

Alderwood Community Church
February 21, 2010

Great Persecution That Yields Great Joy!

Acts 8:1-8

Big Idea: “God sovereignly and strategically scatters His messengers in order to accomplish His mission of seeking and saving the lost.”

Context: Stephen is a man who was full of wisdom. When he spoke with the Jews they were frustrated because they could not stand up against his logical arguments in his presentation of the gospel. So they falsely accused him of blasphemy and hauled him before the religious authorities, the Sanhedrin. Stephen defends the gospel by carefully reviewing the Jews history and God’s sovereign involvement with the nation of Israel. Then, Stephen, lowers the boom, and rightfully points out the Jewish leader’s hypocrisy and guilt in murdering their own Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Read Text: Acts 7:51– 8:8

“On that day a great persecution broke out...” On the day that Stephen was martyred for his faith in Jesus Christ.

At first, Stephen’s death may have seemed pointless. A tragic waste. His ministry seemed to have ended in failure. But God used the anger and wrath of men for his Sovereign purposes.

1. God is Sovereign. (8:1-3)

A. The church is persecuted and scattered. (8:1)

Great Persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem- *Great-* megas, *Persecution-* to chase, pursue and hunt down. *“broke out”* with the ferocity of a sudden storm.

And all except the apostles were scattered- *“And all...”* is probably hyperbolic- since a vibrant Jewish believing church appears in Jerusalem later in Acts. When a significant portion of the church is persecuted, the whole is attacked and affected.

“except the Apostles”- Why were they left behind? 1. Possibly they were too well known to be persecuted. Or 2. They took the risk, feeling their duty to remain in Jerusalem.

“Scattered”, this is an agricultural term used to describe seed that is scattered. The word *Diaspora* is derived from this word. The idea is that the church was *“scattered in order to be planted.”* The question is, who really is behind the scattering? The answer is God. He is the one who was behind placing Stephen in the position that he was in and giving him such wisdom and skills in communication that ultimately frustrated the Jews who opposed him and led to his eventual murder.

God then permitted the persecution of His church in order to fulfill his own plan and determined purpose. Remember what God told the disciples in Acts 1:8, “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” Acts 8:1 is the fulfillment of Acts 1:8!

Appl. Have you considered yourself sovereignly “planted” in your place by God Himself? (At your work, in your neighborhood, at your school, on your team, with your new friend.)

B. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned his death. (8:2)

These men were honoring Stephen. Jewish law permitted burial of one who is executed by stoning, but did not permit mourning. Typically this was a loud wailing that people would do in their process of grieving over a loved one. Their act of public mourning is both defiant as well as a statement that Stephen was righteous or innocent.

C. Saul began to destroy the church. (8:3)

“*But Saul began to destroy the church.*” This word is used only this one time in the N.T. It means to damage or spoil. This word is used in the Greek Septuagint (The Greek translation of the Old Testament) about wild boars that destroy or ravage a vineyard. This term expresses ‘a brutal and sadistic cruelty.’

“*going house to house*”- underscores the seriousness of his quest against the church.

“*he dragged off men and women and put them into prison.*”- He literally, violently captured men and women, and dragged them off to prison and helped secure his victims death.

Acts 9:1 “*Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.*” (22:4)

Galatians 1:13 “*For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.*”

YET “*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.*” Romans 8:28

2. His Gospel is powerful. (8:4-7)

A. The church preached the gospel wherever they went. (8:4)

This verse begins with *men oun* in the Greek meaning “*Therefore, on the other hand*” “*Those who had been scattered*” The church “*preached the word wherever they went.*”

The word “*preached*” means “to evangelize, to preach the Gospel” (5 times in Acts 8) The persecution has the exact opposite effect of its intention- it does not stop the spread but contributed to it.

I think it is significant to note. That when the church is scattered, it’s primary purpose is evangelism. When the church is gathered, it’s primary purpose is edification.

Notice, it is not recorded that the persecuted church sat around and licked their wounds or threw a pity party. Think about it. Many of them were chased away from their homes, leaving behind belongings, family, friends and everything familiar.

Perhaps they had the attitude of the apostles earlier in Acts 5:41, after they were beaten and threatened never to speak in the name of Jesus, “*they left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*”

This is nothing short of having a “*divine perspective*”. It is “having eyes to see and ears to hear”, (1) It is a frame of mind that embraces that God is Sovereign. That all the events in our life that appear to be destructive, harmful, disastrous or incredible losses are part of God’s much bigger plan. (2) It is a frame of mind that engages in His missions of seeking and saving the lost.

Wherever God took them, they proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” Romans 1:16

“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” 1 Peter 3:15

Illus: In 1949 when the Chinese National Government was defeated by the Communists, 637 China Inland Missions missionaries were forced to leave the country. It seemed a total disaster. Yet within four years 286 of them had been redeployed in South-East Asia and Japan, while the national Christians in China, under severe persecution, began to multiply and now total 30 – 40 times the number they were when the missionaries left (the exact figure is unknown).

B. Philip preached the Gospel and performed miraculous signs in Samaria. (8:5-6a)

“Philip went down to a city in Samaria”- We see how God is leading the mission, whether through persecution or in Philip’s case, direct guidance.

The Samaritans were not popular among the Jews, as they were despised for being unfaithful and of mixed ancestry and they were treated as defecting half-breeds. To eat with a Samaritan was said to be like eating pork, their daughters were seen as unclean. Philip obeys and God is fulfilling his plan by literally “taking” his people to share the gospel with the Samaritans.

We see the power of the Gospel as it breaks down the barriers of prejudice.

C. The responses to the power of the Gospel. (8:6b-7)

(1) When they heard the gospel and saw the miraculous signs “*they paid attention to what he said.*” (8:6b) They were “spell bound”, listening with rapt attention.

“*paid attention*”- they were paying very careful attention. Even though God demonstrated His miraculous power through Philip by casting out demons and healing cripples- the emphasis is on the Word of God. The people gave heed to the Word because they saw the miracles, and by believing the Word they are saved.

(2) Evil Spirits came shrieking out of many demon possessed people. (8:7)

(3) Paralytics and cripples were healed (and walking and leaping!) (8:7)

3. His Gospel brings great joy. (8:8)

“*So there was great joy in the city.*” Why? At least 3 reasons:

(1) For the demon possessed: freedom from demonic oppression.

(2) For the crippled and paralyzed: freedom to walk and be self-sufficient.

(3) For all those who believed the gospel: freedom from the guilt of sin.

Both in the Gospels and in the book of Acts Luke emphasizes the joy of salvation.

“*The angel said to them [the shepherds], ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.’*” Luke 2:10-11

“*I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”* Luke 15:7

“*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”* Romans 15:13

Conclusion: God has sovereignly and strategically planted you right where he wants to use you as his messenger to seek and save the lost, by proclaiming that Salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone!