

# The Church Alive

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

## An Open Door of Opportunity

### Acts 8:1-8

*[slide 02]* 1 Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. 3 But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. 4 Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. *[slide 03]* 5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. 6 The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. 7 For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 So there was much rejoicing in that city.

In preparing today's message, I came across the story of what brought an end to the gladiatorial contests. The year was around 391AD and Rome was supposedly Christianized, yet it forced its slaves and political prisoners to fight in the Coliseums. But there was a monk named Almachius who desperately wanted to stop the brutality, so he headed for the arena. Once the Emperor arrived, the gladiators squared off. That is when Almachius bolted onto the field and raised the cross of Christ. He separated the gladiators and shouted, "In the name of our Master stop fighting!" The entire arena froze and fell silent. But moments later, mayhem erupted and the crowd began stoning Almachius. His body was then beaten to the floor, bludgeoned, and the people were left staring at his corpse. History says a feeling of revulsion sank into the crowd and without further fighting, the people dispersed. Before another contest could convene, the Emperor Honorius issued an edict that forbade all gladiatorial games. And it was all because a monk was willing to become a martyr and let God work for "the good" of others.

As we sang in the song, God does indeed work in mysterious ways. He has a perfect plan, and has promised to fulfill that plan. It is because of this that we can trust Him. In the Scriptures, and indeed in our lives, the Lord often uses unusual and unexpected means to accomplish His good plan. Many times these ways make little sense to us, at least at the time. But rest assured, God's plans always make sense because He sees the big picture. In our text, we see an example of this truth played out. If we were to sit down and share stories of our lives, we would conclude that at times, life does not make much sense. Sometimes the pieces just do not seem to fit together and it is hard to see what God is up to. So, when this happens, what kind of attitude ought we to have. I believe we glean some help from Acts 8:1-8.

As I read the text, you may have noticed two significant events that occurred on the same day. Through these two events, we see how our sovereign God uses adversity in our lives to accomplish His agenda in our lives. Let me remind you of what has happened in the church thus far from Acts 1-7. *[slide 04]* Jesus, gave a charge to His disciples telling them in Acts 1:8, **"but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."** Jesus called them to be witnesses and that is exactly what they became, filling Jerusalem with the gospel of Jesus. This resulted in a church explosion as 120 followers turned into 3000, and 3000 into 5000 and then Luke simply stopped giving a number because it was so high. While there had been bumps in the road, the opportunity for the church to declare Christ had been open and the church was growing. That is until one day, the day we read about in our

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text when it appeared that the door had slammed shut and that the very survival of the church was at stake. And yet, as we will see, God was at work in all of this to accomplish something even greater. So let us note the two lessons that come from this text, lessons that reveal God is present in all of life's events, whether seemingly dark and dismal, or grand and glorious. Here is the first lesson we are to glean... <sup>[slide 05]</sup>

## I. Dark hours and difficult times are inevitable (8:1-3).

*1 Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. 3 But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.*

Dark hours and difficult times are inevitable. This is true for a church, like what we see in our text; and it is true in our individual lives. One of the men I served under as an intern once shared with me a part of his story. He had grown up in a Christian home, and as a young adult, in his late teens, he had decided to follow in the footsteps of his father and his grandfather to become a preacher. One day, as he was talking to his grandfather, he started to complain that he had already lost most of his hair by his early 20's. He went on complaining for a moment, until his grandfather sternly interrupted him and said, "Do you really think you were going to get through this life without losing something? And young man, if the worst of your losses is your hair, then you have nothing to complain about." Many of you in here know of darker and more difficult times than the lost of hair. In our text, we see a dark time in the church; a hard time unlike anything ever experienced up to this point. Luke records two great losses that had the church on edge, wondering if they would survive.

<sup>[slide 05]</sup> **First**, according to verse one, the church lost a great preacher. We read that Saul was in full, hearty and complete agreement that Stephen deserved to die. Stephen's story began back in Acts 6 where we read of a man with a servant's heart who was, according to Acts 6:5, "**a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit (6:5).**" We come to see Stephen as a bold preacher who knew the Scriptures so well that he confounded the critics of Christianity. I think we would all agree that the church could do with more Stephens, not less. And to the church's horror, they watched one of their own, a dynamic preacher, stoned to death. Why would God allow this to happen? Remember what God did in Acts 5, when He intervened for Peter, John, and the apostles, by sending an angel to release them from prison (5:19)? Why did this not happen for Stephen? Where were the angels now? Where was God now? We smile and say that Stephen was the church's first martyr. But for the church, that day, things were rough. Not to sound morbid, but what would it be like to suddenly, as a result of persecution, learn that Pastor Ed, or our Elder Jase had been martyred, or better said, murdered for the cause of Christ and that as a result, the rest of you in the church may be next? And this leads us to the next thing the church appeared to lose...

<sup>[slide 06]</sup> **Second**, the church seemed to have lost ground. Reading from the end of verse one through verse three we see nothing but difficulty and heartache. Notice how the end of verse one begins; Luke recording, "**And on that day...**" This is no small detail. Everything seemingly turned for the worse on *that* day, which is the day Stephen died. On that day a "great persecution began"; on that day, the gates of hell sought to prevail against the church; on that day the church was scattered, dispelled, thrown about; on that day Saul sought to destroy the church; on that day, those who professed the name of Christ were bound, beaten, and thrown into prison.

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Anyone want to go to church in this atmosphere? What a shock this day was, for before this, the church was thriving; before this people were coming together, but now they were being split apart. How could the church survive if she were scattered, broadcast here and there? Let us take note of this event and considered it from a different angle. Let us examine a couple of things that came as a result of Stephen's death.

<sup>[slide 06]</sup> **To begin with**, the majority of the Christians were forced to leave Jerusalem. Notice what we read there in verse one, **"and they were all scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."** What an event that caused these Jewish Christians to relocate to places even like Samaria. I will tell you why this is significant in a moment. This was a Christian exodus, only these people were scattering for lives, many leaving homes, business and even their church behind. When Luke says "all" were scattered, I do not believe he means that every single Christian (except for the apostles) left Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem does continue and it grows. Luke's point is that this persecution broke up the church. And while at the time it seemed to be a defeat, we learn in Acts 11:19-21 that it actually was to the benefit of the church and to the glory of God. Notice this footnote of Luke:

**19 So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. 20 But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.**

If you were to look on a map, you would find that the Christians were truly scattered everywhere with the result that the gospel was spread further and further. So, we learn that many Christians fled but the apostles stayed. But not all made it out...

<sup>[slide 06]</sup> **So next we see**, a number of Christians were put into prison. We all know that Saul of Tarsus was the force behind this persecution. Armed with the authority of the Jewish Sanhedrin, Saul hunted down the followers of Christ. Luke says that Saul **"ravaging"** the church. The KJV says he **"made havoc"** of the church. However it is best to translate this Greek term, it has the idea of using brutal cruelty in order to destroy, to ruin, or damage something beyond repair. Outside of Scripture, this Greek word was used to speak of destroying a city, or of being mangling by a wild beast. Saul was ravaging the church, going from house to house to locate Christians and brutally haul them away. This was war to Saul and with great zeal, he sought to tear the church apart limb by limb, a crime that would later cause him great remorse and yet he would be forgiven by Christ.

What would you be asking if you were part of the Jerusalem church at the time? Where is God? Why is He allowing this to happen? Is there nothing He can do? Is He aware of what was happening? Of course He knew and Jesus even told His disciples in John 16:2-4 that this would happen. So Saul had not duped the Lord. Rather, Saul was being used by the Lord to accomplish something good, as we will see in a moment.

In the fourth century, when the Roman Emperor threatened Eusebuis, a bishop who taught the full divinity of Christ, with confiscation of all his goods, torture, banishment, or even death, the courageous Christian replied, "He needs not fear confiscation, who has nothing to lose; nor banishment, to whom heaven is his country; nor torments, when his body can be destroyed at one blow; nor death, which is the only way to set him at liberty from sin and sorrow."

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Would you consider for just a moment the great contrast between the Saul we see in Acts 8, and the Saul that appears in the rest of Acts and the New Testament. Here he is ravaging the church with passion, but starting in Acts 9, he will rejoice in the church. In Acts 8, Saul is doing all he can to prevent people from becoming Christians. Shortly after Acts 9 he is doing everything he can to persuade people to become Christians. How do we explain this? Beloved, this is the grace of God at work. Here Paul's own testimony in 1 Timothy 1:12-14...<sup>[slide 07]</sup>

**12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; 14 and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus.**

O the matchless, powerful and transforming nature of the grace of God. If the grace of God can transform the vilest sinners, such as Saul, then how can we not wonder how such grace reaches to the deepest depths of darkness and plucks the guilty from the mire of sin and despair, and elevates us such a heavenly position in Christ. This is grace and sometimes, by God's grace, He closes doors, like we see here Acts 8. And when He does, while it may make little sense to us, we must choose how we will respond. And how did this first Christians respond to this dark and depressing news of Stephen's death and the outbreak of persecution? <sup>[slide 08]</sup> Notice what we read in verse 4, **"Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word."** I do not know what we would do. Maybe we would whine, complain, lay-low or even second-guess God. But not these believer. They obeyed the command of Jesus from Acts 1:8 and were witnesses for Christ. They preached and proclaimed the Word. And so, while the time was dark, they would see something come from their obedience to Christ, that while this one door seemingly closed on them, God was still at work and opened another door. This brings us to our second point...<sup>[slide 09]</sup>

## II. God is always at work, even in the dark times (8:4-8)

*4 Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. 5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. 6 The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. 7 For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 So there was much rejoicing in that city.*

The day began with sadness. As we read in verse two, the people loudly lamented Stephen's death. Yet, as we have said many times already in our study of the book of Acts, out of opposition comes opportunity as we see God opening a wide door of ministry as a result of this one terrible, but strategic day. And just like the bodybuilding has to tear down his muscles so that they will grow back bigger and stronger, so we see the church, taken back only to come back with a greater zeal. We find two great blessing that came as a result of Stephen's death.

