

Acts 8:1-8

“The Product of Persecution”

Ch 7 moves from the *sermon* of Stephen, to the *stoning* of Stephen, as he becomes the 1st martyr of the early church. and Having covered all 60 vs of ch 7 in our last gathering I obviously was unable to draw your attention to every detail that I might otherwise have taken the time give to you for your consideration, or meditation, hopefully the continuing transformation of your life as by the Word of God, things of that nature. So as we prepare to slide out of ch 7 into ch 8 I want to back up just a bit and look at just a few things in this account that I didn't mention last time because as I said this is really a pivotal point in church history. It's like the final straw that sealed Israel's fate as having rejected Jesus Christ as a nation, sure there will still be pockets of Jewish people who come to believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and receive Him as such. But overall as a nation God is at this point officially beginning to build the bridge that will send the message of the gospel to the Gentiles.

Israel has rejected the witness of the Father who sent to them J.B. as the voice of one crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, he pointed out to them Jesus Christ as the sacrificial Lamb of God who was sent to take away the sins of the world. He said of Jesus *“There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”* Mark 1:7-8 He said to the multitudes listening to him upon seeing Jesus approach him one day, *“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’”* John 1:29-30 He spoke to them of the sinless/eternal nature of Jesus Christ the fact that He was the One promised of God to bring them freedom from the oppression and bondage of sin. But they sat idly by as John was imprisoned and murdered, beheaded for heralding the truth.

They rejected the witness of the Son which resulted in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ For no less than 3 years He sought to teach them, reason with them, demonstrate to them who He was, yet they had Him nailed to the cross in utter disdain, He was despised and rejected by His own.

Now in the witness of Stephen they've rejected the witness of the Holy Spirit who has born witness to the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ just as the scriptures had foretold thereby bringing condemnation upon themselves and God's rejection of them as a nation. Notice vs 51 of Ch 7 (read), they've rejected the witness of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and now God has rejected them.

Now therein lies a warning, you're free to reject the witness of the people of God, of the Word of God, and of the Spirit of God, but understand that there just may come a time when God will reject you. The bible teaches us that the Spirit of God will not always strive with man. In Rom ch 1 Paul speaks of a case in point when he says, "...even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind," Rom 1:28 that is, He quit striving with them and for lack of a better way to say it, "Gave up" on them. and Believe me *understatement* doesn't even begin to touch the solemnity/gravity of the tragic situation on the day that God "gives up" on you. Having rejected Him to the point whereby He's finally at the point of rejecting you, giving you over to your own demise. (Now if you're here you can rest assured you're not at that point, but don't play games with God, eternity is an awful long time.) How much better to receive Jesus Christ, be forgiven of your sin, and spend eternity in His presence, surrounded by His love? No eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.

Vs54-56

I draw this to your attention again due to the significance of Jesus "standing" at the right hand of God. That is, the place of power and authority, because Jesus told the high priest that he would see Him "*sitting*" at the right hand of God. The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus, "... after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God," Heb 10:12 In Rev 3:21 Jesus said, "*To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.*" But as Stephen began to spill his blood as the 1st martyr of the church we see that Jesus actually *stood up* to receive Him. It's like, "Well done good and faithful servant, enter in to the joy of your Lord." and Then in vs 60

Vs60

Or to understand that another way, "He died." But in the scriptures, the physical expiration of an individual is rarely referred to as death; because "death" by it's biblical definition or understanding speaks of eternal separation from God. You remember Jesus said, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.*" John 11:25-26 That is, will never be separated from God but will inherit everlasting/age-abiding life in the presence of God forever. Death for the believer is simply that transitional state that takes us from the proverbial caterpillar state to the butterfly. Because flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, the corruptible must put on the incorruptible, mortality must be swallowed up in immortality. When you put a seed into the ground does it spring up a giant seed just the same, no, you put it in the ground, it sheds that shell and springs up into something beautiful. and Paul said that that's the way it is regarding the resurrection, we're sown in corruption but raised in incorruption, sown in dishonor, raised in glory, sown in weakness, raised in power, sown a natural body, raised in a spiritual body.

So the early church would never refer to the decease of a believer as death, but as “falling asleep” meaning that the body “sleeps” as it were, but the spirit of the individual is alive and well with Jesus Christ because the bible is clear in 2nd Cor 5:8 that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Sometimes people get confused in passages like this, the erroneous doctrine of soul sleep begins to be considered, but the bible doesn’t teach that. You’re not going to lie in a grave somewhere dormant until Jesus comes back, when you draw your last breath on this earth as a Christian you go directly into the presence of the Lord and so shall you ever be with the Lord. Stephen prayed for those who were persecuting him and then he died.

