

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
Sunday, May 07, 2018

Acts 8:1-4 “A Church Thrust into Missionary Work”

Intro. This morning we will begin a new section of the book of Acts. Up to this point we have been learning about the beginning and the growth of the Church in Jerusalem. Literally thousands of people had been won to the Lord in Jerusalem through the ministry of the apostles and others. Now, beginning with chapter 8, we will learn about the church reaching out into Judea, Samaria and even other countries.

That is the way it should be. Jesus commanded them in Acts 1:8 to be witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but also in Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. I believe all churches should be missionary in vision and practice. We do not exist only to minister to ourselves. The Lord established His church to be a missionary force in the world, for Jesus is the Savior of the world (1 John 4:14).

So beginning in chapter 8 we see the beginning of the missionary expansion of the church. And this morning we will see what was involved in the Jerusalem church becoming more of a missionary church. As a result, I hope that we will become more of a missionary church as we give heed to the message of my text. We have made progress since our founding as a church. We are sending out more mission volunteers. We are going into our local community, especially Ettrick Elementary School. Our mission giving has gone from a few thousand dollars/year to over \$95,000 last year. But we can make even more progress.

So let's look into our text and see how God can enable our church to be on mission with Him. Notice first we must:

I. RECOGNIZE FAILURE IN BEING A MISSIONARY CHURCH

The first step in correcting a failure is to acknowledge it. The Jerusalem church did well at reaching thousands of souls for Christ in Jerusalem and the communities close by. But they were slow in reaching out and planting churches elsewhere. The stoning of Stephen probably occurred 4 to 6 years after Pentecost.¹ So after 4 to 6 years the church in Jerusalem was still not reaching out to any significant degree to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Jesus had told them not to depart Jerusalem, but that was primarily to receive the Holy Spirit and establish a witnessing church in that strategic city. Probably within two years they had effectively evangelized the residents of Jerusalem. So there should have been a concerted effort to evangelize Judea and Samaria by the death of Stephen. Yet they had not.

Why did they fail, and why do churches fail to become missionary today?

A. We Fail When We Expect Unbelievers to Come to Us – Up to this point their primary outreach to those outside of Jerusalem was a “come to us” evangelism. That worked on the day of Pentecost (2:5, 9-11). One reason the Lord told them to stay in Jerusalem was because of that location would enable them to witness to tens of thousands who came there from other countries for Pentecost and other pilgrimages, and many were saved when they heard the Gospel. Then in 5:16

¹ Jesus probably died A.D. 30 based on Luke 3:1, etc. (he was born between 6-4 B.C.). Stephen is believed to have died A.D. 34-36. Saul's conversion is normally dated to AD 33-36.

we read that “a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.” I’m sure many of those people were saved. So they felt little need to go out as missionaries. Many were coming to them, and there was so much work to do right there in Jerusalem.

Unfortunately, this is the primary or *only* means of evangelism for most churches. It is one valid form of evangelism (cf. I Cor. 14:23-25). Some who are not yet believers will visit churches for various reasons, especially at Easter and Christmas. If a church is dynamic, some people will come to see what is going on. But “come to us” evangelism or “church building” evangelism is only effective to a small degree. Most people will never visit our church. So we must take the gospel to them. And many people in other countries will never hear the gospel unless we go to them. That is why Jesus began His Great Commission with these words, “Go,² therefore,…” (Mt. 28:19).

B. We Fail When We Prefer the Comforts of Home - I suppose that up to this point things were going well for them in Jerusalem and it was more comfortable to stay. They had a great church. They had great preaching and teaching, great worship, and great ministries, including discipleship and benevolence. Up to this point persecution was limited. No one wanted to leave. But the words of the prophets could easily have applied to them, “Woe to them that are at ease in Zion” (Amos 6:1). When men are “at ease in Zion”, they are prone to grow cold, indifferent, and careless to the point of backsliding.

What about us? Do we prefer to stay in the comforts of home? Are we concerned about the lost? Are we anguishing in prayer over the lost at home and abroad? Are we witnessing, even at home? We have traded our crosses for cushions. We often sit around at ease while the whole world plunges into hell.

So we need to acknowledge any failure on our part in becoming an evangelistic, missionary church and be willing to do something about it. Next, notice with me:

II. ONE CURE FOR THIS FAILURE: PERSECUTION

Last week I shared with you about the martyrdom of Stephen. He was a great Christian, and his death was tragic. His death launched the first major persecution against the church. Yet we are going to see how God used that persecution to scatter the gospel witness into other communities and nations. Now let’s consider first of all:

A. The Greatness of this Persecution - Up to Acts 8, the persecution of the church had been sporadic and limited to the apostles. But in v.1 we read about a “great persecution” that started the very day of Stephen’s death.

