

In this passage, Luke, the author of the book of Acts, is showing how the Lord used persecution to cause the gospel to be preached throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. The book of Acts is about how Jesus through the Holy Spirit caused the early church to grow and spread outward from Jerusalem to Rome. In chapter 1, Jesus is quoted saying to the apostles “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” The book of Acts describes the early church spreading out from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria and as far as Rome. Getting the gospel to the ends of the earth is what the church has been seeking to do ever since. Christianity is fundamentally a missionary religion. And the book of Acts demonstrates that. The church exists for a number of different reasons including the worship of God and the nurturing and building up of believers, but one key reason that the church exists is to proclaim the message of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

Chapters 1-7 in the book of Acts, describe the gospel being preached in Jerusalem and the church both growing and being persecuted. The last part of chapter 7 tells the story of the execution of Stephen who was the first martyr in the NT church. These first 8 verses of chapter 8 describe how the persecution got worse after the martyrdom of Stephen and how as a result of that persecution many believers fled from Jerusalem preaching the gospel as they went. The main point of this section is that the persecution that arose after the martyrdom of Stephen was the reason that the gospel came to be preached throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

The first three verses describe the persecution. I will make four observations about what Luke writes in these verses. The first is that Luke wants to encourage his readers by mentioning Saul’s involvement in the persecution. In verse 1 we are told that Saul approved of the execution of Stephen and in verse 3 Saul is described as being zealously involved in the persecution that followed. Luke writes, “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” The reason that Saul is mentioned here by name is because he will later be dramatically converted and become the most influential Christian ever. Luke is going to tell the story of Saul’s conversion and of his missionary work among the Gentiles. The fact that Saul (who was renamed Paul) was originally a passionate persecutor of the church is a very important part of the story of Paul in the NT.

The fact that Paul was originally a passionate persecutor of the church is an important part of the encouragement of his story. It shows us that God can convert anyone. Saul was the most unlikely candidate for conversion. He was a passionate persecutor of the church, but the Lord turned him into a passionate gospel preacher and theologian. That is encouraging because it shows that God can save anyone. It is this truth that encourages us in our prayers for loved ones who are unbelievers and for unbelievers in general. The reality is that every conversion is a miracle, but a dramatic conversion like that of Saul to Paul makes that point dramatically.

There is another encouragement that flows from the conversion of Saul the persecutor. It highlights the greatness of the grace of God. No one is too great a sinner to be saved. It's true that the regular sins of regular sinners are heinous and God's grace in saving regular sinners is amazing grace. Nevertheless the conversion of someone like Saul still makes the point extra powerfully that the grace of God in the gospel extends to the greatest of sinners. Now matter how terrible our sins are God will welcome and forgive us when we come to Jesus for forgiveness and acceptance.

The second observation that I want to make about the persecution described in the first three verses of Acts 8 is that this was a particularly bad persecution. There is a great variety in the intensity of persecution in the Bible and in the historical experience of the church. When Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:12 that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted," he does not mean that believers will always face the intensity of persecution described in these opening verses of Acts 8. This was bad. Saul was "entering house after house" and he "dragged off men and women and committed them to prison." There is still this level of persecution and even worse in some places in the world today. We read of terrible things happening in North Korea and in parts of Nigeria and many other places. Also quite often it is church leaders who are targeted. Here Saul was dragging men and women to prison.

But Jesus in Matthew 5:11 considers it persecution when unbelievers revile his followers and "utter all kinds of evil against [them] falsely on [his] account." There is a persecution developing in western nations in which Christians will be more and more limited in the kind of jobs they will be able to do because of their biblical convictions. My point is that the kind of persecution described in these opening verses of Acts 8 is on the severe end of quite a wide spectrum of persecutions.

The third observation on the persecution described in Acts 8:1-3 is that even though the death of a martyr is a victory, it is still sad. The death of a martyr is a victory. Stephen dies a victorious death - seeing the glory of God, remaining faithful unto death, knowing that the Lord would receive his spirit the moment he died. In Revelation 2:10, the exalted Christ, says to his people, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." When Paul was contemplating the possibility of his own execution, he wrote "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." He also said in the same context, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Philippians 1:21 & 23).

There are a lot of positive things about dying for a Christian. And yet Acts 8:2 says, "Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him." Stephen was certainly not mourning, but those who loved him and were left behind did mourn. There is this double perspective on death within biblical Christianity. Life as we know it is precious. The death of a loved one is incredibly sad for those who are left behind. We rightly go to great lengths to extend our lives. And yet death for a believer is an entrance into the presence of God. They are truly in a better place. God wipes away all tears. In God's presence is "fullness of joy." (Psalm 16:11)

So there is in biblical Christianity an ambivalence about death. The word “ambivalent” means “having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone.” Being with Christ is far better and yet Jesus assumes that we will go to a physician when we are sick and that we grieve when loved ones die.

There are those who minimize how painful that death is. There are believers who say that we should put all the emphasis on the victory over death that Jesus has won and that we should minimize the grieving. The Bible gives us permission to grieve and it is good and proper that in connection with death we meditate on the seriousness of death and ask the question of whether we are ready to die.