Vs1-3

In Vs 58 of ch 7 we seen where the people who were stoning Stephen laid their clothes at the feet of this young man named Saul and here in vs 1 we read how that as Saul was safeguarding their things he was consenting to his death. and This is just sort of fascinating to me in that these two men, “Stephen”, and “Saul” were in reality the 2 men who had some of the most dynamic impact upon the early church and yet their only experience with each other on this side of eternity was on opposite sides of the cross. Here God was using Stephen as a bridge builder preparing the way for the gospel to go to the Gentiles as the floodgates of persecution began to break open beginning with him which would result in the going forth of the gospel out of Jerusalem, ultimately out of Israel and into the Gentile nations. and Saul, who would become Paul the apostle, would be the chief apostle who would carry the message of the gospel *to* the Gentiles. and Stephen would never know (on this side of eternity) the degree to which God was using his life and his witness. Think about it, from the on look of the outside this seemed to be an untimely tragedy.

Stephen’s ministry ramping up, in its prime (so to speak) but then tragically cut short, we don’t read where anyone was even saved through his ministry, but God was using him so powerfully, so profoundly, great things seemed to lie in store, but now he’s been martyred and in reality all that seemed to come of this (from the natural perspective) was more persecution. “Great persecution” the bible says here.

But God was going to use this episode in a radical way, and through Stephen’s faithfulness unto death God would reach more people than Stephen ever would’ve reached in his life. The gospel would be sent into all the world, God would save who would become the foremost of apostles who would be instrumental in penning 2/3 of the NT and in reality the history of human kind would be altered, and all of these things would spring out of this isolated incident right here. So again I would remind you to never underestimate what God can do, or may be doing through your life even when things appear to be going radically wrong. I would venture to say that countless millions (throughout the last couple of millenniums) have come to know Christ thanks to the faithful witness of Stephen, think about that. Do you think that in retrospect Stephen would give up this moment for anything? God can take the things that the enemy means to destroy, and use it to further His plans and His purposes, and we see that very clearly in this passage, and we’ll see it more as the text develops.

But as for Saul, as for *now*, he's "consenting" to Stephen's death. There'll come a time that after he meets Jesus that he regrets this moment, and it'll haunt him for the rest of his life, years later when he's recounting his testimony he remembers this incident like it was yesterday. He says in his conversation with the Lord, "*And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.*" Acts 22:20 To the Corinthians he would write, "*For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*" 1 Cor 15:9 But as for *now* he's all about what he believes to be his duty. You recall that Jesus said, "*...the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.*" John 16:2-3 That's what we have here, Saul thinks that he's serving God in persecuting the church; he considers them to have blasphemed the law of Moses and the Temple. This word "consenting" speaks of more than a simple nod of approval, it speaks of "gaining gratification" or "taking pleasure in." He's enjoying his job, Saul of Tarsus was not a nice man, when we read here of this "great persecution" that arose against the church, at the root of it all was Saul.

In vs 3 where it speaks of Saul making "havoc" of the church, the idea there is "laying waste" to the church it's like a shark that gets that 1st scent or taste of blood that sends him into a feeding frenzy, Saul was on a rampage. Vs 3 expounds on what exactly was meant by him making havoc of the church when it says that he even went door to door looking for Christians. and If you confessed allegiance to Christ, it didn't matter if you were a man or woman, if he'd leave your kids orphans or anything else, he'd have you dragged out of your own home by force, committed to prison and he'd cast in his vote to have you put to death. I mean this guy was hardcore, he didn't wait for Sunday morning services to find you, he'd comb the streets looking for your house. and Really what's happening here is that we're being given a character profile in order to prepare us for his radical conversion here in a the next Ch. Because in regards to a blasphemous position against Christ, you just really couldn't get any worse than Saul of Tarsus and yet God will show mercy to him and save him. What's the message? That no one is beyond the redemptive reach of God's grace, and God's love, and His ability to forgive.

That it doesn't matter where you've been or what you've done, God loves you, is willing to forgive you, and wants to make Himself real to you. Saul of Tarsus would serve as an example to the rest of mankind of God's desire to forgive, and reconcile mankind to Himself. When Paul was writing to Timothy he said, "*...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.*" 1 Tim 1:15-16 and I used to think that that was just a real mark of humility in Paul, the fact that he considered himself the chief of sinners, and it may be (I think we can all identify with that feeling) but I'm not so convinced anymore that that's all it is. Saul of Tarsus was a man in vehement defiance against Jesus of Nazareth, yet God showed him mercy after all that he did to try and destroy the body of Christ. There's nothing that you have done, that God can't forgive you for if you'll but come to Him and give your life to Christ.

But what Saul doesn't see is that even inadvertently God is using his life even now. Because back in ch 1 Jesus had said, "...*you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" Acts 1:8 But up until this point they haven't really taken the gospel beyond Jerusalem, remember the high priest said that they had filled Jerusalem with their doctrine. But they haven't gone beyond that point, but now that Saul is on a rampage, things are being stirred up a bit and people are being compelled to carry the message throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria simply because they're being scattered for fear of their lives. So the cause is persecution, but the effect of the persecution, or the product of the persecution is the propelling of the gospel into all of these areas that Christians are scattering. and The idea behind that word "scattered" is like taking seed and just scattering it everywhere like you're sowing wheat, or grass seed in your yard. So that far from *stopping* the message of the gospel, the net effect is exactly the opposite, it's *spreading* everywhere. It's like wanting to put out a fire by taking all the coals that you've scooped up in your shovel and flinging them into a dry field, it just compounds the problem. He's stomping on the fire, but the sparks are flying everywhere starting fires for Jesus Christ wherever they land.

Now then, did God cause the persecution? No, but the providential hand of God is in control, so that what we see here is God utilizing the situation at hand in order to accomplish His sovereign will. He had commanded them to take the message outside of Jerusalem, they hadn't done that yet, how does this apply to you? What does this mean for me? As human beings we have a tendency to settle in to our comfort zones, "Hey, if it ain't broke, don't fix it," right? I can look out nearly every Sunday or Wednesday and although (forgive me) I don't know everyone's name, I see familiar faces in practically the same places week in and week out. Because we're creatures of habit, we feel weird sitting on the other side of the sanctuary, and we look at people funny when they're in our spot. But its not until I'm forced out of my pocket that I find somewhere else to sit. But then when I'm shaking hands and introducing myself to people I've never met before I find myself thinking, "These people are pretty cool over here, (I'd still rather be over there) but this is alright." Now did God make that person sit there? No, but because they did God will use that situation to break me out of my mold just a bit and perhaps use me over here in a way that I wasn't really operating in over there. and That's sort of what's happening here in that often times until the pressure is on me, I won't look for other opportunities. The baby eaglets are real comfortable right there in Mama's nest, but when they're pushed out, they find themselves learning to fly.

God wanted me to minister to that fella over there, but until I got fired from my job, I wasn't about to put in applications somewhere else, I was comfortable, (sort of a thing) now it would be nice if we were all just super sensitive with regard to the things of the spirit and never needed the prod of persecution, or being opened up to other avenues through difficulty and hardship, but most of us need to be motivated in a manner that gets us moving or else we'll just stay put.

Couple of thoughts as to why the apostles didn't flee, they may've felt compelled to stay with the infant church there. They may have also refused to flee because they'd already done that once when they all denied the Lord and fled because of *His* persecutors and made a resolve not to do that again as by the grace of God. It could also be that the mainstream of persecution was upon the Hellenists, it sort of leans that way with the fact that Philip is brought up next as one who was scattered, because he was a Greek speaking Jew, 1 of the 7 chose to serve tables. and Real quick regarding vs 2, these devout men, may not have even been Christians, because of this great lamentation and the fact that it doesn't mention them as being disciples it seems that Luke is wanting us to know that it was fairly obvious that Stephen was done wrong and even those who didn't necessarily believe were able to see the injustice with which he was treated. But because of this violent persecution the disciples were scattering.

