

Acts

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.

(Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

How Does the Church Respond to Persecution?

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Acts: 8:1-8

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Good morning Redeemer! Please open up your Bibles with me to Acts 8:1.

Now as some of you know, I am a huge Lord of the Rings fan. Sometimes, when I am feeling discouraged, a quick listen to some of the soundtrack is enough to lift up my spirits. But for me, there is nothing quite like watching the movies to get stirred up. One of my favourite scenes is at the end of the first movie *The Fellowship of the Ring* when the group of heroes is divided into separate groups because of an enemy attack. Frodo, the hobbit tasked with carrying the Ring into Mordor to destroy it, along with his friend Sam, are left to try and get to this distant and dangerous destination and then somehow somehow, destroy it *without* the help of their friends.

If you were watching the movie for the first time, you would feel the hopelessness of the situation. You would think, there is no way that these two small hobbits can possibly carry out this task all alone. But as the story goes on, you learn that the secrecy of their mission, their small stature, and inconspicuous route to Mordor is exactly what was needed to take on this quest. In fact, the very dividing and *scattering* of the group of heroes would be the very key to the victory and restoration of Middle Earth.

Now whether you love Lord of the Rings as I do or not, it isn't difficult to see how this all connects to where we find the Church in the book of Acts. They too, just like the heroes in LOTR, were facing an uphill battle. It seemed like the young Church might have to bend the knee to their enemies or be crushed. It must have felt to many of the Christians that all hope was

lost. They had already witnessed as some of their leaders were imprisoned for preaching Jesus and now their beloved Stephen, instead of being held in honour for his work with the widows of the Church, was mobbed and stoned to death. If there was a time to back out, I think a lot of Christians would have felt this was the time.

But instead of giving into this fear, the Church only grew both in numbers and resilience. And in doing so, testified to the truth of Jesus' Words. He declared:

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18 ESV)

The enemies of God's people thought that they had dealt a fatal blow to the Church when Stephen was stoned. But instead, this blow only served to secure its *expansion*. That is what we are going to see this morning: Jesus WILL build His church and NOTHING will stop Him.

Now with these things in mind, hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today. Acts 8:1-8:

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.

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 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 8:1-8 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now for those of you who have *not* been tracking with us, at this point in time, the Church had been faithful in carrying out its mission from Jesus to take the Gospel to Jerusalem. They had boldly proclaimed the Good News and had seen the Church grow to over five thousand people.

But they had not yet expanded their mission to Samaria and beyond. Remember the mission He gave His disciples 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. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

They were still in Stage One of their mandate from Jesus. They were still in Jerusalem.

But then something happened. A young and zealous Pharisee named Saul oversaw and gladly held the murderers coats as Stephen was stoned to death. This Saul, who would later become known to us as Paul, is introduced to us not as the beloved pastor and missionary but as a violent terrorist who hated the Church. Later on in our series we will hear about his conversion but here we get our introduction. And boy, as we will see, the Saul shown here looks nothing like the man we will see God transform him into.

But before we get to that, our text this morning tells us that Stephen's stoning launched a persecution would force many of the Church to flee Jerusalem. And where did they go? Samaria! Stage One had been completed to a degree and Stage Two had begun! If you mark your Bibles up, here you could put a little note: Stage Two begins.

Isn't that interesting? The opponents of the church thought that this persecution would END the church, but it actually moved the church into the next stage of her mission! As it was famously said:

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

The opponents thought that they understood what persecution would accomplish, but they were all wrong.

How Does the Church Respond to Persecution?

Now if you have grown up in the Church your whole life as I have, you no doubt would have seen various Church growth plans come to the forefront. Maybe it was the small group style church or the seeker sensitive movement that geared services not towards Christians but to non-

Christians. Or maybe you sat in church meetings where the main concern was growing in numbers *rather* than seeing men and women, boys and girls, grow into the likeness of Christ more and more.

Now we are called to pray, to plan, and to put forth ideas which will further cause the Gospel to go forth. Yes and amen! But at the end of the day, it is ultimately God who is steering the ship. He is the Captain and the sovereign One directing us. And He knows EXACTLY what we need and when we need it. Sometimes He will take us through times of peace and excitement as He did when Peter preached and thousands turned to Christ in one day! But other times, He will use a method that is not as welcomed. Sometimes, He will ordain a persecution that will hurt but will lead to the spreading of the good news of Jesus. And when He does this, Acts 8 teaches us how the Church is to respond.