But it is also necessary that we find comfort in and witness to the victory over death that Jesus has won by his death and resurrection. The significance of the death of a believer is radically different than the significance of the death of an unbeliever. There is reason for hope and joy and comfort when a believer dies because we know that he/she is present with the Lord and will one day rise from the dead. Paul expresses the way that Christians should grieve the death of believing loved ones. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13 he tells the Thessalonians “not to grieve as others do who have no hope.” It is proper to grieve the death of a loved one as the people who buried Stephen did, but at the same time there is hope in the face of death because believing loved ones who have died are presently with the Lord in heaven and their bodies will one day be raised from the dead because of the victory that Jesus has won by his life, death, and resurrection.

A fourth observation on these first three verses in Acts 8 is that by his use of the term “church” in verses 1 & 3 he is making the point that the followers of Jesus are the continuation of the OT people of God. The previous mention of the term “church” is found in Stephen’s speech recorded in Acts 7 and there it refers to the OT people of God. In chapter 7:38 in the ESV, Stephen speaks of “the congregation in the wilderness” but the word that the ESV translates as “congregation” in Stephen’s speech is the Greek word that is translated “church” in Acts 8:1 & 3.

And that is significant because by referring to both OT Israel and the followers of Jesus using the word “church,” Luke is making the point that the followers of Jesus are the continuation of the OT people of God. The Jews who did not accept Jesus as their Saviour would dispute that point, but it is a point that Luke in the gospel of Acts is seeking to make. It is one of Luke’s purposes in writing the book of Acts to demonstrate that Jesus is the Saviour promised in the OT and that those who followed Jesus were the new Israel – the renewed Israel – the continuation of the OT people of God. One of Luke’s great purposes in the book of Acts is to demonstrate that the story he tells about the growth and spread of the NT church is a continuation of the story that the OT tells. And the fact that he uses the term “church” to refer both to OT Israel and the followers of Jesus is one of the ways that Luke is making that point.

So 4 observations on verses 1-3. Luke wants to encourage us by mentioning that Saul was heavily involved in the persecution because later on Saul is converted and becomes a great preacher of Jesus Christ. Second the persecution that Luke describes in these verses is rather severe persecution, but not all that counts as

persecution is that severe. Third in the great lamentation over Stephen's death we are given permission to grieve even though the death of a Christian is also cause for joy and thanksgiving because of the hope of the gospel of eternal life and the resurrection of the body. And fourth, we saw how the way that Luke uses the word "church" to refer both to OT Israel and the followers of Jesus is one of the way that he teaches the continuity between OT Israel and the followers of Jesus.

Now we turn to verses 4-8, which describe what happened as a result of the persecution described in the first three verses. Verse 4 says "Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word." Back in verse 1 Luke had written, "they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria."

We saw earlier how Jesus had told his disciples that they were to be his "witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8). In our text Luke is showing his reader, how it was through persecution that the gospel came to be preached in all Judea and Samaria.

This is an example of how the Lord uses evil to accomplish good. Persecution is a great evil. Those who engage in it want to discourage the church from growing and spreading. In many instances persecutors are seeking to destroy the church. That certainly is what Saul was seeking to do. Paul confesses this in Galatians 1:13 where he writes, "I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it." Persecution is a threat to the church. It is a great evil. Christians who suffer under it are being treated unjustly. According to Jesus in the Parable of the Sower, persecution and tribulation are reasons that some who hear the gospel and respond to it later fall away.

And yet here in our text we see the Lord using it to cause the word to be preached in Judea and Samaria. There is no doubt that the Lord was using this persecution to move some of his followers out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria so that they could preach the gospel in those places. The text does not say this explicitly but Luke in Acts has already made the point that the book of Acts is about what Jesus continued to say and do. And he has already quoted Peter as saying that Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). We also know from the story of Joseph, told in the book of Genesis, how God can use evil to accomplish his good purposes. Joseph was sold into slavery by his envious brothers, but after God used that evil act as part of his plan to bring Joseph to the second highest leadership position in Egypt, Joseph could say to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Genesis 50:20).

There is no question that the devil was behind the persecution of Jesus' followers in our text. In Revelation 2:10 the exalted Jesus says to his people, "Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison..." The devil is behind persecution. He uses it to try to destroy the church. And yet as we look at how the persecution in Acts 8 caused many believers to scatter throughout Judea and Samaria preaching the word, we can be confident that we are meant to see Jesus at work behind the scenes using the evil deeds inspired by Satan and carried out by his followers for a good purpose – causing the word to be scattered in Judea and Samaria.

The most significant example of God using the evil of persecution to accomplish good things is the death of Jesus on the cross. That was persecution. It was a great evil on the part of those who were involved. It was the greatest evil ever perpetrated because it was the creature trying to kill its creator. But out of that great evil came and will come the greatest good – the salvation of sinners and the renewal of the creation. And the death of Jesus is a paradigm for how God often fulfills his good purposes – he is so great that he is able to bring good out of evil.

