

When Persecution Breaks Out

Acts 8:1-8

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Introduction

This week in our sermon series from Acts, we come to chapter 8.

- In this chapter we are told about some major changes that occurred in the church in about 34 or 35 AD, four or five years after Pentecost.
 - These changes occurred when Stephen was martyred.
 - They were to a certain extent precipitated by his martyrdom.

- He was the first to be publicly executed as a disciple of Jesus,
 - and it was in that stir that the first general persecution of the church began.
 - This persecution then precipitated many other changes...
 - It led to the scattering of the disciples of Christ into Judea and Samaria,
 - And that led to the evangelisation of these regions.
 - The church was beginning to spread into the world from Jerusalem, just as Jesus and the prophets before Him had said that it would.

- In this we see a principle that has proved to be true in all ages of the church—
 - that the more she is persecuted, the more she grows.
 - As we saw last week in Psalm 57, the Lord has the whole matter in hand and uses persecution to bring forth praise to His name.

- Some have suggested another change here...
 - that up until Stephen, the Apostles have been doing the work of the evangelism, but now others begin to enter into the action.
 - However, upon closer examination, it would seem that many others were involved from the very beginning.
 - There were the 120 who accompanied them right from the beginning, and as there were many house churches, there was need for many teachers.
 - It is just that the focus in Acts now shifts to those who carried the gospel outside of Jerusalem...
 - First, we will see Philip, then Peter, and then Paul.

- The portion we are looking at today... Acts 8:1-8... has some very helpful instruction for us about Persecution.
 - So let's consider what the Holy Spirit has for us to learn here.
 - Though we could hardly claim to be persecuted at this time in this part of the world, the very first thing I want to show you from this passage is that:

I. Persecution can break out rather suddenly and unexpectedly.

A. In verse 1, the words “At that time” stand out...where it says,

- **Acts 8:1: At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem.**

1. A more literal translation is “in that day.”

- On the very same day that Stephen was martyred—persecution broke out!
 - The crowd had been excited by his defence and had taken up stones in a somewhat disorderly execution.
 - And then they turned their attention to others who believed as he had.

2. Up until that day, there had been some rumblings against the church, but now it was a *great* (the word is mega) *persecution* that erupted.

a. No one would have likely expected that at this time.

- The church, for some time, had enjoyed a period of relative peace.

1) At first, the disciples of Jesus had been seen as a curious thing...

- They were not particularly opposed at Pentecost—
 - And as time went on and people saw how the disciples lived and how they worked miracles, they began to admire them.

2) Things heated up a bit when Peter and John were arrested and told to keep quiet about Jesus after healing the lame man,

- but nothing more than a warning was given to them even when they told the court that they could not comply with the order.

3) Things heated up even more when the high priest rose up against them and arrested them again,

- but he had to back off a little when they miraculously escaped from prison...
 - and when he realised the esteem that the people had for the apostles who had done so many miracles among them.

- And even though the court was ready to stone Peter and John when they tried them the next day, God used one man to cool them all off...

- The highly esteemed theologian, Gamaliel, stood up and advised them that the whole movement would die on its own if it were not of God.

- The counsel listened to him and the church entered into a period of relative peace.

b. But with Stephen the deacon, all of that was to suddenly change.

- As he went about doing his ministry among the Hellenistic widows,

- he had an opportunity to testify of his hope to many of his fellow Hellenistic Jews.
 - They were the Greek speaking Jews who attended the Greek speaking synagogues in Jerusalem.
 - Many of them were intellectuals who were zealous for the temple, and they found that they were unable to answer Stephen as he testified of Jesus.
 - But he was only a deacon and not an apostle.

- Who could have expected that persecution against the whole church would break out from here?
 - But it did, and the controversy was brought before the Sanhedrin.
 - No one probably expected that Stephen would be stoned that day!
 - Things happened very quickly and now,
 - in the course of a single day,
 - all the believers at Jerusalem were in danger.
 - The tide had turned.
 - Gamaliel’s counsel had been set aside and in a single day a new agenda had come to take its place.
 - As the text says, in that day, not just a persecution, but a great persecution arose!
 - It was like the unexpected eruption of a volcano!
 - This is quite sobering to think about!
 - A sudden eruption could surprise us just as it did them.
 - Let no one presume otherwise!

B. All it took was one man to spearhead the opposition.

1. Saul of Tarsus is presented to us as that man!

- He is presented to us in verse 1—right before the statement that a great persecution broke out.
- Clearly, he is presented in connection with the persecution that erupted.

a. We are told: **“now Saul was consenting to his [Stephen’s] death.”**

1) The word translated *consent* implies that he took great pleasure in it.

- He seems to have had a leading role in bringing it about.
- F.F. Bruce says that this word may indicate that he was the one who was the *herald* at the execution,
 - the one who had the job of proclaiming that the convicted person was about to be executed for the specified offence.

- 2) Whatever the case, the juxtaposition of his consent is clearly related to the persecution that arose.
 - He appears to be the chief mover and shaker in this persecution.

TRANS> This is brought out all the more in verse 3...

- b. He is spoken of as making havoc of the church.
 - **Acts 8:3: As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.**
- 1) You can see that Saul is the sole instrument of this persecution.
 - Certainly, he employed others in the work, but he is clearly the impetus behind all of it.
 - This supposition will be confirmed when look reports the change that comes for the church after his conversion...
 - In Acts 9:31, he says:
 - **“then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace.”**
 - Once he stopped persecuting, the whole church had rest!
 - Saul was not the kind of man you wanted to have against you!
- 2) The word translated *made havoc* speaks of brutal and sadistic cruelty.
 - It is often used to refer the ravaging of a body by a wild beast.
 - His violence and cruelty is further described—
 - We are told that he did not even spare the women, but dragged off both men and women, committing them to prison.
 - He himself later testifies in Acts 26:10-11 of his vicious behaviour:
 - **Acts 26:10-11: This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against *them*. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled *them* to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted *them* even to foreign cities.**
 - You see from these words that he went hunting them out systematically,
 - and that there were others whose murders he consented to besides Stephen.
 - Indeed, he was an insolent and angry man.
- 3) His goal was to destroy the church—to entirely wipe it out.
 - He tells us this in Galatians 1:13:

- **Gal 1:13: For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to destroy it.***
- c. So you see what trouble one man can cause...
- With Gamaliel, we saw how one man stopped persecution.
 - Now with Saul, we see how one man started it and kept it going.
 - But this is not say that the peace or persecution of the church depends upon the whims of one man...
 - Just the opposite is true.
 - We must remember what we learned from Psalm 57 last week...
 - Eloheem Elyon has the whole matter in hand.
 - He is the one who brings everything to its conclusion for us.
 - When Gamaliel stopped the former persecution, it was because the church was not yet ready for it.
 - God used Gamaliel at that time to protect His people.
 - But now when this persecution erupts, the Lord's hand is just as much in it...
 - Now the time has come for the church to be tested and strengthened...
 - And now the time has come for them to move out into the areas surrounding Jerusalem.
 - I will have more to say about that later,
 - But for now, just understand that when persecution breaks out, God is always in it!
 - It never erupts unless He is in it.

TRANS> But now let's consider why Saul did this?

2. He did this (interestingly) because he was convinced of the same thing that Stephen was convinced about.
 - a. Both men were men of tremendous foresight.
 - And both saw that the old order, that Paul was defending, was not compatible with the new order that Stephen was proclaiming.
 - If the Messiah had come, the shadows of the Old Covenant—the temple and the customs that Moses had appointed, must go...
 - But if Saul was right, the one Stephen proclaimed was an impostor and the spread of His doctrine must be terminated immediately!
 - The New Covenant could not remain clothed in the shadows of the Old Covenant.

- The New wine must be put into new wine skins.
- b. This was what Stephen had so clearly put forth to his accusers.
- 1) He had challenged them that they were blindly clinging to the temple and customs that Moses had given them when a new era had dawned.
 - They were ignoring the Messiah who had been clearly foretold of in their old covenant worship.
 - They acted as though their salvation was to be found in the ceremonies rather than in the One that all the ceremonies pointed to!
 - That is so common even in our day.
 - There are Christians who act as though by going to church or reading their Bible or saying their prayers or engaging in rituals they will be saved,
 - but the purpose of all of these things is to unite us to Jesus Christ through faith.
 - If you are not in Christ, the bare rituals will do you no good.
 - 2) Stephen had also challenged his accusers that they were acting as their rebellious fathers had acted in days of old...
 - They were following in the line of those who had envied Joseph when he had been sent to save them...
 - And who had rejected Moses when he had been sent by God to deliver them from Egypt and lead them into Canaan.
 - So they had done with all the other prophets who foretold of Christ,
 - And now that He had come, they had rejected Him!

TRANS> Stephen and Saul saw that there was no middle ground here...

- Either Jesus is the Messiah and must be served...
 - or He is not and must be rejected.
- c. Saul was convinced that He was not.
- If Saul was correct, it was indeed the duty of the Jewish authorities to do all they could to stop the spread of the doctrine of Jesus' disciples.
 - In his blindness and pride, he truly believed that he was serving God by persecuting them
 - He was never a man given to half-measures—neither before or after his conversion.
 - After his conversion, a huge part of his ministry was in maintaining the distinction between the Old way and the New.

TRANS> But what a man he was to have as an opponent!

- All it took was this one man to keep this great persecution going.

C. You need to realise that persecution can break out at any time.

- The Lord sends it whenever He deems best for His glory and our good.

1. The Bible tells us to expect persecution if we are following Jesus.

a. In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul tells us to expect persecution if we are serving the Lord Jesus.

- He says,

- **2 Tim 3:12: Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.**

- We are certainly wise to take heed to these words lest we be taken by surprise.

b. Peter tells you not to consider it a strange thing when persecution comes.

- **1 Peter 4:12-13: Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.**

- Instead of getting discouraged by it, look at as an opportunity to share in the sufferings of Christ.

- You want to show Him and other people how much you love Him, don't you?

- Well what better way than be cheerfully suffering for Him the way Stephen did?

- Peter goes on to say that persecution shows that you are among those who are blessed...

- and that it enables you to glorify God.

TRANS> So yes, persecution could break out at any time among us.

- Don't be surprised. Be prepared!

2. But how can you prepare for persecution?

a. You can prepare by following the example of the disciples in the early church...

1) They were prepared when the persecution suddenly broke out,

- but what did they do to prepare themselves?

- They simply did what every Christian ought to do... Remember?

- 2) We are told that they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, in fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in prayers!
 - That's right—they had spent their time in the means of grace...
 - They had sat under the word and learned more and more about Jesus and about what He had done for their salvation and what He had promised...
 - That is what you must do—cultivate a real hunger for the word!
 - And they had been eager to learn how to live for Him—studying God's word and seeking to apply His commandments.
 - And they gathered together to sing praise and to encourage one another.
 - They did not forsake the assembling of themselves together—this was their fellowship...
 - And they broke bread at the Lord's Table—
 - where they remembered what Jesus had done for them on the cross and said "thank you" to him—
 - and where they looked to Him to give them strength to serve Him.
 - And they continued in prayer...
 - They did not pray that there would be no persecution, but rather for strength to be bold when persecution came.
 - 3) We are also told that the disciples lived together in mutual encouragement.
 - They shared meals in each other's homes...
 - They cared for one another such that when anyone had need, those who had lands and houses sold them in order to provide for the need.
 - They lived together in love.
 - Most of all, they lived every day for the Lord, casting their care upon Him.
- b. So you see that you don't need to do anything special to prepare for persecution...
- Just do what the Lord calls you to do each day and then when persecution comes, you will be ready for it.
 - If you are accustomed to serving Him each day and drawing upon His grace,
 - you will continue to do the same when the day of trouble comes.

