

Persecution and Preaching

Acts 8:1-8

I am thankful that these three weeks I have been away corresponded to a break between two sections in the book of Acts, so that there wasn't a disruption of the flow of the book. The great benefit of expository preaching, moving from beginning to end of a particular book of the Bible, is that you are able to observe and understand the full context of all that is being written. Since Acts is a book of history, it is especially important to keep your focus upon the historical context, which, as we have been studying for many weeks previously, has been the arrest and then murder of Stephen, with nearly the whole of chapter 7 being devoted to Stephen evangelistic defense of his faith and proclamation of the gospel. Stephen's method of evangelism has been to proclaim the experiences of God in relationship to his covenant people throughout history. So we have surveyed huge portions of the Old Testament as Stephen sought to show to the Jewish leaders who were about to kill him what the saving promise of God was all about. And most clearly, who Jesus was as the fulfillment of everything that was predicted and prophesied in the Old Testament.

As we noted, Stephen was not at all concerned about his own safety, but rather about the salvation of those who opposed him. And his warning to them was a rebuke calling them to repentance for their sin.

Acts 7:51 "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, 53 who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."

If you remember, we studied the end of chapter 7, verses 54-60, way back when we first encountered Stephen in chapter 6,

Acts 6:8 "And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel."

After Stephen's lengthy defense, we read,

Acts 7:54 "When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth...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."

They killed him, the first martyr of the church. And we are introduced to "a young man named Saul," who would become the Apostle Paul as we work our way through this book of Acts. Saul is again mentioned as chapter 8 begins this new section in the book.

v.1 "Now Saul was consenting to his death."

The ESV translates it even more bluntly, "And Saul approved

of his execution.” So where do we start today, in this new section of the book of Acts following Stephen’s great defense of the faith? That’s pretty easy. The whole subject of,

I. PERSECUTION.

Beginning with the obvious point, that should be emphasized even for our own benefit,

A. The reality of persecution.

The words are plain and simple, but the reality of what is expressed is profound and life-changing.

v.1 “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.”

So here are these new Christians, new believers. Jesus had been crucified, but the amazing miracle of the resurrection followed. Then the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when the gospel was proclaimed to all the nations of the world. And if you remember, Luke records how many people were actually saved.

Acts 2:40 “And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” 41 Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. 42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

Also,

Acts 2:46 “So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

And almost immediately, there was persecution. “A great persecution.” “Against the church.” Don’t skip over those words, which is easy for us to do when we think of persecution in our country in terms of being ridiculed, or maybe restricted from speaking something as plainly and clearly as we might want. In Acts 8, Stephen is dead! And the lives of others are threatened. It isn’t a stretch to speculate that others certainly died as well. The persecution was so great that the church members had to leave Jerusalem. They had to flee for their lives.

Jesus, of course, had warned his disciples.

John 16:1 “These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. 2 They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. 3 And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. 4 But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them.”

We will see the good effect of that scattering in just a few minutes, but her, I want to stress it’s existence, especially in our context when such persecution on this level is all but absent from our own personal experiences. That may change, and the situation is certainly very different in other parts of the world. I hope you noticed that email I forwarded about ten days ago regarding a man within our denomination who has served in a country in Asia for 32 years. He and two fellow shepherds were interrogated by the police and told they would spend ten days in prison. I can’t even mention his name, more than his initials SF, or the country he is in because this service is live-streamed on the internet, and any connection or identification of him by that country he is in could become life-threatening. That’s persecution! And persecution today is very, very real! In many places, many countries. Christians, brothers and sisters in Christ,

are suffering for their faith, even unto death, and we hear little to nothing about it because our public media hides those stories from us. So please don't miss the reality of what persecution is all about.

John 15:18 "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you, A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."

Notice, then, the intensity of this persecution.

B. The grief of persecution.

The sorrow, the hardship. Luke includes such a description in this inspired account of God's people.

v.2 "And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him."