This is a reason for us to worship and praise our God. It demonstrates his power and wisdom that he uses evil that is perpetrated against his people for good ends. It shows the futility of all opposition to God and his purposes. Paul makes this point in Philippians 1:12 when from prison he writes, “I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel....” That is exactly what we see in our text where the persecution of the early Christians served to advance the gospel. Psalm 33:10-11 is an example of the people of God worshipping God for turning the plans of his enemies on their heads. “The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the people. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.”

This is also a great reason for us to be encouraged. There is severe persecution in many places in the world. There is increasing persecution against Christians in the west. And yet none of that threatens the purposes of God for the gospel and for the kingdom and for the church. Jesus will build his church and the gates of hades will not prevail against her. At the heart of God’s saving purposes was the crucifixion of the Son of God. And he will continue to overcome evil with good. And because of that we can face the world with its hatred and its satanic desire to destroy the church with confidence. Our God is so great that he uses evil to further his purposes.

The next point that Luke is making is that regular followers of Jesus were involved in this significant advancement of the gospel. We also read of Philip who was a leader and an evangelist. But it is significant that those who were scattered [and] went about preaching the word” are unnamed regular believers who preached the word alongside Philip who stands out from the rest by being named and his ministry described in more detail. Philip is later on described as “Philip the evangelist” (Acts 21:8). The unnamed people who were scattered and went around preaching the word were church members. And they are an example for us of regular believers being involved in bringing the message of Christ to others in the context of living their lives.

The NT puts quite an emphasis on missionaries and evangelists who are set apart and sent out by the church to proclaim the gospel message. But it also envisions regular believers bringing the word to others as they meet with unbelievers in the course of their lives. Colossians 5:5-6 describe the informal witnessing of regular believers. “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” This is different from an evangelist who has been gifted for evangelism and goes places for the purpose of bringing the gospel.

The witness of believers is more informal and responsive to situations as they develop – taking opportunities as they arise to bring in the word and the gospel.

Certainly the example of these early Christians is an encouragement for us to use the opportunities that God gives us as we live our lives and interact with unbelievers to preach the word. Some of us are better at this than others. Some of us have more opportunities than others. But all of us can look at this example of the members of the early church and consider how we might grow in this area.

Verse 5-7 describe the ministry of Philip. “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.”

Philip is mentioned by name. He was one of the men who was chosen by the church as one who was “of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom,” to help manage the ministry of the early church to its widows when some of them were being neglected. Here we meet him again doing the work of an evangelist. His work of preaching Christ is mentioned separately from the preaching of the word of those who were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. And again we see the importance of people whom God has specially gifted for the work of evangelism or missions.

The crowds paid attention to what Phil was saying. No doubt that was partly because of the signs that he was able to do. Philip was not an apostle, but he was one of those in the early years of the church whose preaching God authenticated by miraculous signs. No doubt the Holy Spirit was active in those who heard. Like the rest of these early chapters in Acts, the Lord blessed the preaching in remarkable ways. The Holy Spirit does not always cause such great interest in the gospel message, but there have been other times in the history of the church when there was great fruit on the preaching of the gospel which we call revival and indeed one of the ways that we can contribute significantly to the mission of the church is to pray that the Lord will send revival to our community and to our nation.

Verse 8 says “So there was much joy in that city.” This is a wonderful fruit in the lives of those who receive the gospel message. It brings joy. Philip preached the Christ and the result of that preaching was much joy in that city. The message of Christ is good news and those who see it as good news and believe in Jesus through it have much reason for joy. Those who believe in Jesus are forgiven all their sins. Jesus paid the penalty for the sins of his people on the cross and because of that those who trust in Jesus are declared right with God. Their debt has been paid. The curse upon them due to their sin has been removed. The burden of guilt is taken away. And they are given eternal life. Jesus did not only die on the cross, he arose from the grave and he shares his resurrection life with those who trust in him. What a reason for joy to consider that death is not the end! – that there is a glorious future for believers beyond the grave! – that we will live forever with God! – that all things will be made new and that death and suffering will be no more!

It is significant that the joy in the city of Samaria was a joy that was experienced in the shadow of persecution. Philip was in Samaria because of persecution in Jerusalem. Those who hear the gospel are warned to count the cost. Jesus tells us that following him involves taking up our cross. That would have been pretty clear to those who heard Philip proclaim Jesus. And yet there was much joy in that city. That is how good the good news of the gospel is. The blessings of salvation in Christ are so great that it is possible to rejoice even in the shadow of persecution or even in the midst of persecution. The person who wrote the book of Hebrews commended them saying, "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one."

The joy that is possible for believers is a very precious thing. It can be experienced even during suffering because the blessings of the gospel are not affected by suffering. There is the present enjoyment of the love of God and there is the hope of unimaginable blessedness beyond this life.

We can experience more of that joy through growing closer to God and through growing in obedience. Paul could write to the Corinthians that he worked among them for their joy (2 Corinthians 1:24). As we think about the joy in the city of Samaria in connection with the proclamation of Christ let us remind ourselves of all the reasons for joy that are ours in Christ and all that he has obtained for us.