

**Acts 8: 1-8; “The Wonders of Christ’s Working”, Sermon # 36 in the series –  
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on  
January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017, in the Morning Worship Service.**

It will be important for all of God’s people to remember, in such days as we are living in, that Christ is always working wonders for the advancement of His kingdom in one place or another. For we read here that “at that time”, the time when Stephen was killed, “a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem”. And yet, we also read that the gospel of Christ was still being proclaimed; it was still having good results, when the brethren and Philip preached Christ . Even though Stephen had been martyred, Christ would be continuing to work to build His Church. The gates of hell, and the wicked schemes of men would not prevail; they could not detour that glorious working of Christ which brings salvation. So, this morning I want to bring to your attention the great wonders of Christ’s working during those times, which I believe were written for our instruction here today. There were 3 ways in which Christ was working wonders in those days, which if you will take notice of them, will result in the strengthening of your faith; wonders of His working which I believe will strengthen your resolve to continue to preach Christ wherever you are, and wherever you may go. 1<sup>st</sup> of all – I want us to consider together, the Wonders of Christ’s Working during a time of great persecution. (verses 1, 3, and 4) 2<sup>nd</sup> – The Wonders of Christ’s Working during a time of great lamentation. (verse 2) And 3<sup>rd</sup> – The Wonders of Christ’s Working through Philip, which brought great joy to the city of Samaria. (verses 5-8)

**1<sup>st</sup> of all – The Wonders of Christ’s Working during a time of great persecution.**  
(verses 1 and 3)

“Now Saul was consenting to his (Stephen’s) death.” “At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” It seems hard to believe from the human standpoint that such an awful thing as persecution should show forth the wonders of Christ’s working, but it is always the case. Why is this? It is because the blessing of God is clearly shown to those who suffer for Christ’s sake. I want you to turn over with me to Matthew 5, verse 10 with me. Here, as a part of Jesus’ giving of the Beatitudes, we find these words: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.” “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

So, you can see that the Lord Jesus clearly saw what would happen to those who would follow Him; those who were intent on leading righteous lives. Evil men would oppose them; they would speak against them and try to ruin their reputation. Some would go so far as to try and jail them, or even have them put to death, for being followers of Jesus. And, we should understand, that often times the persecution would come from those who were the most religious people; most especially the leaders and zealots among them. It would not be, so much, the lawless selfish sinners who would persecute them, as much as it would be the people who believed in their religion of legalistic doctrines which they had made up around the word of God. Their false system of religion must be adhered to, because they were controlling and authoritarian men who wanted to force other people to believe what they believed, about God, the way of salvation, and how they should live their lives by man-made rules. These persecutors would speak “all kinds of evil against them, falsely”, because they believed that Jesus was the only Savior of the world, and that He was Lord of all.

What is significant for our study today is that the Lord Jesus said that when this happened, when they were reviled and persecuted, they were to rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great was their reward in heaven. In other words, Christ would give such abundant grace to those who were being persecuted, that they would be able to rejoice and be exceeding glad under such awful persecution. We need to take notice of this, for these Beatitudes apply to us in our day, just as much as it applied to them in that day. They are called, “the Beatitudes” because they are the attitudes that “be” in a true Christian. A true Christian will have an attitude of faith, and the practice of faith in all the situations of opposition and persecution that they are facing. That attitude and practice of faith will secure the help and blessing of Christ to enable them to rejoice in persecution; even to be exceeding glad. Why? Because we know that Christ is with us. “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Let each one of us understand that our Christ does give us grace, not only to save us and to cleanse us from all of our sins, but He also gives us grace to endure the sufferings of persecution, with a spirit of rejoicing, for His name’s sake.

For Paul says in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3, verses 10-12 – “But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, long suffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra – what persecutions I endured.” “And out of them all the Lord delivered me.” “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” So, I need to ask you the question now: Are you a person who desires to live godly in Christ Jesus? Then, you should know, that there will be times when you will suffer persecution. Notice that Paul said that the Lord delivered him out of all of his persecutions. Did this mean that he wasn’t delivered from the last persecution that came against him when he was martyred for the faith? No, my beloved. The truth of the matter is stated well in Psalm 34, verses 17-19 – “The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles.” “The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit.” “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.”

You can see here that the Lord delivers the righteous out of all of their troubles, whether it is in life, or whether it is in death. We have just seen an example of this in dear Stephen; the first martyr of the church. Was Stephen downcast about his having to suffer death at the hands of these men? No, he looked to Christ and he was radiant, and his face was unashamed. That poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles by bringing him to Himself straight away. You and I will need to cultivate the idea in our minds that our Lord Jesus is always watching over us, and is with us at all times. Listen to John G. Paton, the missionary to the New Hebrides, as he was surrounded by wild savages seeking his life. “A killing-stone, thrown by one of the savages, grazed poor old Abraham’s cheek, and the dear soul gave such a look at me, and then upwards, as if to say: ‘Missi, (Their name of endearment for J.G. Paton) I was nearly away to Jesus.’” “A club was also raised to follow the blow of the killing stone, but God baffled the aim.” “They encircled us in a deadly ring, and one kept urging another to strike the first blow or fire the first shot. My heart rose up to the Lord Jesus; I saw Him watching all the scene.” “My peace came back to me like a wave from God. I realized that I was immortal till my Master’s work with me was done.”

“The assurance came to me, as if a voice out of Heaven had spoken, that not a musket would be fired to wound us, not a club prevail to strike us, not a spear leave the hand in which it was held vibrating to be thrown, not an arrow leave the bow, or a killing-stone the fingers, without the permission of Jesus Christ, whose is all power in Heaven and on Earth.” “He rules all Nature, animate and inanimate, and restrains even the savage of the South Seas.” “In that awful hour I saw His own words, as if carved in letters of fire upon the clouds of Heaven: Seek, and ye shall find.” “Whatsoever ye shall ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” “I could understand how Stephen and John saw the glorified Saviour as they gazed up through suffering and persecution to the Heavenly Throne!” “Yet I never could say that on such

occasions I was entirely without fear.” “Nay, I have felt my reason reeling, my sight coming and going, and my knees smiting together when thus brought close to a violent death, but mostly under the solemn thought of being ushered into Eternity and appearing before God.” “Still, I was never left without hearing that promise in all its consoling and supporting power coming up through the darkness and the anguish, “Lo, I am with you always.” “And with Paul I could say, even in this dread moment and crisis of being, I am persuaded that neither death nor life . . . nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (P. 336, Vol. 1 of the Autobiography of John G. Paton, Missionary to the New Hebrides) My brethren, this is the wonder of Christ’s working when we are persecuted. Let us all believe it. **2<sup>nd</sup> – The Wonders of Christ’s Working during a time of great lamentation.** (verse 2)

Verse 2 says: And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.” I think that it is a marvelous testimony to the strength of Christ’s grace, that during a time of great persecution, that they could conduct a burial for the man who was hated and killed by those wicked men who would not hear God’s word preached to them. There were, at that time, even though so many had been scattered because of the persecution, devout men who were of a strong enough character and a strong enough faith to be able to publicly carry Stephen to his burial, and make a great lamentation over him.” We should understand that this is a great testimony to the strength of Christ’s working during that perilous time. Why did they bury Stephen and not cremate him as so many are starting to do today? It was because they believed in the resurrection of the dead. They believed in Christ’s resurrection from the dead, and they believed that there was a God-honoring way of doing things, that was not necessarily at all as convenient as cremation, but which would communicate a better witness to their expectation of the future resurrection of the dead. It would honor God and His truth more than cremation. People of understanding, people who believe in Christ and the resurrection, believe that the death of the body is like a long sleep. It says of Stephen that as he was being killed, he said in a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” “And when he had said this, he fell asleep”.

When a person falls asleep, there is the expectation on their own part, and on the part of other people around them, that they will wake up sometime later. It is not as though Christ cannot raise the dead who have been created; He certainly will be able to do that. But the real question is, what is more God-honoring? And truly, we need to understand that Christ is coming back someday; He will come in the clouds, in great glory, and all the dead will be raised. It says that “every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him.” This is the expectation and sure hope of the Christian. They are looking for that “blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ”. This is the reason that all knowledgeable Christians bury their dead if they can. It is because it better represents the truth of Christ, and what is coming. Ever since the days of Abraham, when he was given the great promises of salvation in Christ, we read of the custom of the burial of the body. This was done because of the great expectation that someday Christ would come; be crucified and die, and be buried, and that He would rise from the dead. This did happen, and it is what we celebrate every Sunday in observing the Christian Sabbath. Our expectation as Christians, living in the midst of a watching, unbelieving world, is that someday Christ shall return; and at His command, “all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.” (John 5: 28, 29)

No, the body should not be cremated, according to the thinking of Christ. It should be treated with dignity, respect, and honor, knowing that God made it, and that Christ will someday re-make it over into a glorious body. “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue

all things to Himself.” Any of these men who buried Stephen could have easily been opposed, or jailed, or even put to death for showing such public support, love, and care for a man who was hated by the Sanhedrim and by those who killed him. But these “devout” men, these men who given to fearing God and remembering all of the marvelous works that the Lord had done through Stephen, carried him to his burial, and it says: they made great lamentation over him. Therefore, it is important that you and I should have the right view of the death of great Christian men and women; of people who have been greatly blessed of the Lord to be faithful to Him, in their lives, and in their generation.

Listen to what it says in Isaiah chapter 57, verses 1 and 2. “The righteous perishes, and no man takes it to heart; merciful men are taken away, while no one considers that the righteous is taken away from evil.” “He shall enter into peace; they shall rest in their beds, each one walking in his uprightness.” When it says: “The righteous perishes”, it does not mean that he perishes eternally, for that would go against many of the magnificent promises of the word of God which talk about how the righteous are kept forever by the Lord and preserved from everlasting destruction. They are not taken away to judgment when they die, they are brought to heaven when they die. The sheep of Christ never perish and no one snatches them out of His hand. This, as well as many other precious promises, show us that the righteous shall never be cast down to hell. Rather, this verse is saying that when the righteous man dies, no unbelieving man takes it to heart. No unbelieving man considers that the righteous man who has died has been taken away from the evil of the Lord’s judgments coming upon an ungodly society and nation. These the righteous man who has died, will not see. He has entered into peace; he is resting in his bed in the grave, but because he was, by faith, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and because he learned by grace to walk in uprightness before Christ, now, during his life, while he was in the land of the living, he has entered into peace, and his works do follow him. They are, and will continue to be, to all of eternity, a testimony to the grace of Christ.

The Christians who are left behind, following the death of a great and godly man, have great reason to mourn the loss of that man. For it is always the case, that it will be very hard to replace him. It is hard to find men who are kind and merciful, good and trustworthy; men who love the Lord and love His word. In this case, of Stephen’s dying, these men were lamenting the fact that they and others would not be able to hear this great preacher of the word of God, anymore. They lamented losing one who was also a good servant of Christ, and a deacon in the church. He would be sorely missed, for he had fearlessly preached the truth in the face of those who were the murderers of the Lord. They had hoped that the whole cause of Christ would go forward to conquer the hearts of those who had been so stiff-necked. They had hoped that the whole nation would be turned away from their great sins, and turned to embrace the Savior and live for the Lord of Glory, who was their Messiah. But this was not to be. And so they lamented the loss of the man who had done them all such good; who had lived for Christ’s glory, and who had lived such a good example before them. The whole cause of Christ would miss this champion of truth and righteousness. Other righteous men would lay it to heart. They would let the implications of his going on before them to heaven, sink down in their hearts. They would mourn his loss, but they would not mourn as those who have no hope. There is a great deal of difference between holy, God-glorifying lamentation and the weeping and mourning of people who have no hope.

Listen to this small selection from Thomas Manton’s funeral sermon upon the death of Christopher Love – The text was 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15: 57 – “But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” He says: “It (that is – Thanksgiving) serves to press God’s children to improve the comforts of Christ’s victory; do not let it go out of your hands.” “1<sup>st</sup>, improve it for your friends that are departed in the Lord.” “Our weeping puts some disparagement upon Christ’s conquest.” “Why should we weep in the day of their preferment, in

the day of their solemn espousals to Jesus Christ?” “In the primitive time, at funerals, they were wont to sing psalms of thanksgiving.” “We should bring them as champions to the grave, as those that have passed the pikes, and finished their course, and kept the faith, and have conquered the world, and sin, and death, and danger.” “Chrysostom, in one of his homilies on the Hebrews, speaks of the ancient rites at funerals, of their hymns, and psalms, and praises: *Hoec omnia sunt loetantium*, saith he – all these signify joy; and wilt thou weep and sing a psalm of praise and triumph at the same time?” I confess it is said in Acts 8: 2, that “devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him”. “It is our loss when the church is bereaved of such excellent persons; there is cause of sorrow, but there should be a mixture; we should not mourn as those without hope, 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 4: 13.” “As Christians must not rejoice without sorrow, so they must not be sorry without some mixture of joy.” “Let us declare that hope for a resurrection, that we expect to meet our friends again in heaven; and when we weep, let it be like rain when the sun shines.” “There should be somewhat of joy in our countenances, as well as tears in our eyes.”

**And 3<sup>rd</sup> – Let us consider the Wonders of Christ’s Working through Philip, which brought great joy to the city of Samaria.** (verses 4-8)

Verse 4 says: “As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.” “Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” “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.” When it says that Saul “made havoc of the church”, the word havoc means “great destruction, or devastation, or ruinous damage”. This was what Saul, as a persecutor was doing to the church in Jerusalem. It says here that he was entering every house and dragging off, not only the men, but also the women, committing them to prison. He was going to try single-handedly to crush this movement of Christians, and not let it develop any further. In his own testimony of himself which we find in the book of Philippians 3: 6 he says that “concerning zeal”, he was a persecutor of the church.

Now, here is something that we should take notice of; God’s work and the advance of Christ’s kingdom are not stopped by this kind of persecution. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem because the great work that Christ had called them to, was basically among the Jews there in Jerusalem. The Lord, however, was setting the stage for the conversion of Saul; this great persecutor of the church, and his becoming the apostle to the Gentiles. Let us see and recognize the fact that our God has very tangible plans for the building of His Son’s kingdom and the advancement of His cause. He used the persecution and the scattering of many believers into the regions of Judea and Samaria to further His purposes. Saul was making havoc, but his greatest efforts would not affect God’s plans, but rather further them. Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

The Greek words for “preaching the word”, here in verse 4, are *ευαγγελιζομενοι τον λογον*. They went about evangelizing or gossiping the gospel (the truth about Christ). These persons who were doing this good work were not called ministers; they were just ordinary Christians who had a great desire to see the gospel spread far and wide. Now that they were forced to leave Jerusalem, there were ample opportunities to spread the truth of the gospel and the word of God to many other people. And this is what they did. This kind of evangelism is what every Christian is called to. If you know Christ you want others to know Him also, and you will do what you can, and speak wherever and whenever you can to others, in relation to your everyday job or activities. In verse 5 we see Philip going down to the city of Samaria, and it says there that he began “preaching Christ” to them. The word for preaching there is *κηρυσσεν*, and its meaning

is that Philip was a divinely appointed herald; one called by God and engaging in his ministry in connection with the full approval and appointment of the local church that he was a member of, in Jerusalem.

Let us learn from this that each and every Christian should attempt, according to the grace and gifts given to them, to share and spread the truth of the gospel in some way in which they think that they can. Some brethren have gifts and calling which enables them to have a greater public ministry than others, but this should not cause jealousy in those who are not formally called to the public ministry. You should do what you can, to promote the truth, in the sphere where the Lord has placed you. Philip, like Stephen, was given great gifts; he even had the ability to perform miracles as Stephen had done. There were multitudes who came to hear him preach, and it says that they were heeding the things spoken by Philip as they also saw the miracles which he did. He cast out unclean spirits, and when these spirits were coming out, they cried out with a loud voice. And many of those who were paralyzed and lame were healed.

This is no doubt why it says in verse 8 that there was great joy in that city. The powers of darkness were shaken and cast down. People were being made whole and sane by believing in the gospel message and by experiencing, firsthand, the powerful working of Christ through Philip's ministry to them. Great joy always comes where the gospel comes with power, because people behold for themselves the change which grace makes; and the change which believing in the truth of the Bible makes, in the lives of people who have been touched by the power of the Living Christ. Let us not be ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation. Great joy comes to the hearts and minds of those who have been set free from the awful effects of the demonic powers of darkness; those who know that though persecution will come, that so will Christ's power, to deliver, to save, and to keep until we reach eternal glory.