II. But what should we do when persecution actually breaks out in our midst?

- Should we run away or should we stay and face it?
- That is the subject to which I wish to turn now.
- What do we learn from the example of the church about how to respond to persecution?

A. Sometimes, there is a lively debate about this.

1. Some would say that of course you ought to flee.
 - It is the only prudent thing to do!
 - Why would you stay if knew that danger was coming?
 - They would argue that we should be willing to die for Christ,
 - but that there is no virtue in looking for martyrdom as some in history have done.
2. Others would say, “Don’t be a coward—stay and die for the truth.”
 - After all, it is a privilege to die for Christ and to show your love for Him by dying for Him.
 - What better way to testify than with your blood?
3. So what ought we to do?
 - a. The truth is that there is no one right answer.
 - Our Lord Jesus and His apostles sometimes fled from persecution and sometimes courageously faced it.
 - We are at liberty in this matter.
 - Every situation is different and there are times when it would be wrong for us to flee, but there are times when it would be best for us to flee.
 - We err when we try to make absolute rules in places where God has not made absolute rules.
 - Here in Acts 8, we have both examples and both examples are positive!
 - We will look at the particulars in a moment...
 - b. But be careful that you don’t judge your brother unjustly in this matter.
 - Did he move out of a neighbourhood because he was being persecuted?
 - Or did he change jobs for the same reason?
 - It is not for you to tell him that he should have stayed.
 - He must answer to His own master, not to you.
 - Why not help him move if he thinks he ought to move?
 - Does he want to stay and face the persecution?

- Then don't accuse him—
- Don't demand that he leave...
 - rather be ready to support him and encourage him to stand strong.

TRANS> Well now let's look at the positive examples of those who stayed and those who fled when persecution broke out.

- From these we can see how God uses those who stay and those who flee.
 - You can see how they are said to have been scattered in verse 1...
 - It says that the whole church which was at Jerusalem was scattered except the apostles.
 - This does not mean that everyone left except for the apostles...
 - If you scatter a bag of marbles, some of them stay together, but some of them go across the floor.
 - The apostles remained and others remained with them,
 - some were scattered into Judea and some to Samaria...

B. Let's begin by looking at the example of those who stayed.

1. The apostles are mentioned as all staying at Jerusalem.
 - a. One reason for this may have been that this persecution was primarily against the Hellenistic Jews who were associated with Stephen.
 - Saul, the leader of the persecution, was from Tarsus, and so was especially opposed to other Hellenistic Jews that were known to him.
 - He likely had less interest in the Apostles because they were uneducated men who,
 - in his mind,
 - did not pose as much of a threat as a young intellectual like Stephen.
 - So as Saul was leading things, he may not have given as much attention to the apostles.
 - b. But another reason the Apostles stayed was, no doubt, to carry on their ministry at Jerusalem.
 - They did not want to abandon the flock that the Lord had entrusted to them too soon.
 - Later on, many of them went out to minister in other places, but the church was only about four years old and the time to leave had not yet come.
 - Jerusalem was foundational to the work of the gospel.
 - Here was the base from which the church was to expand and upon which it was to build.

- Jesus is the chief cornerstone, but the prophets and apostles are the foundation that are tied together by Him.
 - The foundation was not finished, so they boldly remained in their places.

- In subsequent years, Jerusalem remains the great sending church from which the Gentile mission is launched.
 - They sacrificed greatly for the Gentile mission such that Paul says to the Gentiles that they are indebted to them.
 - He goes to great lengths to collect an offering for the saints in Jerusalem...
 - In Romans 15:26-27, He says:
 - **Rom 15:27-27: For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things.**

- So it was necessary for the Apostles to remain at Jerusalem to ensure that there would be a strong foundation for the whole church.
 - They did not use the pious sounding pretence that “the church can get along fine without us...”
 - Because that was not true—

 - Jesus had placed them there because they were needed there to lay the foundation of the kingdom.
 - Of course it was all by the grace of God and they could not boast of being indispensable...
 - but they were His appointed instruments for that time and it was their duty to continue the work He had given them!
 - They stayed until the work was finished.
 - Shepherds are responsible to care for the flock which has been entrusted to them.
 - A shepherd who leaves the flock, testifying the Lord is able to take care of them, is an irresponsible wicked shepherd.