In God's providence, we grieve today as a church even as we anticipate the memorial service for Don Johnson this afternoon. There will certainly be a sense of lamentation in that. But we will grieve the death of a man who had lived out well his years on earth, who loved the Lord who first loved him, and whose death reminds us all so clearly of the great hope and promise of the resurrection. But here in Acts 8, the grief is magnified by the circumstances. We don't know exactly who was killed, who suffered, but surely it would include men in the prime of their lives, husbands and fathers. Surely this persecution would include mothers, women old and young. And children would certainly be affected. Outwardly, there was no mitigation, no context for comfort. Just suffering under "great persecution" causing "great lamentation." Great grief. And even more broadly, great suffering. Luke's makes a point to emphasize,

C. The suffering off persecution.

Again, don't skip quickly over these words, but let the reality of them sink in a bit.

v.3 "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison."

Havoc is word used by the NKJV. The ESV uses the English word "ravaging." Strong words, with another dictionary uses the phrase "brutal" in its definition—"to treat shamefully or with injury, to ravage, devastate, ruin." The idea is of great suffering, beyond what we would even want to imagine! But that was God's will and purpose for his church, and in various ways today, it still is. It doesn't mean that Satan will win, or that God is weak or powerless. It doesn't mean that God has abandoned you or forsaken you. It doesn't mean that you did something wrong or someone displease God. It certainly doesn't that God's goodness is somehow lacking. It simply means this, "If they persecuted Me, [says Jesus], they will also persecute you."

That is the context and the underlying explanation for Paul's astounding words in,

Col. 1:24 "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, 25 of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God."

So any suffering that you or I might endure, any persecution that we might well experience throughout this age, can be explained by those words: "I...fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church."

And in that context, we are introduced to a greater sense of God's purpose even in allowing the persecution of his church, namely preaching.

II. PREACHING.

That is what this text is all about. This text is not simply a prequel to Foxe's Book of Martyrs, giving us an inspirational biography of human suffering. Rather, this persecution has a purpose, God's purpose. Remember the commission God gave to his disciples just before his ascension,

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."

Thus, what this persecution accomplished was a scattering of God's people so that they could become his witness to the end of the world. So it is that...

A. Scattering is the context of preaching.

Just look at,

v.4 "Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word."

So much of the rest of the book of Acts will follow upon that sentence. "Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word." That's what God called them to do. That's what God ordained for them to do. That's how the gospel would spread to the whole world. That's how the great commission would be fulfilled.

Mat. 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the

end of the age."

Go to all the nations of the world, says God. And not that his people were unwilling to obey, but God provided the necessity for them to go! God scattered them. God sent them out from Jerusalem into the world under world and earthly compulsion—they were scattered. And that is his great purpose, as it remains today. The gospel will go to every nation, to every land, to every people. God will see to it.

In the study of church history, one of the great highlights is what is often called the great century of Christian missionary expansion, the 19th century. That great movement was triggered, in a human sense, by the work and mission of William Carey in India, who is often called the father of the modern missionary movement. Many other missionaries are often noted, such as David Livingstone in Africa and Hudson Taylor in China. Many, many others could be identified. And yet, what we have observed in this past generation, just in the years of my adulthood, is a great decline of a commitment to that missionary endeavor. When I was in seminary, a large number of men were pursuing the sense of call to be foreign missionaries. And opportunities abounded. When I transferred into the OPC twelve years into my ministry, I noted the active commitment of the OPC to foreign missions, and I continued to see new, young men not only sensing the call to foreign missions but actively pursuing it. I continued to see new families joining the missionary efforts of our denomination, whose influence for the gospel around the world far exceeded any relative relationship to our size. Mission stations flourished in many places around the world. Yet now, in 2026, we hear repeatedly of the need for new missionaries. New missionary evangelists. New families willing to spend their lives scattered around the world, scattered in nations where the gospel has yet to penetrate. Within the OPC, we have missionary

openings in multiple places that are fully funded, fully prepared, but no preachers to be found. That has been a repeated emphasis in prayer for the whole of the OPC.

It is not restricted to us, either. Most conservative and evangelical churches are facing the same dilemma, and are praying similarly for God to raise up workers for the harvest. Jesus own words have never been more appropriate,

Mat. 9:37 “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. 38 Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”

Let this text in Acts 8 be of motivation in praying in just that way! Scattering is the context for evangelism. Notice then, in verse 5, where Philip is introduced, that,

B. Christ is the subject of preaching.

v.5 “Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.”

