

Two days after her seventeenth birthday, Laura Welch was driving around town with a friend in her car. The windows were down, the music was up when, in the midst of a carefree day, Laura made a mistake. She didn't see the stop sign, and broadsided a car driven by another seventeen-year-old Michael Douglas who happened to be Laura's boyfriend. He was thrown from the car, suffering a broken neck. By the time help arrived, he was dead. Laura says, "No words to describe it," It was the worst day of Laura's life. It would be many years before Laura could think of dating seriously again. After that day in 1963, Laura found comfort in the only real strength she could count on – Jesus Christ. Laura eventually married a man from a wealthy family. Her too-rich husband started drinking more and more. In 1986, Laura came to another intersection. She told her husband he must choose between her or alcohol. Laura's husband made a wise choice. He subdued his thirst and paid more attention to the faith his wife had shown him. He soon found that a deep, abiding faith was worth the effort, worth his investment of time and energy. And today, both Laura and her husband - President George W. Bush - look back on that entire season of struggle as the turning point for their marriage, their family, and their political journey. Laura, however, says her life changed years before, on an ordinary day in 1963 that became the worst day of her life. (Kenneth T. Walsh, "Laura's Moment" U.S. News and World Report, April 30, 2001, pg. 22).

If you had to choose a title for Acts 8, it might be “The Worst Day In The Life Of The Early Church.” Stephen, a man we met in Acts 6, a man full of the Spirit and wisdom and grace and power, was arrested, charged, and executed for preaching the gospel. The enemies of the church laid aside their robes and stoned Stephen in an effort to snuff out Christianity. Here is what happened next... **“And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”** Acts 8:1-3

The killing of Stephen opened the door for all kinds of persecution. Men and women ran for their lives but many of them couldn't run fast enough. Some landed in prison. Some became martyrs as Stephen had. It was the worst of times, but it was also the best of times. I don't know how you feel about the times we are in right now but some days I wonder, “Can it get any worse?” Then I remember. God often does His best work in the worst of times. I want you to remember that too. In fact, there are a number of priceless principles to remember here in chapter 8.

I. Remember, the gospel is NOT good news to everyone. The gospel will always be opposed by evil men. But God often uses what is evil to promote what is good. Nothing happens by chance. In God's world, the worst times of our lives can become the best times for the advancement of God's agenda if we maintain a proper perspective. One thing we learn from the early church is that God is sovereign over our circumstances, but we must choose how to respond. We are living through some crazy times, some very trying times for the church. Many older believers are looking back, longing for the good old days, the age of Christendom. Christendom refers to the 1700 years in which Christianity was welcome at the table of Western cultural life. The church enjoyed a cozy relationship with the government which resulted in things like "blue laws" and the Ten Commandments and prayer in our schools. Every town was designed with space for all the "First Churches" on the city square. Newspapers even encouraged Bible reading. The year I became a Christian, the Los Angeles Times still offered a list of daily Bible readings for the upcoming week. Ah, the good old days. Today cities are replacing churches with big box stores that generate tax revenue. Sundays are more about Starbucks and soccer than Sunday school. This month, 1,500 pastors will leave their posts discouraged because they were trained to serve a culture that no longer exists. We are a lot better at remembering the past than we are dreaming of the future. If you want to remember, remember this...

II. Remember, the gospel advances in spite of adverse circumstances..."Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word." Acts 8:4. Persecution becomes God's method of fulfilling the mandate 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.**" The church was scattered through the very regions Jesus commanded His disciples to take the good news. It was a shock for some of these Jewish Christians to hear Jesus mention Samaria. Those Christians who were ethnic Jews had no desire to take the gospel to Samaritans. But persecution forced the issue. V. 4 says the church was "scattered." This word is used to refer to a farmer scattering of seed. And that is exactly what God was doing. In fact, one of the early church fathers, Tertullian, observed, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Just think of all the rulers and regimes that failed to snuff out the faith. The Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet Union, the Chinese Communists, the Third Reich, just to name a few examples.

No matter the global circumstances, God uses those circumstances to further the spread of the gospel. Is it possible that God could use a world-wide pandemic to

accomplish His purpose in the world? While we are arguing politics and science, we may miss some timely opportunities to advance the gospel.

The gospel advances in spite of the circumstances. Notice I said “in spite of” not “because of.” There has been a huge misunderstanding over this chapter. I have heard people say, “What the American church needs is more persecution.” No, we don’t. What we need are Christians who do what they did in v. 4.

III. Remember, the gospel exposes the hearts of men. Chapter 8 features three men who reflect three responses to the gospel.

