

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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HOW THE GOSPEL WAS SPREAD

Acts 8:1-8

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There are three points to my message today:

- Persecution led to scattering.
- Scattering led to more Gospel-spreading.
- Gospel-spreading led to joy.

In my last message from the book of Acts, I spoke about the stoning of Stephen and the triumphal sermon he gave that made the Sanhedrin angry. It is indeed a powerful message, and all Christians should be familiar with the content of Acts, chapter 7. I closed the message telling you about a man named Saul who stood there watching and approving of their killing of Stephen. Saul will come up again later on chapter 9.

1-PERSECUTION LED TO SCATTERING

SCRIPTURE: Acts 8:1

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

EXPLANATION: It is part of our Christian nature to gather together. We use the word fellowship a lot. We have various fellowships of different kinds... because we like to be together. We have a common denominator that binds us together, and he is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Among Christians, we should feel safe and have an ongoing sense of security.

But it is not meant to be that Christians never spread out. A few weeks ago, we looked at Acts 1:8: *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.”

I am reminded of the Mount of Transfiguration. In Luke 9, some of the disciples observed a supernatural happening. Jesus met with Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah had been dead for centuries. The disciples thought they should build shelter. But the scripture says they didn't know what they were talking about.

It makes sense that the disciples wanted to live in the perpetual state of bliss and amazement that they encountered, but it wasn't meant to be. The Lord had work for them, and their time at the Mount of Transfiguration was only temporary.

APPLICATION: I think of Christian groups that are exclusive. I've never understood that. They say they have the truth but make no effort to reach out to the world. I've asked a few of them about their missionary outreach, and they don't have much to say.

Listen, folks, the Gospel message is not intended AT ALL to be held exclusively by any group of believers. It is meant to be spread.

Acts 1 said they were to spread the Gospel to Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the earth, but it did not say what the circumstances would be.

ILLUSTRATION: Believers are scattered for various reasons:

- Some might have to move because of job relocation.
- Some might have disagreements, so they split up and create new works.
- Others might have a missionary call on their lives to create new works.
- And some, in a way we in America have not experienced, are scattered because of persecution.

Take, for example, the North Koreans. The persecution inflicted upon them is just awful. The regime will not only punish the person found practicing Christianity but the extended family as well.

We must remember the persecuted church. We've learned they are highly encouraged when they find out that the outside world knows about them and is

praying for them. I have a magazine here called the Voice of the Martyrs. I'll mail you a copy if you will simply ask. Inside there is a map of the persecuted church around the world, with most places being in Africa and Asia, but there are some places in Central and South America as well.

In our story today, Christians were scattered, and now we see the result:

2-SCATTERING LED TO MORE GOSPEL-SPREADING

SCRIPTURE: Acts 8:2-4

Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

EXPLANATION: We see that Stephen was properly buried. Saul had a lot of clout and no doubt had plenty of supporters as he tried to destroy the church.

Acts 8:1 is the fulfillment of Acts 1:8. Believers were now scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. It was Tertullian, one of the Early Church Fathers of the second century, who said “the blood *of* martyrs is the seed of the Church.”

The goal of religious persecution is to stop the spread of the Gospel. Think about it. Those who hated hearing Stephen's sermon, the ones who put their hands over their ears and yelled so they would not hear him... they thought the answer to stopping the spread of such a message was to kill the speaker. But what we learn in chapter 8 is that the opposite happened. The Christians fled persecution and shared Stephen's message all over the place. You see, persecution might make some cower down, but historically we've learned that those who are persecuted are overcome with an overwhelming boldness and they cannot remain quiet.

Here is what Saul did not know but would later learn: The church cannot be destroyed. Did you hear me? The church cannot be destroyed. Yes, you can drive through the countryside and see numerous old, decaying churches that have been closed for decades. You can drive through towns and find churches that have been converted into wedding chapels and restaurants. But these examples do not mean

the church has been destroyed. Those are just buildings. It is impossible to destroy the real church.

ILLUSTRATION: I hear more talk today about investments than ever before. It's not uncommon to see people buying and selling stocks from their phones. What was once left to day traders with expensive commissions is now something that high schoolers can do while sleeping late on snow days.

But the big question remains the same as yesteryear? What's the best investment?

The best investment, I believe, is in the church. You won't get a dividend check and you cannot buy and sell stocks for profit, but your investment in the kingdom of God is eternal. Your investment in the church is an investment that will never fail. The people of the early church figured that out because many of them dedicated their lives to the spreading of the Gospel. The church and its Gospel message can never be destroyed. There may be congregations that are unfaithful, and if so, God will raise up another congregation to continue the work.

The phenomenon we see in Acts is that the more the people were persecuted and scattered, the more the church grew. In other words, Satan's plan to destroy the church and Saul's plan to destroy the church were both failures. Their plans to destroy the church resulted in the COMPLETE opposite! It resulted in the spread of the church.

So, follow me here, we see that the first part of Acts 1:8 is being fulfilled and that is that the Gospel would spread to Judea and Samaria. Later, we'll revisit Acts 1:8 when we see that the Gospel went to the ends of the known world – and we are still living that out today.

Let's review:

- Persecution led to scattering.
- Scattering led to Gospel-spreading.

And next:

3-GOSPEL-SPREADING LET TO JOY

SCRIPTURE: Acts 8:5-8

Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

EXPLANATION: It was just incredible what happened. Samaria was a place of diversity: Long before it was called Samaria, it was settled by the Israelite tribe of Joseph. Samaria had a mix of people who were Israelites, Persians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans. It kind of looked like today's Nashville.

Philip went to a city there and started preaching. I wonder how that happened. Did he find a street corner, or what? What I believe is this: Wherever the Gospel is about to be shared, the Lord has already been there to prepare hearts.

In the case of this city in Samaria, the Lord knew the hearts of the people would be touched if they saw evil spirits cast out and if they saw the paralyzed healed. And Philip the Evangelist arrived on the scene. This Philip is not one of the original twelve apostles but was one of the deacons appointed in Acts chapter 6. I point this out because it would be easy for someone to assume that this was Philip the Apostle who had a special anointing because he was one of the original twelve. But no, he was one of the first deacons. After Stephen was martyred, Philip moved to Samaria and started preaching.

See, you may have thought you had an out by saying you aren't one of the original twelve taught by Jesus himself, in person, and therefore you don't have the words and the passion of the original twelve, but you don't have an out; neither do I.

The only signs Philip performed that we are aware of, at least at this point, is that he cast out evil spirits and healed the paralyzed. We see that he was not criticized by the Pharisees, Sanhedrin, and other religious leaders because there were probably none there. This is what many missionaries tell us, that it is not hard to preach the Gospel in many areas and that it's easier to disciple someone with no Christian religious background at all than it is to do in America.

Well, look what the result was. Here's that word again: JOY! Why is it there so much in the book of Acts! It's not a mistake that it is there! Think of it. Stephen was martyred, the church was persecuted, and then Philip goes and shares the Gospel, casts out evil spirits, heals the paralyzed – and there is lots of joy!

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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