Going back to church history, one of the great disasters in terms of worldwide missions and evangelism was the German and European liberalism of the late 19th century that started to influence and even dominate the churches of our own country, such that the subject of preaching Christ was transformed into the subject of social improvement, the social gospel. And no longer did these words of Paul accurately reflect the preaching of many churches,

1 Cor. 2:1 “And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom,

but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

Clearly, that is my commitment. I was ordained to the gospel ministry 39 years ago this very day, and in good conscience I can use those same words as Paul. “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” I was ordained to preach Christ. To proclaim the gospel of Jesus to you. And I will do that just as long as God gives me breath!

1 Cor. 1:22 “For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

So God ordained a great persecution so that the gospel of Jesus Christ would be proclaimed all over the world. So it must be today.

v.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.”

Then, with apostolic preaching, we the power of God displayed, the supernatural power of God.

C. The miraculous power of God validates preaching.

v.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.”

Let me emphasize this point, as I have before and I will again

in our study of Acts. These demonstrations of miraculous power, these miracles, were the apostolic attestation of the power of God in the gospel itself. These miracles, performed by the apostles who had been with Jesus, validated that preaching as coming for Jesus. Philip, interestingly one of the first deacons along with Stephen, becomes prominent in chapter 8 as a preacher, following Stephen's death. And it was with his preaching, associated with the apostles, that we see these great miracles performed by God, even as we saw during the ministry of Jesus on the earth.

Remember, the Apostles laid the foundation of the church, so it isn't that we expect these miracles to continue, once that apostolic foundation has been laid. But neither do we understand the purpose and significance of the apostolic miracles. That point is made Mose clearly in,

Heb. 2:3 "...how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, 4 God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?"

So the gospel was first spoken by Jesus himself. Then it was confirmed by the apostles who had been with him, and God gave himself provided "signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will" in order to bear witness to the truth and authority of the apostolic gospel.

So we read at the very end of Marks' gospel in the NKJV, Mark 16:19 "So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. 20 And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen."

We also read at the day of Pentecost,

Acts 2:22 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know."

So we don't expect any further apostolic miracles as the gospel is preached, but we do refer back to these same miracles that Luke describes for us in our text. And the description is quite spectacular, to say the least.

v.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."

Now, don't think for a moment that the absence of these special miracles means that God's power is no longer present in the preaching of the word. You won't see me attempting to perform those sorts of miracles today, but you will hear me, today, pointing you back to those very signs and wonders in order to emphasize the supernatural power of God that is at work in the preaching of the gospel.

I should note, sadly, that the very people who stop preaching Christ and substitute the social gospel for the true gospel also deny the power and the reality of supernatural miracles! In other words, liberalism, in terms of theology and doctrine, liberalism denies that reality of supernatural power. Liberalism denies the power of Jesus to save sinners. The same liberal preachers who stop preaching Christ also stop proclaiming the truth of supernatural miracles. They just don't believe in them, and religion becomes natural rather than supernatural.

Not so for Peter. No so for Stephen. Not so for Philip. Not so for the Apostle Paul. And not so for me. For I preach to you, I proclaim to you, the power of God that is made evident in all these miracles, the power of God unto salvation for everyone who would believe. So again,

1 Cor. 2: 4 “And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

So we come to,
v.8 “And there was great joy in that city.”

D. Joy is the result of preaching.

Interesting conclusion, isn't it? Joy is what Luke emphasizes in conclusion. Clearly, it is the joy of salvation. The joy of redemption. The joy of the forgiveness of sins. The joy of the gospel.

Certainly there would be joy in the miraculous healings, but that outward and external joy would be but the symbol of the joy of the heart. The joy of salvation. Paul would later put it this way,

Rom. 5:1 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God! We rejoice in the hope of life, eternal life, even when we confront death, as we do as a congregation today with Don Johnson's memorial service this afternoon. We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God! Even in the midst of trials and struggles. We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

So it is when the gospel is truly preached, when the power of God unto salvation is evident in that preaching. There is great joy! With that note, I will end with the encouraging words of,

Ps. 30:1 “I will extol You, O LORD, for You have lifted me up, And have not let my foes rejoice over me. 2 O LORD my God, I cried out to You, And You healed me. 3 O LORD, You brought my soul up from the grave; You have kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit. 4 Sing praise to the LORD, you saints of His, And give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name. 5 For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; Weeping may endure for a night, But joy comes in the morning.”

May that joy be yours as you hear and believe the gospel preaching today, the preaching of Jesus the savior.