Philip the Evangelist **“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. 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. So there was much joy in that city.”** Acts 8:6-8

We met Philip in ch. 6 when the apostles appointed some Hellenistic followers of Jesus to make sure the Hellenistic widows were not stiffed in the distribution of food. The Hellenists were Jews who grew up outside of Judea and under the influence of Greek culture. They were easy to identify – they spoke Greek rather than Aramaic. The fact that Philip was Hellenistic might explain why he was God’s choice to go to the Samaritans. The Jews had a problem, a problem that has plagued every culture throughout history. It is called racism. Racism is the belief that my race is superior to all others. It is never said quite like that, but the attitude is unmistakable. The problem with racism is that once you conclude someone is less of a person than you are, then you don’t have to extend to them the rights and privileges you enjoy. You see this in Acts 10. When Peter goes to Cornelius, a Roman centurion, he says, **“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.”** Acts 10:28. When Peter reports back to the Jewish leaders about what he had seen, he was scolded, **“You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”** Acts 11:3. God went to great lengths to heal them of this disease, remember Jonah who didn’t want to take the Good News of salvation to lowly Gentiles? Still, racism persisted.

Since Philip was not an ethnic Jew, he was God’s choice to take the gospel to non-Jews. The gospel is the only solution to racism. Jesus said, “Go, to all nations (ethne - people groups) and make disciples.” Remember how the story ends? **“a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb,**

clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen." Rev. 7:9-12

When that future scene informs our present passion, racism doesn't stand a chance.

Philip is such a good reminder that God will use your circumstances to further His purposes. He used a Hellenistic Jew to go to the half-Jews in Samaria. He may use a recovering alcoholic to minister to those who are struggling with alcohol. He may use a woman who has experienced abortion to bring the freedom of forgiveness to other woman in the same situation...Jennifer O'Neill.

When the church leaders in Jerusalem heard what was going on in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to check it out..."**Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.**" Acts 8:14-17. "I thought you receive the Holy Spirit when you believe?" When studying the book of Acts, it is important to distinguish between what is DESCRIPTIVE and what is PRESCRIPTIVE. Laying on of hands...etc. Much of what we read about in Acts is not normative for the church today. For example, when we have a vacancy in the pulpit, we don't cast lots like the early church did to replace Judas.

The second guy is Simon the Sorcerer..."**But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.**" Acts 8:9-13 "Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay

my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” And Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.” Acts 8:18-25. As Luke has already pointed out, he was a magician - but not the kind that you invite to your children's birthday party. Simon was a practitioner of the dark arts, a man who had held the attention and amazement of the Samaritans for a long time with his magic. So amazing were his miracles that Luke says in verse 10, the Samaritans called him “the power of God that is called great.” Most likely, the source of his magic was demonic. After all, Luke says there were many who, when they heard Philip preaching the gospel, had demons come out of them.

“Can demons perform miracles?” They sure can - Pharaoh's magicians were able to turn staffs into snakes. Jesus warned in that “false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.”

Simon was a poser. He had apparently made a profession of faith of some kind, but it wasn't a genuine faith in God based on truth. He was just drawn to the power that he saw, and he wanted it for himself. He saw the Spirit as a force that could be manipulated and bought with money, a force that if he could get his hands on, could make him a tidy profit, and restore him to the top dog status - make him legit a powerful man again.

Simon earlier made a profession of faith and was even baptized but it is clear now that he made this profession and was following Philip with the wrong motive. He didn't come to Jesus because Jesus was the One who could save him and give him eternal life. He wasn't drawn by a desperation to be saved. He was drawn by a lust for power. It wasn't Jesus He wanted, but power. He was even willing to pay for it.

What is Peter's response? “May your silver perish with you.” Literally - to hell with you and your money. You have no part or share in the gospel. Repent of your wickedness and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven. You are still in the bonds of sin

The third guy was an Ethiopian eunuch. He served the queen mother (Candace is a title) of Ethiopia. This was an area in Africa called Nubia that ran from Cairo to

Khartoum. Once again, God “beams” Philip over in Star Trek fashion to explain the gospel to the eunuch and the gospel goes to Africa. Centuries later, many of those who were herded onto slave ships and sent to the Americas were Christians. As a result, a vibrant African-American church is born and thrives to this day.

IV. Remember, God does some of His best work on some of our worst days.

Jesus proved it. There would be no resurrection without a bloody cross. The cross proves that God sovereignly determines our circumstances, but He expects us to choose the appropriate response.

We don't always see what God is doing. Those first century Christians had no idea that their circumstances were working out for the greater progress of the gospel. But we remember. That is why we take communion – to remember, God does some of His best work in some of our worst times.

Communion

This week, when you are tempted to analyze the culture to death, shift gears and offer someone words of life. Remember to do what Philip did, **“Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.”** Acts 8:35.