

Acts 8: 1 – 8 “Scattered Preachers of Joy”

When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, 56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

1 Now Saul was consenting to his 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. 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. 3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. 4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. 5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. 6 And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 And there was great joy in that city.

9 But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, 10 to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." 11 And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. 13 Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.

I. Introduction

- a. Romans 8:28 “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.”
  - i. What a comfort to know that when the Lord saves us, He brings us into His plan to make all things we experience work together for good to us His beloved children. And, yet, we also know that even as believers in Jesus Christ, sometimes we face things in life that seem to challenge this great promise. We can be tempted to look at our circumstances and wonder skeptically how God could be working this pain or loss for our good. In today’s text, we see a persecuted church walking in faith toward God, even under sore trials. Can we have the same faith as we face great pain and loss in our lives? Let us look to the Lord to strengthen our faith in Him today. May we be like Joseph who forgave his brothers and said, “But 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.”

- b. Acts 1: 1 – 8 “Scattered Preachers of Joy”
      - i. Saul’s actions v1,3
      - ii. Scattered by a great persecution v1
      - iii. Stephen buried v2
      - iv. Extensive persecution v3
      - v. Preaching the Word: faithful response to persecution v4
      - vi. The example of Philip v5-7
      - vii. Outcome: Citywide great joy
      - viii. Questions to know, love and obey God
- II. Saul’s actions v1,3
  - a. 1 Now Saul was consenting to his death.... 3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.
  - b. We saw in Acts 7:58 how Saul participated in Stephen’s stoning: “And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” Now, in today’s text we see Saul wasn’t just watching after garments. He also wanted Stephen dead, and then after Stephen is murdered by the mob, Saul becomes a lead persecutor against the church in Jerusalem.
  - c. Saul made “havoc” = to treat shamefully or with injury, to ravage, devastate, ruin
    - i. So, this beautiful and powerful community of faith filled with the Holy Spirit, so blessed by God to bring the Gospel to Jerusalem, to heal so many sicknesses, to cast out all manner of demons, and so committed to caring for one another, and such a public witness to the glory of Christ, is ruined and ravaged by Saul. We see Saul’s commitment to his malice.
      - 1. “Like some furious beast of prey. So the Greek word properly signifies.”<sup>1</sup>
    - ii. Years later, after his conversion, Paul testifies against himself when he writes to the Galatians: “For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.”
  - d. In these early days of the Church in Jerusalem, the Lord used an angry, vicious and deceived Saul to ultimately spread the Gospel of Christ outside of Jerusalem. Saul meant it for evil, but the Lord meant it for good.
- III. Scattered by a great persecution v1
  - a. 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.
  - b. Now, Luke transitions and describes how the murder of Stephen served as the spark to release a volcano of persecution against the church in Jerusalem.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, [\*Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament\*](#), Fourth American Edition. (New York: J. Soule and T. Mason, 1818), 305.

- i. Persecution, root word = to make to run or flee, put to flight, drive away; to pursue (in a hostile manner); in any way whatever to harass, trouble, molest one.
      - 1. So, the apostate Jewish leadership initiates a systematic plan to eradicate the church from Jerusalem. It was a “great” persecution. Very extensive.
      - 2. “It was a “severe” or “great” (μέγας) persecution that affected the entire Jerusalem church. This means, in the context of Acts 4–5, that the persecution went beyond the arrests and interrogations of which the apostles had so far been the target.”<sup>2</sup>
  - c. Scattered throughout Judea and Samaria
    - i. The multitude of believers fled from Jerusalem. Prior to this great persecution, the apostles in Jerusalem had experienced arrest, harassment, imprisonment, slander, threats, and beatings at the hands of the Sanhedrin. The church did not flee then, but now it’s time for many to flee.
    - ii. Judea and Samaria
      - 1. Immediately prior to His ascension, the Lord said to His apostles, “But 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.”
      - 2. Now, we see how the Lord first built up a multitude of believers in Jerusalem (Acts 6:2 “Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples”) and then sent them out throughout Judea and Samaria.
  - d. Except the apostles
    - i. Somehow, the apostles are kept safe by the Lord in Jerusalem. The apostles clearly believe they are to stay there and serve the church at Jerusalem. Some believers do remain behind, as we will see. The church at Jerusalem will be referenced throughout the book of Acts, especially the Jerusalem church leadership: the apostles.
    - ii. When persecution occurs, we see the Lord working in different ways in His people. Some He leads to flee. Some He leads to stay.
- IV. Stephen buried v2
  - a. 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.
    - i. Stephen’s life is a great example of Christ-likeness for us all to follow. Christian burial is a way we honor those who have gone before us, and even in the midst of great persecution, “devout” believers were courageous enough to identify themselves with Stephen by carrying him to be buried, and not quietly, but with much mourning over him.

---

<sup>2</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, [Acts](#), Expanded Digital Edition., Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Ac 8:1.

1. “Those devout men paid these their last respects to Stephen, (1.) To show that they were not ashamed of the cause for which he suffered, nor afraid of the wrath of those that were enemies to it; for, though they now triumph, the cause is a righteous cause, and will be at last a victorious one. (2.) To show the great value and esteem they had for this faithful servant of Jesus Christ, this first martyr for the gospel, whose memory shall always be precious to them, notwithstanding the ignominy of his death. They study to do honour to him upon whom God put honour. (3.) To testify their belief and hope of the *resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.*”<sup>3</sup>

V. Extensive persecution v3

- a. 3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.
- b. The prior efforts to terrify the Church into silence were ineffective. They continued to preach and to teach in Jesus’ Name throughout Jerusalem, even though they had been commanded not to teach any more in His Name.
- c. Note how extensive was this great persecution. Every house was entered. Both men and women.
- d. Note how cruel: “dragging off” – shame and contempt cast upon them
- e. Note how serious: committing them to prison – loss of freedom, and livelihood for their family. What became of the children?
- f. We also learn about the nature of the Jerusalem church and the premeditated nature of the persecution.
  - i. “The description of Saul’s activity as a persecutor suggests two things. First, the house churches in Jerusalem were not only meeting places for believers who kept to themselves, but centers of teaching and evangelism where believers actively proclaimed the gospel and attracted new converts. Second, the persecution that followed Stephen’s execution was organized. Jews connected with the Sanhedrin moved against the believers with a specific plan, tracking down their meeting places and arresting believers in their private residences with the aim of forcing them to abandon their religious convictions or of eliminating them altogether by throwing them into prison, by having them executed, or by forcing them to leave the city.”<sup>4</sup>

VI. Preaching the Word: faithful response to persecution v4

- a. 4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

---

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry, [\*Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume\*](#) (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2095.

<sup>4</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, [\*Acts\*](#), Expanded Digital Edition., Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Ac 8:3.

- b. Now, we see the good providence of God described clearly. The scattering and the persecution are painful and scary losses for the people of God. What does the Lord do? How do His people respond?
  - i. The scattered believers go “everywhere” preaching the Word. They don’t run off and hide silently. They don’t congregate in one spot. They spread everywhere and carry out the mission Christ gave His Church:
    - 1. “Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 “and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 “And you are witnesses of these things.” (Lk 24:46-48)
  - ii. “Though persecution may not drive us off from our work, yet it may send us, as a hint of Providence, to work elsewhere.”<sup>5</sup>

VII. The example of Philip v5-7

- a. 5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. 6 And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.
- b. Luke provides us with a specific example of God’s care for His Church as He empowers the spread of the Gospel. Other good examples have been set before us with Barnabas and Stephen, and now the Lord sets Philip before us. He was one of the seven chosen and appointed in Acts 6, a man filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom, with a good reputation, who was known as a servant. Here we see Philip is a faithful preacher as well.
- c. Note the power of God: the multitudes believe, many miracles occur via Philip, demons are driven out, and the sick are healed. When the Lord’s providence drove them to a new place, the Lord’s Holy Spirit accompanied them in their mission. The Lord never leaves us alone in our distress, and He always helps His people with His power to accompany the Gospel. The Lord fills this region of Samaria with His power and Presence as they believe upon Jesus as their foretold Messiah.

VIII. Outcome: Citywide great joy v8

- a. 8 And there was great joy in that city.
- b. What is the result of believing the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ? Individual and corporate great joy!
- c. Joy = gladness of heart.
  - i. Joy is that internal gladness springing forth from the Lord’s Presence within us. Thus, it is not at all dependent upon external earthly circumstances, but rather upon Christ Who never changes.

---

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry, [\*Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume\*](#) (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2096.

- d. "This occasioned great joy; each one rejoiced for himself, as he in the parable who *found the treasure hid in the field*; and they all rejoiced for the benefit hereby brought to their city, and that it came without opposition, which it would scarcely have done if Samaria had been within the jurisdiction of the chief priests. Note, The bringing of the gospel to any place is just matter of joy, of great joy, to that place. Hence the spreading of the gospel in the world is often prophesied of in the Old Testament as the diffusing of joy among the nations: *Let the nations be glad and sing for joy*, Ps. 67:4; 1 Th. 1:6. The gospel of Christ does not make men melancholy, but fills them with joy, if it be received as it should be; for it is *glad tidings of great joy to all people*, Lu. 2:10."<sup>6</sup>

IX. Questions to know, love and obey God

---

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Henry, [\*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume\*](#) (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2096.