

The Spread of the Gospel

Acts 8:1-13

DT- The Holy Spirit always gets his work done.

I appreciate Steve filling in for me last week. Acts chapter 7 is a powerful chapter and as Steve made the comparison of Stephen to Jesus we see that continuing even into chapter 8 with the burial of Stephen. There is a major shift that occurs here in chapter 8, and we won't get to look at it all, but the gospel is about to spread just like Jesus said it would back at the beginning of Acts 1. Let's pray and we will see how the spread of the gospel takes place.

PRAY

The Holy Spirit always gets his work done. No matter what, the Holy Spirit is going to accomplish what needs to be done for the kingdom to grow and move it forward. The Spirit is either going to guide you in it or propel you to it. He is not so much worried about whether you are comfortable but whether the mission of the church is being accomplished. The Spirit wants the world to be won for Christ and if you don't do that voluntarily he will make it happen in some other way, and in this case he uses persecution to get his work done.

Persecution has been one of the most effective ways to spread the gospel. Think of persecution like a dandelion. Here in a few months dandelions will begin to spring up with that bright yellow flower. Eventually that dandelion will transform into a white fluffy seed head. Kids will sometimes pick those up and blow on them to watch the seed stems float into the wind or kick them, which is probably a better way to make the connection with persecution, as you watch those seed stems scatter. Those seeds that float onto good soil will eventually germinate and produce another dandelion.

That's how persecuting the church works. Kicking us just makes more of us. Persecution is what this early church began to face and Acts 8:1 says this just after the stoning of Stephen, "Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria."

Persecution was already happening for the early church before this moment. The Apostles had been beaten because they refused to be quiet about Jesus. But now the persecution was moving from the leaders of this church to the members of the church. For the first time the leaders of the Jewish community in Jerusalem were united in their opposition against this new movement. Saul, who we know as Paul, is introduced as really the first deadly enemy of the church.

When persecution happens to the church it produces 2 things; first it scatters the church.

Persecution produces 2 things:

1. It scatters the church.

One moment of persecution may not scatter the church but prolonged persecution certainly can. Things were getting bad for these new Christians, so they began to run and hide. Literally they began to scatter in places outside of Jerusalem. Luke mentions two places specifically, Judea and Samaria. His mention of those specific places reminds us of what Jesus said in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

God was not causing this persecution, but he does use it to accomplish His will. Now the church is headed to Judea and Samaria. Part of the reason these Christians fled to places like Samaria is because that's the last place a Pharisee like Paul would go to look for them. Luke paints an ugly picture of why this scattering takes place and unfortunately Paul or Saul is at the center of it. Acts 8:3 says, "But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison."

Have you ever watched an alligator attack and eat its food. It bites down and then it begins to twist and shake. Sharks do the same sort of thing. Lions bite down and then rip and tear their prey. That's what this word destroy means. When Paul writes in 1 Timothy 1:15 that, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all."

This is what Paul was thinking about. The time in his life when he persecuted the church with a passion. You can understand why the Apostles were leery to let Paul into the church after his conversion. He was going house to house dragging out men and women. To drag a woman out of her house for the purpose of persecution was unheard of. Women in this time period were not objects of war but trophy's of war. The very fact that Paul identified women as members of this church too, says a lot about what the church was doing for women. For them to be seen as individual believers was outside the norm for this cultural.

These men and women were thrown in prison and prisons weren't punishment like they are now; they were simply holding places until they could be properly punished. You can understand why persecution scatters the church. We don't face this kind of persecution. Most of us have no concept of what this would be like. When we were in Romania last summer we had a worship night just there at the chapel. A few of the Romanians shared their testimony or the testimony of their parents about the persecution they faced under communist rule until 1989.

Stories of the state finding out they were Christians and then the next day losing their job and unable to be rehired. Stories of smuggling in Bibles from other countries. Stories of fleeing the country to escape the persecution of being thrown in jail. Father's leaving their families and their wives to escape to America to work and save enough money to fly their families here, and that process took several years. Persecution truly does scatter the church, but persecution also expands the kingdom.

2. It expands the kingdom.

That happened with the church in Romania during that time of persecution. We see it happening right now with the church in China. It happened here in Acts as well. Luke writes in Acts 8:4, "But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went."