 - Too often, you hear of pastors abandoning churches in their infancy—even at the five year mark when things are often hard.
 - They will leave for a higher paying position or for a more prestigious congregation.
 - Jesus said that the good shepherd will not abandon the sheep when he sees danger coming.

- He will stay on to protect them
 - Pray that God will raise up good shepherds in His church.
 - Pray for the elders of this congregation.
 - Pray that God will raise up additional elders for us.
2. But as I said before, there were others besides apostles who stayed back as well...
- a. We know that everyone did not flee because a very large church continued at Jerusalem.
- Besides that, we are told here in Acts 8 about some of those who stayed.
 - Some of them buried Stephen and lamented over him...
 - Some of them were taken to prison in the persecution...
 - We will look at these in particular in a moment
 - And of course not everyone would be able to flee...
 - Some would not have the means to leave and some would not be physically able because of age or other issues.
 - But many of them stayed for the same reason the apostles did.
 - They knew that they were part of the foundation of the church that Jesus Christ was building.
 - They were committed to the ministry that they had in Jerusalem and wanted to continue to witness to their friends and relatives there.
 - It was a very noble thing for them to stay.
 - They were very courageous disciples!
- b. Of particular notice are those who are mentioned in verse 2 who buried Stephen!
- Acts 8:2 says:
 - **Acts 8:2: And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.**
- 1) What boldness! What courage!
- Think of it!
 - On the same day, a bloody persecution had broken out...
 - And these disciples step forward and publicly identify themselves with the one who stirred up all the hostility—
 - not because of any wrong that he had done, but because of his faithfulness.
 - Here they show their love for Stephen and for their Lord!
- 2) Burial is an important thing!

- We should not be like the pagans who dishonour the body by cremation or some other such practice.
 - As Christians, we are to honour the body because we believe that it will be raised up again!
 - All through the Bible, burial is the way with God's people rather than burning.
 - We are even told that the Lord Himself buried Moses.
 - And in the gospels, we see how Jesus commended the woman who prepared Him for His burial by anointing Him.

- It is not that we are superstitious and suppose that the resurrection of the body will be hindered if the body is burned.
 - It is rather that we do not see the body as being permanently cast off at death.
 - Those who believe in reincarnation expect to enter into a different body...
 - And there are others who believe that we move into a permanent spiritual existence never to return to our body.
 - But the Christian doctrine is that of resurrection...
 - The body is raised up and the Spirit is united with its body again for all eternity.
 - That is why we show honour to the body.
 - It is not an old garment that is to be cast off and trampled upon.

- So here you see how these devout men put themselves in the way of danger to show honour to their friend and Christian brother Stephen.

3) Notice as well that they lamented his death.

- This made them even more obnoxious in the sight of the persecutors.
 - The law actually encouraged the burial of one who had been publicly executed, but it discouraged lamentation for him.
 - By their lamentation, they showed that they thought him to be executed unjustly!
 - They were not ashamed or afraid to show this...
 - The lamentation was great—it was loud and long!
 - It was very bold!

- We may also learn from this that it is not wrong for us to lament the death of a loved one.
 - God does not call us to be stoics who show no emotion.

- Jesus wept beside the grave of Lazarus even though He knew that the sorrow of those who stood by would soon be turned to joy.
- Yes, Stephen had gone to a better place, but Stephen would be greatly missed in the church...
 - He had a lot of people who loved him and admired him, and all the more now that he had died in such a noble way!
 - They were sorry to see him go and it was right for them to be sorry.
 - Their hearts were not made of stone.
- In some circles, it has become customary to have a celebration at a funeral, but there is no scriptural warrant for this.
 - In the scriptures, there is lamentation.
 - We sorrow for the loss, even though we do not sorrow as others who have no hope.
 - That is what Paul says in 1 Thess 5.
 - Sorrow is there,
 - but not sorrow without hope that turns into despair and bitterness and keeps us from serving God.

TRANS> How thankful we are for these who remained despite the persecution and so boldly identified themselves with Stephen.

- c. We see also that some who stayed back were given to suffer for Jesus.
 - 1) We have already seen that Saul went about from house to house in search of Christians...
 - and that when he found them, he dragged them off to prison...
 - And we have heard from his own lips that he approved of the murder of many of them.
 - 2) It was a tremendous privilege for these believers to suffer for the Lord Jesus.
 - By dying for Him rather than denying Him, they were able to show everyone the great love they had for Him.
 - They were able to show that they really did believe everything they had been saying about Him.
 - If they had not believed it, they would not have been willing to die and suffer for it.
 - 3) All through history, believers have rejoiced to give their life for the Lord.

- Latimer and Ridley were martyred under the persecutions of Queen Mary,
 - And as the fire was lit around them, Latimer said to Ridley...
 - **“Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out!”**
 - They died in hope that their testimony would lead to the strengthening of the church—and it did!

TRANS> If persecution comes, rejoice!

- There is no better way to honour your Lord who gave His life for you than to give your life for Him.
 - If you believe that, begin laying down our life for others this very day!
 - Husbands, give yourself for your wives—to care for them—to love them!
 - Elders, give yourself for the care of the flock over which you are given oversight.
 - Christians, lay down your life for sake of the gospel—die to self and remember that you are here for one reason—to honour the Lord.
 - You may not ever be called to die as a martyr, but you can certainly lay down your life for Jesus... and you must!
 - Jesus calls you to do it.
 - That is what those who remained in Jerusalem did...
 - They laid down their lives for the Lord.

C. But now let’s look at those who fled.

- Were they cowards?
 - Were they wrong to leave?
 - Is it wrong to flee when persecution comes?
- 1. We have already seen in verse 1 that they were scattered into Judea and Samaria.
 - a. It would have been difficult to go in most cases...
 - They had to leave behind their houses and their possessions...
 - They had to find another place to live and try to find a way to make a living...
 - They had to uproot their children.
 - But they did this in love—to protect their families from the persecution.
 - Jesus Himself often fled when hostility arose against Him...
 - And so did the apostle Paul on more than one occasion.
 - There is nothing wrong with this.

- The Bible commends those who hid in caves when they were being persecuted and who went about naked and destitute.
- They did this rather than deny the gospel.

TRANS> That is the key—whether you flee or whether you say—you must not deny the gospel.

b. And we can see clearly from what is said of those who fled that they were faithful—they did not deny their Lord.

- We can tell because when they went to various places to escape,
 - they did not become silent saints!
 - Incidentally—this is a challenge to us who are not under persecution—
 - Are we silent saints?
 - Are we showing ourselves to be faithful by testifying of our hope?
- Verse 4 tells us what they did!
 - It says,
 - **Acts 8:4: Therefore, those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.**
 - I am sorry to say that the translators did not do a very good job here.
 - The original does not say that they went everywhere *preaching* the word, but rather that they went everywhere evangelising...
 - In the next verse Philip, who had become an evangelist, is said to preach—
 - but these other disciples were just going around and telling everyone about Jesus and their hope in Him.
 - It was not formal preaching as such—just talking to those they met wherever they were.
 - You see, they had a special opportunity to testify too...
 - People would see them bringing their families and coming to resettle and they would be curious as to why...
 - And these disciples went everywhere telling them why!
 - When we are suffering for what we believe and are experiencing great inconvenience for it, people are more willing to listen.
 - As you live sacrificially for God,
 - People will ask you about it...