So this morning, as we dive into our text, let's ask the question, *How does the Church respond to persecution?* Acts 8:1-4 tells us that:

1. The Church Grieves

Look with me to the text to see this:

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 8:1-4 ESV)

After Stephen was stoned to death, the enemies of the Church led by Saul, were emboldened and launched a great persecution against the Church. This didn't consist of mere hurling insults but actual JAIL TIME. People were forced to flee from Jerusalem to neighbouring areas or risk being thrown into jail for their Christian faith. Peter and the apostles had been arrested and imprisoned before but now this was a potential reality for ALL BELIEVERS in Jerusalem.

As the Church was grieving for Stephen, Saul, the enemy of the Church, was hunting them down. Quite a contrast isn't it? And it was most likely especially bad for the Hellenists, that is

the Greek Jewish Christians, as they were the same target. Some Christians fled, some ended up in prison, and some were spared. Saul was ravaging the Church, going door to door, not to take surveys but to imprison Christians. This was a very scary time for the Church. Verse 2 says this:

Devout men buried Stephen and made **great lamentation** over him. (Acts 8:2 ESV)

Stephen had a mom. Stephen had a best friend. Somebody had to recover his disfigured body for burial. Luke is going to tell us all the good that came from this tragedy, but first he wants to make sure that we see that it WAS a tragedy. Hearts were broken and lamentations went up. Glory is coming, but there is pain in the delay.

Most if not all of us have never experienced persecution. We have not feared losing our lives, jobs, or homes, or going to prison because we trust in Jesus. But the early Church did. They shed real tears as they saw their brothers and sisters losing everything for the sake of their Savior. The early Church was learning the real cost of following Jesus and it included grieving over dead and imprisoned brothers and sisters. They were learning that to follow Jesus meant you could lose your very life.

And on the one hand, this shouldn't have surprised them as Jesus warned them of the fires ahead. He said:

If they persecuted me, **they will also persecute you.** (John 15:20 ESV)

But isn't it true that even a storm forecasted way in advance can still cause a lot of hurt and damage? So it is with persecution. We may know its coming but it doesn't change the fact that it hurts. We need to grasp this because in our excitement at all that God was doing in the book of Acts, I would hate to see us neglect to see the real cost that was paid to take the Gospel to the world. If we forget to be sober minded and truly count the cost of following Jesus, if we are blind to the real grief that accompanied the early Church, then we are going to be so caught off guard when the heat is turned up against *us* and our children.

Following Jesus entails persecution and it hurts. It costs us. And it should and will grieve us. Our brothers and sisters in south east Asia who were rushed by angry mobs are feeling this now. Our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan have felt this as the Taliban has threatened and killed many. Christians all over the world are experiencing grief as they live with the real and daily reality of potential suffering for their allegiance to Jesus. These stories remind us of our real enemy who though he is defeated, can still deal some heavy blows. Some of them will hurt us big and it will be *right* to grieve just as the Church did when Stephen was murdered.

Persecution will lead us to grieve but it does more than this. Acts 8:4-5 tells us that when the Church is persecuted, a strange thing happens:

2. The Church is Mobilized

Before the stoning of Stephen, the Church was bundled up in Jerusalem. They were still in Stage One of their mission. But through the rampant persecution, came the scattering and mobilizing of the Church *and* the beginning of Stage Two. Look with me to verse 4:

Now those who were **scattered** went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of **Samaria** and proclaimed to them the Christ. (Acts 8:4-5 ESV)

Persecution has and will continue to be a pattern for the people of God but that is because behind our enemies plans, stands a God who is building His Church. Matthew Henry, famous Bible commentator put it this way:

It was strange, but very true, that the disciples of Christ the more they were **afflicted the more they multiplied**.¹

Instead of foiling their mission, persecution actually FURTHERED the spreading of the good news! Don't you love that? Isn't that like our God? To bring about victory when all hope seems lost?

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Complete Commentary Series: The Acts of the Apostles*, accessed via Olive Tree Bible Software.

