



GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

The Great Persecution of the Jerusalem Church

Acts 8:1-8

June 17, 2007

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- ❑ On Sunday, January 8, 1956, on the banks of a small river in the jungles of Ecuador, five young missionaries [Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, Roger Youderian] were savagely killed by a group of native Auca Indians – a group they were attempting to reach with the Gospel Message of Christ.
- ❑ Although to much of the world, this loss of life seemed senseless and ‘for nothing’, their sacrifice caused the Gospel message to spread well beyond the jungles of Ecuador; and their testimony encourages and strengthens millions of Christians even to this day, some 51 years later!
- ❑ Interestingly, the five men had weapons with them in their airplanes, yet chose not to use them when attacked. The reason was that, according to Jim Elliot, the men knew they would be with the Lord if they were killed; however, they also knew where the Aucas would be if they killed them in self-defense.
- ❑ After their tragic deaths; however, many in the Auca tribe came to a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, to include those who actually murdered the five missionaries. This may never have happened had it not been for the deaths of these men.
- ❑ Nate Saint, prior to his death, wrote:

As we weigh the future and seek the will of God, does it seem right that we should hazard our lives for just a few savages? As we ask ourselves this question, we realize that it is not the call of the needy thousands, rather it is the simple intimation of the prophetic Word that

there shall be some from every tribe in His presence in the last day and in our hearts we feel that it is pleasing to Him that we should interest ourselves in making an opening into the Auca prison for Christ. [taken from *Through the Gates of Splendor*, by Elisabeth Elliot]

- As was the case with the five missionaries, and many centuries earlier with Stephen, that which may at first seem to be a tragedy is often the means God uses to accomplish His gracious, sovereign will!

I. Stephen's Death Sparks a Great Persecution

- In **Verse 1**, Luke writes, 'Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.'
 - Luke had already stated, in [Acts 7:58](#), that during the stoning of Stephen, 'the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.'
 - Saul was the Jewish name that the young man was given; however, the world would later know him best by the Roman form of his name, *Paullus*, or Paul.
 - Interestingly, in Romans 11:1 and Philippians 3:5, Paul claims to have been from the tribe of Benjamin ['...a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.'].
 - This would make perfect sense, given that the first king of Israel was also from the tribe of Benjamin and was named Saul. Certainly his parents had named their son after the most well-known member of their respective tribe.
- Then, Luke states, 'And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.'
 - There very day that Stephen was [illegally] stoned, 'a great persecution began against the church...'
 - Luke's statement that 'all scattered...except the apostles,' seems to indicate that this persecution was directed *primarily* at the Hellenistic Christians in Jerusalem.
- Interestingly, **Luke directly connects the death of Stephen with the persecution of the church.**
 - It seems that it was the stoning death of Stephen that sparked the great persecution of the church.
 - It was as though the death of Stephen was not enough; [through the trial and death of Stephen] the Jewish officials had acquired an insatiable thirst to persecute members of this new movement.

- John Calvin wrote, ‘For Satan, who is the father of all cruelty, doth first take from them all feeling of humanity when they are once imbrued with innocent blood; that done, he stirreth up in them an unquenchable thirsting after blood, whence those violent assaults to commit murder come; so that when they have once begun, they will never made an end with their will.’
- So it is with our own sin. **Sin begets sin.** It never satisfies; and left unchecked, sin leads to deeper, more continuous patterns of sin.
- **Verse 2** states, ‘Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him.’
 - John Gill writes, ‘...it is an instance of great boldness and resolution, and especially at this time...[for] Jewish rule forbade lamentation for those that died as malefactors...’
 - According to the Mishnah, *Sanhedrin 6:5-6*, funeral services were prohibited for convicted criminals.
 - Thus, in the midst of this ‘great persecution’ the burying of Stephen and the ‘loud lamentation over him’ demonstrated a bold protest against the Jewish establishment.
- Then, after acknowledging Saul’s agreement with Stephen’s death, Luke writes, in **Verse 3**, ‘But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.’
 - When describing Paul’s persecution of the church, Luke uses the Greek word *lumainomai*, translated, ‘ravaging.’
 - This is the only place in all of the New Testament that this word appears. It literally means, ‘to destroy,’ ‘to ruin,’ or ‘to damage.’
 - In extra-biblical literature, *lumainomai* refers to wild beasts, such as bears, lions and leopards tearing at raw flesh. It also used as a military term referring to the destruction of a city.
 - William Barclay calls the use of the verb *lumaino* a reference to ‘a brutal and sadistic cruelty.’
 - This account by Luke is fully consistent with the words of Paul throughout his epistles.

Galatians 1:14: ‘and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.’

Philippians 3:4-6: ‘although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.’

- Furthermore, it was this ‘great persecution’ that fulfilled the words of Christ in the Gospels:

John 15:20: ‘Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.’

John 16:2: ‘They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.’

- Yet, because Saul was a persecutor of the Church; because he did have blood on his hands, is the very reason why he understood so well the concept of God’s grace.
- Paul knew who he was apart from Christ; he was intimately familiar with his sins; he knew what he deserved.
- However, he also knew what he had received: grace upon grace through the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Galatians 1:13: ‘For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it;’

1 Corinthians 15:9: ‘For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.’

1 Timothy 1:13: ‘even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief;’

- Until one, like Paul, understands how wicked he is, how sinful apart from Christ, he will never fully understand his desperate need for a Savior as well as the miraculous nature of the grace which brought all who believe from death to life.

Ephesians 2:1-9: ‘And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.’

II. The Persecution in Jerusalem Scatters the New Believers

- Luke writes, in **Verse 1**: ‘...and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.’
 - The direct result of the stoning of the Stephen was the ‘great persecution’ of the church; the direct result of the persecution was the scattering of believers throughout Judea and Samaria.
 - This verse powerfully demonstrates the fulfillment of the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8: ‘...and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria...’
 - The Gospel had already spread throughout Jerusalem. Now, it was spreading into Judea and Samaria, just as Christ had said [‘...you **shall** be My witnesses...’].
 - In God’s providence, He always ordains the ends, and He always ordains the means as well. In the case of the immediate fulfillment of Acts 1:8, the means of its fulfillment was the persecution of the church in Jerusalem.
- Not only was the spreading of the Christians through persecution the fulfillment of Acts 1:8, but it was also, in a very real sense, a demonstration of God’s grace.
 - Through the persecution of the Jerusalem Church, God was graciously taking the focus of the early believers off of Jerusalem, with all of its ‘sacred’ buildings, sites, and rituals, uprooting them from this world, and turning their eyes heavenwardly to Christ Jesus.

‘Jerusalem and the temple now begin to fade from view, as Christ calls his people out and accompanies them.’
John Stott

- God was uprooting his people from the trappings, the prison, and the charming things of this world.
- Also, God had providentially prepared his people for this ‘scattering’, as seen in Chapter 2:

Acts 2:44, ‘And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.’

And Chapter 4:

Acts 4:32-35: ‘All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.’

III. The Scattered Believers Proclaim the Gospel

- In **Verse 4**, Phillip states, ‘Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.’
- The word translated ‘scattered’ comes from the Greek word (*diaspeiro*) for ‘seed.’
- Just as seed is scattered and grows where it lands, so the seed of the word of God grew as it was scattered from Jerusalem.

1 Peter 1:23 states, ‘...for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.’

- Tertullian [155 – 230 A.D.] said, ‘The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.’
- Therefore, the death of Stephen led to the persecution of the Church in Jerusalem; the persecution of the church in Jerusalem led to the scattering of the believers into Judea and Samaria; and the scattered believers preached the word.
- What is certain is that what Satan meant for evil, God meant for good. Just as Joseph told his brothers in **Genesis 50:20**: ‘You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.’
- Notice, Joseph does NOT say, ‘You intended to harm me, but God was able to use it for good.’ In other words, the very actions that Joseph’s brothers took were the means that God had **always intended** to use to reveal His will and save many lives.
- So it was with the persecution of the Church. In the midst of Saul’s ‘ravaging’ of the church, God was working to accomplish His purpose. So it is with us today in the midst of our own personal trials and difficulties. As the Apostle Paul later states: ‘And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.’
- ‘What is plain is that the devil (who lurks behind all persecution of the church) over-reached himself. His attack had the opposite effect to what he intended. Instead of smothering the gospel, persecution succeeded only in spreading it.’
John Stott

- Luke states, in **Verse 5**, that ‘Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.’
 - The phrase, ‘the city of Samaria,’ would be a reference to Sebaste, the capital of Samaria. This city was rebuilt by Herod the Great and named after Caesar Augustus. However, this is most likely not the city referenced here.

- It is quite possible, even likely, that the reference here is to the city of ancient Shechem, at the base of Mt. Gerazim.
- Yet, in that city, Philip ‘began **proclaiming** Christ to them.’ The Greek word *kerusso*, translated ‘proclaim’ literally means to ‘proclaim publicly,’ or ‘herald.’ Philip, here, becomes the first missionary to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentile world; and he does so, as this word indicates, publicly and boldly.
- ‘But now he [Luke] introduces the verb *kerysso* (‘to herald’) in relation to Philip’s proclamation of Christ (5), and popularizes the verb *euangelizo* (‘to bring good news’)...This is a salutary reminder that there can be no evangelism without an evangel, and that Christian evangelism presupposes the good news of Jesus Christ. Effective evangelism becomes possible only when the church recovers both the biblical gospel and a joyful confidence in its truth, relevance and power.’
John Stott

- Notice, as well, the *essence* of Philip’s proclamation: He was ‘proclaiming **Christ**.’
- John Calvin write, ‘When [Luke] said that Philip *preached Christ*, he signified that the whole sum of the gospel is contained in Christ.’
- **In other words, Christ is the Gospel.** There is no Gospel apart from Christ. As we often say about Christ at GRBC: ‘He not only reveals the Gospel, He is the Gospel.’

1 Corinthians 2:1-2: ‘And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.’

- By ‘preaching Christ’ John Gill states, they were proclaiming ‘that Christ was come in the flesh, that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, and that he was the Son of God, and the alone Savior of men; who by his obedience, sufferings, and death, had wrought righteousness, procured peace and pardon, and obtained eternal redemption for his people; and was risen again, and ascended into heaven, and was set down at the right hand of God, where he ever lived to make intercession, and would come again a second time to judge both the quick and the dead.’

- Yet, interestingly, Philip is proclaiming Christ, not to the Jews, but to the Samaritans. The half-breeds. The heretics. Those who were, in many ways, worse than the Gentiles.
- Therefore, Philip’s trek into Samaria to proclaim the Gospel represents a bold step in His willingness to obey the words of Christ.



- ❑ The great schism between the Jews [of Judea] and Samaria began centuries prior to the birth of Christ. The first indication of the division appears to be traced back to the isolation of Judah from the other tribes of Israel during the ‘settlement period’ in Deuteronomy 33:7.
- ❑ Following the death of Solomon in approximately 930 B.C., civil war divided the Northern ten tribes [Israel, with the capital of the city of Samaria] and the Southern two tribes [Judah, with the capital city of Jerusalem]. Although some attempted to reconcile Judah and the other tribes, to include Samaria [such as Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 30:1-11) and Josiah (2 Kings 23:21-23)], the division between the North and the South only widened.
- ❑ As the division deepened, the Northern Kingdom drifted sharply into idolatry. As a result, in **722 B.C.**, the city of Samaria, and the Northern Kingdom, fell into the hands of the Assyrians under Shalmaneser V (2 Kings 17:1-6; 18:9-12).
- ❑ Many of the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom were resettled into other foreign lands (2 Kings 17:6). Also, Assyria [consistent with their manner of ‘conquering’] relocated peoples from other conquered lands into the land of Israel [the Northern ten tribes] (2 Kings 17:24). This, naturally, caused the people of Northern Kingdom of Israel to intermix with the foreign nations. This further caused a virtual destruction of a nationalistic, ethnic identity for those in the Northern ten tribes.

‘When the Assyrian army had overthrown Samaria and carried the Jews of the northern kingdom away to Assyria, some Jews were inevitably left behind. These soon intermarried with the foreigners who had been settled in Samaria in their place, which made the Samaritans both ethnic and religious half-breeds, and they soon compounded the problem by setting up a rival temple on Mount Gerizim. This was prohibited in the Old Testament, but the Samaritans solved the problem by rejecting the Old Testament except for the first five books.’ James Montgomery Boice

- ❑ Furthermore, this intermixing and intermarrying caused these ‘half-breeds’, later known as Samaritans, to embrace foreign, false gods. **2 Kings 17:33** states, ‘They feared the Lord and served their own gods according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had been carried away into exile.’
- ❑ Later, in 586 B.C., the Southern Kingdom, Judah, was carried off into Babylonian exile; the temple and the city of Jerusalem laying in waste. Following the Decree of Cyrus the Great, the Jews were free to return to their homeland, rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple.
- ❑ However, following their return from Babylonian exile, the Jews would not allow the Samaritans to help rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:1-3).
- ❑ It was not until the 4th Century, B.C. that the division between the Jews and Samaritans hardened to the point of becoming irreparable, as the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerazim and rejected the authority of the Old Testament [with the exception of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible)].
- ❑ The Samaritan Temple on Mt. Gerazim was destroyed by the Hasmonaean ruler John Hyrcanus I (134-104 B.C.) when he conquered Samaria and made the Samaritans subservient

to the Jews. However, when Rome conquered Jerusalem in 63 B.C., the Samaritans were freed from Jewish control.

- Following the Roman conquest of Jerusalem, the Samaritans continued to worship in their own unique way, centered at Gerazim [such worship, without an actual Temple, continues to this day for the Samaritans at Mt. Gerazim]. Further, they waited for the *Tabeb* or ‘restorer’, a prophetlike Messiah, spoken of in Deuteronomy 18:15-19, who they believed would restore true worship on Mount Gerazim.
 - This is why, during her conversation with Jesus in John 4:24, the Samaritan woman said, ‘Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet [the *tabeb* possibly]. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain [Gerazim], and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men out to worship.’ [vv.19-20]
- However, the great tension, indeed, hatred, between Judea and Samaria continued well into the first century. Read Luke 9:52-53; John 4:9; 8:48.
- **Yet, Philip’s proclamation of the Gospel to the Samaritans demonstrates the universality of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Certainly, this does not mean that everyone will be saved [the Scriptures are clear on this point]; however, every individual, without exception, regardless of tribe or tongue, is in desperate need of the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. In this sense, the Gospel is indiscriminate; it does not distinguish between race or nationality.**

IV. The Work of the Gospel Results in Great Rejoicing

- Verses 6-7 state, ‘The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed.’
 - The signs and wonders which Philip performed served to authenticate, to validate, the truthfulness of his testimony. In other words, the signs and wonders pointed directly to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - As Philip healed individuals of unclean spirits, Luke states that ‘they were coming out them shouting with a loud voice.’ It is quite likely that they were shouting in rage, protest, and even torment as they are confronted with the truth of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - Furthermore, the physical, temporary healing, at the hand of Philip only pointed to the greater healing, the spiritual, eternal healing through the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- This account most certainly underscores one of the great paradoxes in all of Scripture: the foolishness of Gospel preaching accomplishes the eternal purposes of the One true and Living God.

- Luke concludes this section, in **Verse 8**, stating, ‘So there was much rejoicing in that city.’
 - ‘Their joy came not just from physical deliverance from diseases, or spiritual deliverance from demons, but from complete deliverance from sin through the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.’
John MacArthur

This passage began with a ‘great persecution’ and it ended with ‘much rejoicing.’

- This further demonstrates Christ’s promise, in John 16:20: ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy.’
 - In other words, God will not replace your weeping with joy; but, rather, He will turn, transform, your weeping into joy. The very object of your weeping will become the object of your joy. [Consider how the Cross bears witness to this truth.]
- ❖ God’s sovereign hand is powerfully evident throughout this entire passage. The stoning of Stephen leads to the Persecution of the Jerusalem Church; the persecution of the Jerusalem Church leads to the scattering of believers beyond Jerusalem; the scattered believers proclaim the Gospel message of the Lord Jesus Christ; the proclamation of the Gospel message leads to great rejoicing!

Romans 5:1-5: ‘Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.’