- This can be with little things such as spending time with your family or rising early to pray or refusing to work on Sunday.
 - People will ask you about it and you must tell them about Jesus!
 - Don't give them some nonsense that avoids the person that your life is supposed to be built around!
 - Tell them the good news that has changed your life and that is so good that you are willing to suffer for it!
- c. So if you are going to flee as these saints did,
- see to it that like them, you do not flee from Christ!
 - Fleeing is wrong if you flee from Him.
 - Jesus says that if we deny Him, He will deny us.
 - And my brothers and sisters, again, see that you are not a silent saint even now when there is no persecution...
 - You don't have to be preacher, but you need to be speaking to everyone about Jesus.
2. Now I want you to see how God used these fleeing saints for the advancement of His kingdom!
- a. We are given the example of one of the ones who fled—of Philip the deacon who has now become an evangelist.
- Later on in Acts, we are told that Philip is an evangelist, and here we see him doing the work of one.
 - He was probably already set apart to preach in one of the many house churches in Jerusalem.
 - But now, having been scattered, he goes to Samaria to preach to the Samaritans!
- b. This is a rather daring thing to do.
- The Samaritans and the Jews did not get along well at all—as John says, the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.
 - The trouble had begun about a thousand years before...
 - at the time of Solomon's death when his son Rehoboam had oppressed the people and the ten tribes of Israel had rebelled.
 - Under Jeroboam, they established a separate kingdom—and they even stopped worshipping at Jerusalem and erected worship sites at Dan and Bethel complete with a golden calf as a throne for God!
 - In 722, they were taken into exile and foreigners were brought in to maintain the land.

- The Assyrians shuffled the people they conquered in this way to make them less capable of rebellion.
 - The result was that these Israelites intermarried with those who were brought into the land with them.
 - The Jews greatly resented this and considered the Samaritans half breeds.
 - They held that their women were unclean.
 - They held that to eat with a Samaritan was equivalent to eating pork.
 - They accused them of aborting their babies.
 - The Samaritans had also built a rival temple at Mount Gerizim which had been destroyed by the Jewish hero John Hyrcanus I, about 150 years before the time of Philip.
 - They rejected the prophets and accepted only the first five books of Moses—
 - but they did believe that a messiah would come who would announce that the end had come—
 - He was understood to be the one Moses spoke about who was to be a prophet like Him.
- c. Look at what happened through Philip’s preaching!
- Look at verses 5-8:
 - **Acts 8:5-8: Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city.**
 - This is beautiful!
 - This is what was happening as the faithful disciples were scattered!
 - They were making Jesus known and these Samaritans were listening and believing that the Messiah had come!
 - What joy there must have been!
 - There were healings and the casting out of demons!
 - And they were introduced to the One who had come to take away the sin of the world...
 - Philip was preaching Christ to them and as we shall see when we go on in this passage,
 - many of them believed!
 - Isn’t it marvellous!

- Souls that were lost, souls that would have spent eternity in Hell, were converted to Jesus Christ!
 - Their sins were pardoned through faith in Jesus crucified.
 - His life came flooding into them!
 - Now they had a future and a hope!
 - What joy there was in this city—indeed—what joy!
- Do you see—the suffering and the scattering at Jerusalem was all in God’s hands.
 - It brought His gracious salvation to people all over Judea and Samaria... even to Samaria!
 - You need to see persecution that scatters as an opportunity to spread joy all over the place!
 - If you find yourself scattered and cut off from other believers, just let your light shine wherever you are...
 - Go everywhere telling them of Jesus.
 - Perhaps some will be converted!

Conclusion: So you see, my brothers and sisters, what you can do if persecution breaks out...

- You can stay and face it, or you can flee—
 - But what you must never do in any case is deny Jesus Christ.
 - If you start living for Jesus now, you will be ready to live for Him if persecution should come.
 - You will be ready for whatever comes—to honour Him and to spread joy to those who do not know Him.
 - Don’t you want to do that?
 - Surely you do!