So Phillip, one of the seven deacons chosen back in Acts 6, fled Jerusalem and went north to Samaria. Now to keep things short, Jews and Samaritans did not like each other. Their feud went back hundreds of years and the Jews looked upon the Samaritans as half breeds. One writer put sums it up well:

Samaritans were of a mixed ethnicity and religion—they were not Jews, but they practiced elements of Judaism and worshiped Yahweh alongside other gods. The Jews spitefully regarded the Samaritans as hated half-breeds.²

The Jews didn't like the Samaritans. And even the Jewish Christians hadn't quite figured out that God desired to save people from every tribe and tongue and not just the Jews! Maybe this is hard to imagine for some of us, but for others who have been victims of racism or for others who have perpetuated it, this text should hit close to home. Phillip would have no doubt had some preconceived notions about the Samaritans but evidently they were confronted and cast aside as he saw an opportunity not to despise them but to PROCLAIM to them the Christ.

Barriers that had been in place for generations came down because the message of Jesus is that which has the power to unite all people no matter how far back the fighting goes. Peace was made between Phillip the Jew and the Samaritans because the peace of Christ had begun to rule in their hearts. This was a *foretaste* of what Paul would later declare in Ephesians:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. (Ephesian 2:13-14 ESV)

Through the scattering, the apparent *weakening* of the Church, she was made stronger, larger, more diverse, and able to continue her mission. I love this quote from I. Howard Marshall:

The **scattering** of the Christians led to the most significant step forward in the mission of the church. One might say that it **required** persecution to make them fulfil the implicit command in 1:8.³

² Trillia Newbell, "The Samaritan Woman and Our Barrier-Smashing Savior," October 25, 2019, accessed, January 16, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/samaritan-woman-savior/>.

³ I. Howard Marshall, *TNTCS: The Acts of the Apostles*, accessed via Olive Tree Bible Software.

Success through scattering seems counter intuitive. We often hear ‘strength in numbers’ don’t we? We think the bigger the better. But it isn’t always so in God’s kingdom. God ordained the scattering of the Church to spread initiate further Gospel proclamation. And He still does this today. In fact, Redeemer City Church exists because Cornerstone Baptist Church believed this. We were planted so that the southward of Orillia would have another Gospel proclaiming Church. Did you know that?

Whether its through persecution like the early Church saw and many face today, or the planting of a new church in a different area, or simply moving because a job takes you to a new city, God is working and growing His church through our scattering. That’s because ALL PEOPLE need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. You may not be chased from your home because you are a Christian, but nevertheless God has placed YOU where he has you to further spread His fame and glory. Your family, your neighbourhood, your job, your kids soccer teams. God places and moves us so as to spread the news of Jesus to all people.

As the Church is persecuted, she will grieve and be mobilized. And thirdly, Acts 8 teaches us that through persecution:

3. The Church is Emboldened

If the church was merely scattered and kept to herself, no one would ever hear about the saving news of Jesus. But that is not what happened. As they were scattered, they kept on doing the VERY THING that had instigated the great persecution! Look with me to verse 4:

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and **proclaimed to them the Christ.** 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. (Acts 8:4-6 ESV)

This is pretty extraordinary! Saul could make men and women flee Jerusalem but he couldn’t get them to stay quiet about Jesus! Phillip travelled to Samaria and continued to preach about the Messiah. Now as I alluded to before, the Samaritans had some connection points with the Jews as they worshipped the God of Israel and the Torah was their holy book. That being the case,

they too, just like the Jews were waiting for the Messiah to come. So what did Phillip preach about? He preached that Jesus was the Messiah that the Jews AND the Samaritans had been waiting for! In particular, the Samaritans were clinging to the promise found in Deuteronomy 18:15. It reads:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen. (Deuteronomy 18:15 ESV)

Phillip knew that Jesus was the fulfillment of this prophecy so he would have expounded it further and showed how Christ was no mere prophet but also the Divine Savior who would save men and women from their sins. And what happened as Phillip preached? Look with me to Acts 8:12, a few verses down from our text. There we see that God opened the hearts of the people:

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. (Acts 8:12 ESV)

The crowds that had gathered to hear the Phillip's message believed the gospel and were baptized and the church grew. And not only did it grow, but it grew as Samaritans-half breeds and outsiders-heard the Word and were transformed by it!