It was great for 3 reasons:

1. It Was Broad in Its Participants – It was no longer just the Sadducees that were persecuting the church. They opposed the church because of the preaching of the resurrection, which they did not believe in. But now the Pharisees were also persecuting the church. They began to sense that the church was turning from the Jewish traditions that they considered so important.

2. It Was Broad in its Scope – The persecution was no longer directed against the apostles and a few other leaders. After the stoning of Stephen, the mob turned their anger against all believers, including women, according to v.3. No doubt this affected their children as well.

² Literally, it is, “Going…”

3. It Was Intense - The word “persecute” means to chase, hunt, pursue. Many Christians were hunted down and captured like wild animals. The most fearsome of the persecutors was Saul of Tarsus, who later became Paul the apostle. He was the first great persecutor of the church. Saul’s activity is described in v.3. His persecution of the Church was so intense that he is described as making “havoc of the church.” The word translated “havoc” (*lumainomai*) is an unusual word which means “to harm, damage, ruin.” It refers especially to the ravaging of a body by a wild beast, or the laying waste of a vineyard by a wild boar. Or think of the destruction of a Hurricane or tornado. In his attempt to destroy the Christian movement, he would enter into every house on a street and “haul” or drag to prison any Christians that he found. In Acts 26:9-11 we also read that he tried to force Christians to blaspheme the name of Christ. He even had a hand in putting some to death.

Saul’s intention was to destroy the Christian faith, as many a man has set out to do. The Communists have tried. The infidels and skeptics have tried. But the only way to destroy the church is to destroy the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ, and that’s not going to happen!

Now why did God allow this widespread persecution against His church? Well, consider with me:

B. The Result of the Persecution - The death of Stephen was very tragic. But our God is able to turn tragedy into triumph. He is able to turn evil into good, as stated in Romans 8:28. Our text is a great example of that. You see, Stephen’s death was the crucial event which started the expansion of the church. Apart from this event, and the great persecution which followed it, the Christian movement might have remained a small sect in Jerusalem, ignoring the missionary imperative of Acts 1:8. Satan tried to wipe out all the Christians in Jerusalem. But Satan played right into God’s plan to send His people out with the gospel.

We see that this great persecution resulted in missionary outreach because:

1. It Scattered the Witnesses – Luke says in v.1, “...they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria...” Persecution did not silence their witness. The persecutors were trying to stamp out the church like you would stamp out a fire. But the only problem with that is that sometimes the coals and sparks scatter and the fire spreads even more. Even so, the persecution simply scattered witnessing Christians into many other areas. It caused them to do under duress what Christ had told them to do voluntarily. Luke no doubt considered the dispersion to be very significant. He could have used a general term for scattering, but chose instead to use a word (*diaspeiro*) which means to scatter as seed is scattered on the ground.³ As Luke looked back on the event, he must have considered the scattering to be a providential event. The people went as missionaries more than as refugees. They didn’t flee to hide, but they probably saw the persecution as an opportunity to share the good news of Christ elsewhere. Long ago Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

The providence of God was involved in another dispersion, and that was the Jewish dispersion. The Jews had failed to be a missionary nation. So several hundred years before Christ was born, the Jews were disbursed all over the Roman Empire. That resulted in the spread of monotheism, and prepared the way for many Gentiles to come to Christ.

But this Christian dispersion was much more missionary in nature. It was probably the Hellenists in the church (the group in which Stephen had been a leader) who were persecuted the most, and they were the primary ones who felt compelled to leave Jerusalem. So they eventually made it back to their home countries, carrying the good news of Christ with them. But by now they

³ This is also the same word that is used in connection with the Jewish dispersion.

were well taught and grounded in the Word. And they were justified in leaving. Jesus said in Mt. 10:23, "But when they persecute you in this city, flee into another."

Do you remember the story of the slave girl of 2 Kings 5? A Jewish girl had been captured and sold as a slave to Naaman, a Syrian general. He was afflicted with leprosy, and so this little girl told her master's wife of the prophet of Israel that could heal him of his leprosy. Through her bad circumstances she became a missionary for the Lord. Naaman became a believer in the God of Israel after he was healed (2 Kings 5:15).

Likewise, when Paul was put in prison in Rome he stated in Philippians 1:12 that what happened to him resulted in "the furtherance of the gospel." A number of prison guards were saved.

Whenever God moves you to a new location, or to a new job or school, you should consider His purpose, to place you where He needs a witness for the gospel.

But the scattering would have succeeded in hurting the Christian Church if it were not for the fact that:

2. It Brought Out Greater Commitment - The fire of persecution gets rid of the dross in our lives. The commitment of Stephen, even unto death, probably set a fire in the hearts of his fellow believers, as the deaths of other martyrs have. And when persecution began against the rank and file of the Christian church, and even against women, they had to stop for a moment and evaluate their relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ. Would they deny Him and thus avoid persecution, or would they stand for Christ and be totally sold out to Him? Persecution will either make you cold toward Christianity to avoid persecution, or it will set you on fire for Christ. Perhaps for the first time these Christians had to join their Savior in taking up the cross. He suffered for me, so I will suffer for Him. But apart from persecution, too many of us are "lukewarm."

What about you? Has being a Christian ever cost you anything? Has it cost you a friend? Has it cost you a job? Do you have enough commitment to Christ to make sacrifices for Him?

3. It Gave Opportunity to Witness - Stephen was persecuted unto death, but what an opportunity he had to witness in the midst of being persecuted. He had the opportunity to witness to 70 rulers of Israel. He gave a great witness at the time of his death. The way he reacted to persecution was a great testimony to the grace of God.

In Acts chapter 16 we see another example of this. Paul and Silas had been beaten and put in prison. Well, how did they react? They sang praises unto God and prayed no doubt for their persecutors. And they had a tremendous impact on the others in the jail and on the jailor himself, who was saved as a result of their witness. No wonder the persecution did so much good for the church!

What will it take to make us more missionary? Do we need to suffer persecution? I believe that persecution is coming even to believers here in America. We don't want it, but God will use it for good, you can be sure of that!

So we have seen from our text the failure of the church to be missionary and the providential cure. Now let us see:

III. THE EXERCISE OF EVANGELISM & MISSIONS

When they were thrust out of Jerusalem by persecution, they certainly practiced what it is to be a missionary. Luke says in v.4, "Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word." What a great statement of the missionary thrust of the early church! They were obedient to God, sharing the gospel wherever they went. God used persecution to get His church to do what they should have been doing all along.

Based on this verse I want to answer three important questions:

A. Who Should Engage in Missionary Service? We can find the answer from the example of the early church.

1. Not Just the Preachers – Notice in the last of v.1, “they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” That seems odd. Perhaps they did not even try to run the apostles out of town or put them in prison. Could it have been because of Gamaliel’s advice (5:34-40), or the bold courage of the apostles? Perhaps it was God’s will that they stay right there in Jerusalem. Jerusalem would continue to be a great place to witness to Jews who came there from all over the world. There were still some believers in the city who needed a shepherd. They also needed to maintain the home base for the enlarging sphere of the Church (Judea and Samaria). Furthermore, there were still others in Jerusalem who needed to be evangelized. Perhaps these “devout men” (v.2) who buried Stephen were pious Jews who were not yet Christians,⁴ but who felt a great injustice had been done. Such men could be won to the Lord if they stayed in Jerusalem. Who then went?

2. The Lay People of the Church - From v.4 we see that everyone who was scattered preached the Word, and that was most of the church except the apostles. Most likely the persecution was especially against the foreign Greek-speaking Jews. Without any special status as ordained missionaries, they carried their faith with them; they spoke of it wherever they found themselves.

Now don’t get too hung up on the word “preached.” You may be thinking to yourself, “They must have been preachers. But I am *not* a preacher.” Well let me explain the meaning of the word. It is not that all Christians preached as I am doing now. There are two words translated “preached” in vs. 4 & 5. In fact, there is a contrast in the two words. V.5 uses the Greek word that refers to public proclamation, like a herald (*kerusso*). I do not believe that God intends for every Christian to publicly preach the gospel. But the word used in v.4 is the word that simply means “to tell the good news” (*euaggelizo*). I like the HCSB translation, “So those who were scattered went on their way proclaiming the message of good news.” So the word has nothing to do with the manner of speaking, but rather it refers to the content of speaking or the message. Some of those who were scattered did publicly preach in the open air or to an audience gathered in a building. Stephen did so, in later in chapter 8 we will see that Deacon Philip preached. But I believe that most shared the good news in a conversational way to individuals or to small groups. I can imagine them meeting someone and saying, “Have you heard about Jesus of Nazareth?” Then they would tell the Gospel. That is the example of the early church.

Suppose your neighbor’s house caught on fire. Someone was trapped on the second floor. You have an extension ladder that you could bring over to help rescue your neighbor from burning to death. But imagine that you say, “I’ll not get involved. I’ll just call the professionals to come help. That’s what they’re paid to do.” Would that be right? Yet that’s what Christians do all the time spiritually speaking.

Now I do believe that it is God’s will for every Christian to share the gospel, at least to some degree. Do you realize that lay people can be more effective in reaching people for Christ than preachers? Some people are suspicious of preachers. They question our motivation. They think we are just out for converts, and we’re just after people’s money. So they are more open to the witness of a layperson. Even the apostles started out as lay people, mostly common working men.

⁴ In Acts 10:2 we are told that Cornelius was "a devout man."

Not one Rabbi was selected by Jesus to become an apostle. One layman understood this when he said, “My main business is to evangelize; I sell shoes to pay the bills.”

Our Southern Baptist mission agencies have many opportunities for laypeople to go on mission for Jesus. Our church will help you with the cost of going if need be. You just need to be willing to go.

B. Where We Should Engage in Missionary Service? Well, v.1 tells us that the primary areas to which they were scattered were the regions of Judea and Samaria. We know from Acts 9:31 that they also went and established churches in Galilee. But v.4 gives us another clue as to where they told the good news of Jesus Christ. There we read that they “went everywhere” preaching the word. The word translated “went everywhere” is literally “passed through” (*dierchomai*). Wherever they passed through, they shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So they that were scattered passed through the regions the Judea and Samaria preaching the Word. As they were passing through cities, escaping persecution, they shared the good news to everyone along the way!

We, too, need to share the gospel and plant churches here in Virginia and America. If God moves you to another community, or another state, consider if God wants to use you to reach new people for Christ.

Thirty-one years ago I had no plans of leaving Georgia. Yet God used a difficult situation that I was facing to make me open to accepting a call from this church in Virginia. I believe God was in it.

Then they even went to other countries! In Acts 9:2 we see that believers had established a church in Damascus, Syria. Now look over to 11:19, “Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch....” The areas were further north or northeast of Judea.

We, too, need to share the gospel and plant churches in other countries, especially where there is very little gospel witness. Soon, our Acts 1:8 Team will plan an international mission trip for 2019. Will you be willing to go?

The conclusion is very clear: They took their Christianity with them. Do you take your Christianity wherever you go? Too many have moved, but have left their church membership back where they used to live. [Apply to college students]. Your presence here today is commendable, and hopefully indicates a desire in your heart to please God, but when you leave this place today, are you going to take your Christian faith with you to school, or to work, or to wherever you go? You can't separate Christianity from your daily life.

C. Why We Should Engage in Missionary Service? I know being a witness and being a missionary is difficult and costly. There are several reasons:

1. Appeal from Above – We have the command of Jesus in the Great Commission of Mt. 28:19-20 to go and make disciples, even in other nations. He is seated at the right hand of God. He is Lord, and we must obey Him. Why should we go to the nations? John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

2. Appeal from Below – Remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Hear the words of the rich man in hell saying to Abraham, “I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment” (Lk. 16:27-29).

3. Appeal from Without - Look at the needs of so many people. In Mt. 9:36 we read, “But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.” Jesus taught that men and women apart from Him are lost. People are longing for some meaning and purpose in life. They are longing for the love that is found in God and among God’s people. They are longing for forgiveness and inner peace. The need is there. If we share the Gospel, they can find what they are longing for. They can be rescued from hell.

4. Appeal from Within – We should have an inward compulsion to witness from the Holy Spirit. Jesus said in Acts 1:8, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me....” Have you ever had an inward leading to speak to someone about the Lord? I’m sure you have if you are indwelt by the Spirit.

Response: You can respond positively to this message in several ways:

A. Become trained as a witness. Engage in lifestyle witnessing, and as you go. At least to learn how to share your personal testimony.

B. Do Evangelistic Visitation and Hospitality – Many people are more likely to witness if they engage in intentional witnessing. We have too few from our church engaging in evangelistic visitation. If you are not willing to witness locally, you are not likely to witness elsewhere. You can also witness through hospitality. Invite someone over for a meal or fellowship. Take someone out to eat. What an opportunity that gives you to witness.

C. Commit to Mission Service, either short-term or long-term. Is there a young person who is being called to become a career missionary? Who else will volunteer to be trained in the disaster relief ministry? What an opportunity that ministry gives to witness! Sign up for any mission trips that we offer.

D. Support of the work of this church and our Southern Baptists Mission agencies through the mission offerings. Also give prayer support. The \$8000+ that we gave to the North American Mission offering is no small amount.

Will you make one or more of these commitments to the Lord? [Review].

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text); Warren W. Wiersbe, “*Be*” Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2: Acts* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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