Vs4-8

Again we see the product of persecution, the message didn't cease, it only spread. But again if it weren't for the persecution perhaps Philip wouldn't have journeyed to Samaria, but God wanted to send the message of the gospel to them to, for God so loved the *world* He gave His only begotten Son, and we see how God uses the things that the enemy desires to destroy us to propel His purposes over and over again as a fairly consistent pattern throughout the scriptures. Last week we read where Stephen mentioned Joseph, and I can't say for sure, but if his brother's hadn't sold him to the Ishmaelites who traded him as a slave in Egypt, and if Potiphar's wife hadn't sought to ensnare him, and he wouldn't have wound up in jail for 3 yrs, all those things led to him standing before Pharaoh being exalted to the single most powerful man in the world right beneath the Pharaoh himself. and Again I could be wrong but I doubt that he'd have moved to Egypt on his own to start a campaign for the vice presidency and minister of foreign relations of Egypt. But in the end he was able to see the providential hand of God at work and when he was speaking to his brothers he said, "*...as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.*" Gen 50:20 You see, Saul meant this to destroy but God would use it for good, to "save many people" by the message of Jesus Christ that otherwise wouldn't have come to them. Of course the ultimate example of God turning what the enemy means to destroy to accomplish His ultimate agenda is the cross of Jesus Christ Himself. They thought they were destroying Him, but God was taking that, and using it to provide atonement/forgiveness/ and redemption for all of mankind, as many as would call upon His name. Later on recognizing this principle himself Paul would write, "*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.*" Rom 8:28 So whatever it is that may be going on in your life today, know that God knows. and Though you may not see it now, there will come a day, even if it's the day that you're in His presence when you'll be able to see His sovereign hand at work in your life working things together for good according to His purposes. There's a big picture here, ideologically these people probably couldn't see the good in their persecution personally.

But in the big picture the gospel was sounding forth everywhere and people were being snatched from the pit of hell and being turned on to Jesus Christ (now that's good, God was working this situation for good, ultimately). All of these people were coming to Christ through Philip, God gave him the gift of evangelism, and hearing of the person of Philip's message (Jesus Christ and Him crucified) and seeing the power of Philip's message, the sick restored, the possessed released, man the people rejoiced and received Christ.

That's what Jesus wants to do through you today, He wants to take those who are paralyzed in/by sin and cause them to walk in a manner that's right before Him, restore them through repentance to a right heart before Him. He wants to free those who've been oppressed by the enemy, because the one the Son sets free is free indeed. You see this phrase there in vs 4 is a bit misleading where it says they went everywhere "preaching" the word. Makes it sound sort of like seasoned and skilled missionaries slicing and dicing with the word of God, formal preachers and all. and You kinda go, "That's neat but, I could never do that." But it's more accurate to say that they went everywhere, "bringing" or even simply, "sharing" the word. Which is to say that they were sort of missionaries by default in that their circumstances forced them to flee and when they wound up where they wound up, or on the way or whatever. They would just talk to the people about the reality of what Jesus had done in their lives and how that they could be forgiven to by simply believing in Him. The point being that this is something that we can all do, a way that we can all be used. You can tell anyone about the life changing encounter that you've had with Jesus Christ, where you've been and what you've done, but that God loved you, that Jesus died for you, and that when you submitted to the love and grace of Jesus Christ He came into your life, forgave you of your sin and gave you everlasting life. and He wants to do that for them to, that's what's going on here. God propelling His purpose in practical ways, spreading the gospel through the anybodies and everybodies, if you're experiencing uncomfortable pressures, or persecution of some form today that's pressing you out into a situation that you wouldn't normally find yourself open to or looking for. Don't be discouraged, God is in control and He's ultimately going to use that situation for good, because you love Him, and have been called according to His purpose. It may be through an unconventional, or uncomfortable means, but His will, will be done in your life, (as Jon Courson says,) you wait, you watch, and you'll see, lets pray.

Prayer points: If we're experiencing pressures or persecution of some form and its pressing us out of our comfort zone, may we trust you, that your further purposes and plans might be produced through our lives, for the general good and for Your glory. Help us to be those who simply share Your grace and Your goodness, how You've changed us, forgiven us and given us life wherever You may have us, work/school/whatever. As with Stephen we thank You that in You we'll never face death, but merely make the transition from the corruptible to incorruption, mortality to immortality, sown in dishonor raised it glory, sown in weakness raised in strength, raised in Your likeness, for when we are with You we shall be like You for we will see You as You are and in that we give You praise.

When we began our time today we spoke of resisting and rejecting the witness of God's people, of God's Word, of God's Spirit regarding the reality of the resurrected Christ and His desire to extend forgiveness and redemption to us today. and If God has been dealing with you on that level, stirring your heart, reaching out to you, desiring to reconcile you to Himself, don't resist the Holy Spirit today. There's nothing you've done but that He won't forgive you, if you'll just surrender to Him by faith and give Him your heart. Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty of your sin, of my sin, I believe it, I've received it, now how about you? If you'll receive Christ today God will wipe away every sin and make you white like snow and give you everlasting life.