Powerful, bold, and life-giving gospel preaching characterized the Church as she was mobilized through persecution. And in doing so, God continued to build His Church. That's how He did it 2000 years ago and that's how He does it today! Without preaching the Church will NOT grow! Do you believe that? Do you know and value the preaching of the Word as highly as you ought to? To be clear, I am not only talking about those who preach sermons; I am talking about faithful, bold and courageous evangelism that ALL CHRISTIANS are called to. Did you notice the wording of verse 4? Look with me there again:

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. (Acts 8:4 ESV)

Who were scattered? Lots of people! Lots of church goers who probably couldn't articulate the Word as clearly as Peter or Stephen or Phillip but nevertheless, where they went, they proclaimed that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life! They told people that Jesus performed

and fulfilled all that humanity was meant for and that He died on the Cross as the sinless lamb of God. They told people that He died for no sins of His own but for those of the world and that He rose again in power! And the people believed and the Church grew! Persecuted and scattered Christians preached the Word and God expanded His Kingdom.

And God does that today! He uses faithful men and women, boys and girls, to evangelize to the lost world around them. And what is the requirement for doing this? Nothing but an understanding of how Jesus saves sinners. Little Keziah and Piper did it as they shared their testimonies a few months back! Phillip pointed the Samaritans to Jesus as the Messiah they were longing for. That was his launching pad.

What will be yours? Maybe it will be a conversation with someone about the beauty of creation which leads you to proclaim God as the CREATOR. Maybe it will be showing compassion to someone who lost someone close to them which leads to a discussion about how sin and death were never meant to be a part of this world. Or maybe it will spring from a conversation about how much you love your spouse and kids that leads to a conversation about the beauty in God's design for the family. Maybe it will be something else.

But the point is, the Church will only grow as she proclaims her Savior to the dying world around her. So that means we MUST preach as God scatters us. Wherever you find yourself, proclaim the Christ as Phillip did! In your homes, neighbourhoods, workplaces, even at the grocery store!

And before we move on, look with me to verse 6-8:

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 ESV)

The Church mobilized and emboldened, preached and God did great things in Samaria! He transformed lives and brought joy to the city! Don't we foolishly forget that the Gospel is the GOOD NEWS? The Angels announced the birth of Jesus declaring that it would be:

Good news of **great joy** that will be for **all people**. (Luke 2:10a ESV)

Just as God used the grieving Phillip to bring the Gospel of joy to Samaria, so you and I should EXPECT God to transform and bring joy to world around us as we proclaim His Good News! We too should expect to see the Gospel TRANSFORM not only US but the people we are proclaiming it to. We should expect to hear stories of changed lives from those who hear and believe the Word as we boldly take it to those around us. We *must* expect great things from our great God. Oh Lord give us faith to believe this.

Conclusion

Friends, as we come to a close this morning, maybe you are sitting here feeling like the battle is all uphill and that the terrain is too tough for you to handle. Maybe you are discouraged beyond belief. Well this episode in the life of the early Church reminds us that our God is far greater, powerful, and wiser than we can imagine. Just as the early Church couldn't see what God was doing through their persecution, maybe you can't see what He is accomplishing through the very storm that you are in. Remember that your Savior is with you in the boat as you go through this storm. He's with you and will keep you. You may feel like He has lost control but I can assure you He has not. Your God is just as sovereign and near to you as He was during the persecution that Saul brought on. And what came from that? The advancement of the Church from Stage One to Stage Two. The advancement of the glory of God to Samaria and beyond! So be of good courage, for your God is with you and He IS working.

Or maybe you are sitting here and feeling apathetic and in need of a push. Maybe you have elevated good things above God things and are finding yourself feeling stuck. Acts 8 reminds us that God knows how to move us and mobilize us for His mission. He knows how to get us unstuck and moving in the *right* direction. Is that you today? If it is, then ask God today to shake

and move you in the right direction. Ask Him to send whatever YOU need in order to get *His* glory and *His* Kingdom at the top of your priorities.

The Church undergoing persecution is a reminder that NOTHING will or can stop the Lord. Persecution and suffering will come but when they do let's remember that God WILL mobilize and embolden us to proclaim Him for His glory, for our good, and for the sake of the world.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray.