

Now You've Gone and Done It

Acts 8:1-8

By [Billy Dempsey](#)

We have been horrified as we read news weekly of persecution on an unprecedented scale, unprecedented in our day, in the Middle East as ISIS fighters make their advance across Syria and Iraq. And I thought it might be wise for us to take a moment tonight and just look at what God does with our enemy's efforts and draw some encouragement, not just for the crisis of our brothers and sisters in Christ so far away, but also for things that go crooked for us day in and day out - how does God work among us, not in this type of persecution, but what about the crookedness that we find around us? Is there an answer that God might give? I think what we see happening in Acts chapter 8 certainly gives us direction and gives us some kind of help. So before we read from Acts chapter 8 let me direct us to the Lord in prayer.

Father, this is Your Word. You have left us a written record by which we see Your character, Your heart, something of Your purposes in which You plainly declare Your will. So now help us as we pull aside from the day to read Your Word aright and see Your promises kept there and learn what You would have for us. Soften our hearts and open our minds, in Jesus' name. Amen.

I want to start in Acts chapter 8 with the second half of verse 1. Acts chapter 8 follows immediately on the events of Acts chapter 7, the martyrdom of Stephen, and the first part of verse 1 lets us know that Saul of Tarsus approved of Stephen's execution. Let's begin with the latter part of verse 1:

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. 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. So there was much joy in that

city.

Persecution and the Providence of God

You've heard the reports; I won't recount them all here - hundreds, thousands being killed; one church leader in Iraq calling what he witnessed and knew to be happening there at the hands of ISIS soldiers, "genocide." One report noticing here that a hundred thousand Christians have fled from Nineveh which is called one of the heartland cities for Christians in Iraq. That's a hundred thousand people suddenly fleeing with the clothes on their back - fleeing homes, fleeing businesses, fleeing and separated from family and loved ones. It's a wretched, wretched, terrible time. And it's a wretched, terrible time in Iraq and in Syria because those men who formed that ISIS coalition, they are about the destruction of the church. They don't want the church there; they don't want believers there. They will destroy the church in every way possible so that their supremacy can be unchallenged. It's interesting what God does with that kind of malice and hatred. It's interesting that God takes the malice of His enemies - whether we find them in the Middle East, whether we find them in North Korea, whether we find them in China, whether we find them with some level of hatred for the church across the street or on the other side of the office or in the next block - God doesn't give them the last word.

I. The Persecution of the Church

Here's the first general persecution of the church. The church, the apostles had been persecuted. Acts chapter 5 is the first time we see the apostles flogged. Peter and John are flogged and they rejoice that they can bear suffering for Jesus' sake. And of course Acts chapter 7, Stephen is martyred, he's killed, he's the first one to shed his blood for the witness to Christ, the witness to saving faith. And now we have the first general persecution rising up at the very time that Stephen is martyred. And it does not come about so that the church might be hampered, it does not come about so that the church might be bothered or hemmed in. It comes about so that the church might be destroyed. That's the emphasis, that's the desire and the impetus of the religious leadership in Jerusalem; that is why they deputized Saul. They want to facilitate the destruction of the church. And it leads, obviously, to this scattering, this scattering of believers throughout the region of Judea and Samaria. Interesting that that's exactly where Jesus said they would go - "You'll be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and in Samaria." So the scattering of the church follows the pattern that Jesus set in Acts chapter 1, but the point is they're not leaving because it's more comfortable somewhere else; they're leaving everything. They're scattered for trying to save their own lives. They're scattered because Paul, or rather Saul - I want you to look at the language Luke uses - Saul is "ravaging" the church.

First of all, let me point out the tense to you. That's an imperfect tense which means that Saul began ravaging and he continued to ravage. It wasn't as though the religious leadership deputized Saul for a fit. Let's have a quick show. Let's have a quick show of force, of animosity. It was something that began and continued. It was not going to stop until the church was broken. That was Saul's intent; that was the intent of the Sanhedrin - to break the church and remove it as a force. What does it mean to ravage? Derek, in his commentary on Acts, says something very interesting. He said, "This is a strong verb indicating brutal and sadistic cruelty." Listen to what Paul says about his ravaging days as he is making testimony to saving faith in Acts 26 before Agrippa. He says in verse 9 of Acts 26, "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them." That's why Paul, toward the end of his life, the last decade of his life in 1 Timothy, is remembering his days as a persecutor. Paul's conscience, even though cleansed by the blood of Christ, even though fully justified, Paul regretted a blood-spattered past. This is grim. This is bloody. This is ugly. This is horrific. Saul is about the business of breaking the back, taking the life, stamping out the church. As ugly as we've heard of events in Iraq, they were just as ugly in Jerusalem as Saul is heading up the effort to remove the church from Jerusalem.

II. The Scattering of the Church

It's interesting that two times in these opening three verses, or rather these first four verses, the word "scattered" is used. Did you catch that? Did you catch that in verse 1? "They were *scattered* throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria." In verse 4, "Those who had been *scattered* went about preaching the Word." The Greek word is "*diasporao*," which we get our word, "Diaspora," if you've seen that word used - the Jewish Diaspora, the Jews that were scattered throughout the world. That's an agricultural term and it's an agricultural term about scattering to plant. A farmer will *diasporao* his seed. He'll scatter his seed across his field. That's not scattering to destroy; that's scattering to plant. And out of that *diasporao*, out of that scattering, will come a crop, and from a crop a harvest. That's not what the enemies of the church intend; that's what God does. That's what God does with the persecution of His people. They're scattered.

The ones that survive are scattered and they're scattered throughout Judea and Samaria and as they're scattered they do something very interesting. Do you see that in verse 4? "Those who were scattered went about preaching the Word." It's interesting that as God moves among His people they're scattered for their identification with Christ. The church is being ravaged, the church is being scattered as a great heel that's coming down on the back of the church, crushing its life. And it's people scattered. And what do they do? They're quiet about

Christ. "Jesus is the one who got us in trouble. We're going to be quiet about Him so we won't have any more trouble!" No. As they scatter, what do they do? They talk about Jesus in the places that they go. The church never fails to identify who her Savior is. The church never fails to identify who her Lord is, never fails to identify who her bridegroom is. They preach about Jesus. You know the word "preached" there as we read that translation we think in terms of preaching - a preacher standing up and delivering a message. But that's not the best translation of this Greek word. The best translation of this Greek word is "talking, telling." One commentator even used a word, "gossiping the Gospel."

III. The Proclaiming of the Good News

Now in the next verse, "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming" - that's preaching, what we understand. That's a different Greek word. That's proclaiming, that's the *kerygma*, that's the proclamation of the Gospel. That's preaching as we understand it. That's not the word that's used in verse 4. As they scattered, everywhere they go, everywhere they land as refugees, they're talking about Jesus, they're talking about their faith in Christ, they're talking about their Savior - they're talking about Him in the marketplace, they're talking about Him as they go to buy food, they're talking about Him as they make arrangements for their families or what's left of their families for a week's lodging or a night's lodging. They're talking about Him as they make arrangements for some kind of employment. Everywhere they go and all the things that they do, there's conversation about their Savior.

It's interesting, a church historian, Justo Gonzales, who wrote a very readable history of the church - if you've not come across his *Church History*, it's a great readable work. He says this, "Most of the missionary work of the church in the first century was not carried out by the apostles, the apostles who went out and preached as we think of preaching, who offered the proclamation of the Gospel; most of the missionary work was not carried out by them, but rather by the countless and nameless Christians who, for different reasons, from persecution to business, traveled from place to place taking the good news of the Gospel with them." Gossiping the Gospel. Gossiping the Gospel. The scattered Christians talked about Christ, talked about their faith. How did they know what to say? Have you ever wondered that? How did they know what to say? How did they have enough information? We've got great libraries. You've got a greater library in your home of books about Christ and books about the Gospel - how many bound copies of the Scripture do you have, do I have in our homes? They didn't have any of that. You and I - if they could see the books about Jesus that you and I have, and certainly if they could come here and see the books about Jesus in our church library, they would say, "I never knew there ever could be so many books in one spot!" How did they know what to say, other than simply, "I was lost and now I'm found. Jesus saved me." That's enough, and yet there's more needed.

Devoted to Scripture and “Gossiping the Gospel”

You know how they knew what to say? Go back with me to Acts chapter 2. Here's the practice of the church. Verse 42, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Here were people whose practice was, whose habit was, to devote themselves to the teaching of the Word, to make their time subservient to, as much as possible within the confines of daily need and the need to work. When the apostles were teaching and preaching they were there. They were there in the temple precincts as the apostles were opening the Word of God and relating the ministry of Jesus to the promises and the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets. They were made their time subservient to hearing the preaching of the Gospel, the preaching of the whole counsel of God and talking about that in their homes and with other groups of believers as they thought through and talked through together, “What does this mean in terms of everything we've always heard about God and the Law and the sacrifices?” They were devoted. And so out of that devotion to the apostles' teaching they had a body of knowledge. They understood. They understood enough about Jesus to gossip about Him, to talk about Him, to explain Him to Jews and Gentiles across Judea and Samaria.

Are we devoted to the apostles' teaching? Are we ready in the places that we go to give an answer to our faith? Are we ready to gossip the Gospel in the places that God has put us? Philip even went to Samaria. We don't have time to unpack that but it's a useful image to recognize how the Jews and the Samaritans were so at odds with each other. David has been preaching about Jonah and Jonah's sense of superiority - “The grace of God is for the Jews; it is not for the Gentiles.” There's a racism; there's a xenophobia - a fear of foreigners, that keeps him back from answering the call of God. And here's Philip under the leadership of the spirit who weighs right into Samaria and begins to preach the Gospel to people who had been so, so at odds with the Jews. And you see what God does? All that beautiful story of their response in faith. You even see it again in verse 12, “When they believe Philip as he preached the good news about the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ they were baptized, both men and women.” Great joy! God blessed the preaching, both the gossiping and the proclamation of His Word, in the framework of those who would cut the church off.

A Glorious Irony

You see, as Satan through his minions has attacked the church historically and here in Acts chapter 8, he's attacked the church, and this is now his moment to crush the life out of the church, now he's gone and done it. You know that phrase; I know that phrase. That phrase comes from, as a description of things that we do to solve perceived problems and we just make matters worse. Satan has just made matters worse for himself because in his effort to strike at the heart of the church and rid the world of the church, he scattered them. And the

people of God have gone out to the places where they are scattered to talking about the Gospel and preaching the Gospel to any who would listen. As we read the news, as we watch the news and our hearts break for our brothers and sisters in Iraq and the Middle East, in China, in North Korea, let's not fail to pray for them. Let's not fail to join them in their struggle for the Gospel but let's not fail to remember that the enemy has gone and done it. He has, in an effort to solve his problem with the church, he has scattered them and these dear saints are talking about Jesus and gossiping about Jesus and telling everybody that they meet about Jesus as they're scattered. Even as they're fleeing, they're talking about Christ. Let's be encouraged by that, let's be encouraged by this, this narrative from Acts chapter 8, and let's not forget to look out for the places where we can go without fear of persecution and gossip about Jesus.

Let me lead us in a word of prayer.

Help us, our Father, to be people who love the proclamation of the Word and love the telling of the Word. Help us see those places that we can go and talk about Jesus. Help us see the need around us. Thank You for the fact that we can do so without persecution. We do pray for our brothers and sisters in such dire straits. Comfort, strengthen them. Show them and Your enemies who persecute them Your mighty power. Father, how we pray for a great conversion of souls out of the terrible events, out of the scattering, just as we saw in Acts chapter 8. In the subsequent history of the church, so let us see again. Hear us, our Father. We make our prayer in Jesus' name, amen.

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