The more Saul tried to persecute the church the more it expanded. All those believers in that Jerusalem megachurch scattered throughout Judea and Samaria planting the seed of the gospel wherever they went. There are different words for scatter in the Greek language. One means to disperse an item that is gone from that point forward, you won't get it back. Like spreading ashes over the ocean. That's not the word Luke uses in verse 1 or here in verse 4. The word Luke uses here means scattered in order to be planted.

They thought persecution would stop the Christian church from spreading but all they did was chase them into places where the gospel could be planted and flourish. Everywhere they went they preached the good news of Jesus. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether that is true of us. Wherever you find yourself, whether your scattered because of work or family or education or some other means, have you spread the gospel message where God has taken you? You can. All it takes is a conversation, an example, a kind word, a simple prayer and the seed is planted.

It's what the early Christians did and you are here today because even in some of the toughest moments of their life they chose to expand the kingdom. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them."

This was all part of God's plan. The Holy Spirit always gets his work done. What amazes me most about how God orchestrated all this, is the people he chose to use. At this point he didn't send out the Apostles. They were the only ones who stayed in Jerusalem. We don't know why. Perhaps to make sure as many Jews as possible had the opportunity to hear the gospel first. The people who were scattered that God used were the everyday members of the church. They were the ones living out the great commission of Acts 1:8.

Persecution scattered the church and expanded the kingdom. Luke decides to focus in on one of those members that was scattered; a deacon named Philip. Philip runs and hides in Samaria. Acts 8:5-6 says, "Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah. Crowds listened intently to Philip because they were eager to hear his message and see the miraculous signs he did."

There's a lot of bad blood between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Jews saw the Samaritans as half breeds, but Philip was a Hellenistic Jew. He had left Jerusalem years before and spoke the Greek language so maybe that helped his cause with the Samaritans. What we know helped him the most was the power of the gospel itself. Philip is beginning the first gentile mission here in Samaria.

Philip does exactly what the other Apostles were doing before him. He preached the gospel. Romans 1:16 says, "For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile."

Philip was not ashamed to preach the gospel and his preaching produced 2 things. First it transformed lives.

Preaching produces 2 things:

1. Transformed lives.

Through the preaching of the Word in formal settings like this, and through testifying to the Word in informal settings like the conversations you have with a lost friend; through those 2 avenues the power of God is known. God reaches people through the preaching and proclamation of his word, and through the living out of his word. You are a living testimony. Every time you walk into work, every time you walk into your house, every time you go anywhere the gospel should go with you. You are a living testimony and living like you believe that can transform lives.

Please take notice that Philip was not an Apostle. He was not the preacher. He was not a staff member of the church. He was a deacon. He was a volunteer leader. We sometimes think the minister has to be the one to seek out and save the lost, he's the evangelists. But in my experience some of the most effective evangelists are everyday members of the church.

Ministers should be evangelizing and trying to save the lost but our job is to prepare you and help you go out and do that. Ephesians 4:12 says, "Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ."

That's the job of the pastor. To teach and preach the Bible so that those in the church, especially those with the gift of evangelism, are prepared and ready to reach the lost. Philip was one of those guys. His preaching to the Samaritans transformed lives. Look at Acts 8:7, "Many evil spirits were cast out, screaming as they left their victims. And many who had been paralyzed or lame were healed."

I don't think you could have a greater transformation than that. Evil spirits being cast out, lame and paralyzed being healed. God is allowing some extraordinary things to happen at the beginning of this early church to help spread the gospel. The Holy Spirit always gets his work done.

Transformation wasn't the only product of Philip's preaching. His preaching also produced joyful reconciliation.

2. Joyful reconciliation.

With all the bad blood there was between the Jews and the Samaritans, you might see verse 8 as a continuation of the miracles he describes before it. Acts 8:8 says, "So there was great joy in that city."

They were joyful because a hated Jew, running from other Jews, came and preached a gospel that transformed lives. This truly was a moment of joyful reconciliation. A moment of healing between 2 groups of people who share a similar history but had become enemies and now because of Christ those walls between them are starting to break down and it all began because of persecution.

A man ran for his life and hid, yet could not keep his mouth shut about Jesus. God in His grace built a bridge between two estranged peoples and made them one in Christ. We still need people like Philip today. People who will carry the gospel into places that others might not go.

The Holy Spirit always gets his work done. Are you letting him get his work done through you?