21 – end of Paul's third missionary journey – and he's been at sea, and don't you know he's worn out:

On the following day we left and proceeded to Caesarea and there we went to stay at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven deacons. He had four unmarried daughters, all of whom spoke by the Spirit of God (Acts 21:8-9, TM)

God used pressure and tension to cultivate a great family for him.

Listen – if we will do these three things - pray, read the Word of God, and make Christian community a priority, there is no amount of pressure and weight in the universe that you can't withstand if we've invited God to get under that weight with us.

Listen – your financial problems are not too much for God.

Any amount of scars or offenses, the Lord can help us with these things.

But we have to invite him into the mix, we have to be proactive about our faith. Because when these times come – and you will – if we have Christ next to us and we're full of the Word of God and the knowledge of the Word of God – if we have a prayer life, brothers and sisters in Christ around us, we will be able to withstand it.

You will be able to stand up and take it, and you'll come out the other side better than you've ever been.

You will come out better if you are proactive about your faith.

Bow your heads with me -