<sup>[slide 09]</sup> **First**, the church was blessed with an army of preachers. From verses 4-5 we find that out of the ashes of Stephen's fiery trial arose a burning host of witnesses for Jesus Christ. Yes, one preacher was lost, yet on the same day a throng of preachers replaced him. But just who were these people that **"went about preaching the word"**? Luke calls them the "scattered" – just ordinary people preaching the Word of God. There are a couple different words for

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“scattered” in the Greek. One word speaks of being dispersed or spread to the point of disappearing, like the scattering a person’s ashes over the ocean. This is not the word Luke used here, rather the word here for “scattered” means to broadcast in order to be planted, like one does with seeds on a field.

This was the response of these persecuted Christians; not to hide themselves, but to broadcast themselves. Not to lay low but to use the persecution as an opportunity to speak to others about the gospel. Think about what was happening; believers were forced to leave town overnight and began to travel north to Samaria. They would come to some place to hear some kind of welcome along with the question, “Where are you from?” These people would say, “From Jerusalem.” And then a series of questions would result. Things like, “Why did you leave Jerusalem to come here?” And here it comes, “Well, it was either move here or go to prison. We have been regarded as criminals. And our ‘crime,’ if it could be called that, is that we believe the Messiah has come and has offered eternal life to all who will receive Him. His name is Jesus.” Ordinary people telling other ordinary people time and time again that Jesus is the Savior who promises eternal life. Why did God have this dark day come? He did it to mobilize the entire church to do evangelism as those scattered preached the Word wherever they went. These were not seminary, or even Bible school trained folks, just ordinary people talking to others about Jesus. Yet God would also raise up other preachers.

[slide 09] **Second** then, is that God blessed the church with evangelists, one by the name of Philip. In verse five we read, **“Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.”**

This is Philip, “the servant”, second in the list of men back there in Acts 6 called to head up the church’s benevolent ministries. I called Philip an evangelist and it is interesting to note that he is in fact the first person in the Bible called an “evangelist” in Acts 21:8. He is also the only person so called an evangelist in the Bible. We are told there are gifts of evangelism and other evangelists; and Timothy is called to do the work of an evangelist, but only Philip holds that title. Philip was not an apostle, he was a “layman.” And it is as if Philip’s attitude was this, “If Stephen is gone, then I will step in and take his place.”

As a result of Stephen’s death, a whole company of ordinary people like him said, “I will take his place. Here I am, Lord. Please use me, please!” What looked as though it would be such a loss turned out to be a great gain. The church was blessed with new preachers in Acts 8. But there is more that was gained.

[slide 10] **Third**, the church was blessed with more conversions. In verses 6-8 we read what happened: **6 The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. 7 For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 So there was much rejoicing in that city.**

Let us review for a moment. Where was Philip preaching? We are told in verse 5, Samaria! And where did the scattered believers preach? Verse 4 tells us everywhere they had been scattered, which included Samaria. And what had Jesus told His disciples in Acts 1:8? That they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and...Samaria and then on to the remotest parts of the earth. In other words, in Acts 8 we find Jesus revealing in effect that it is time to go to Samaria to preach the gospel. Up to this point, the church had been sharing the gospel to people *like themselves*. But the good news was to be for all people, for all kinds of people; not just Jews, but also Samaritans. The church traveled some 40 miles north but the racial and social gap between the Jews and Samaritans might as well have been 40 light years. There was deep-seated prejudice and outright hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans. If

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you recall the exchange between the woman at the well and Jesus in John 4:9 where she said, **“How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman? (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)”**

May I remind you that the tension between the Jews and the Samaritans started many centuries earlier? Back around 725 BC, the northern tribes of Israel were taken captive by the Assyrians. The Assyrians’ practice was to deport an number of captives back to the homeland and then to repopulated the conquered area with non-Jews from other countries. These “Gentiles” settled down in Israel, and eventually inter-married with the Jews that did not go into captivity. The offspring of these marriages were the *Samaritans*. To the Jews the Samaritans were considered ‘half-breeds.’ The Jewish rabbis taught, “Let no man eat the bread of the Cuthites (the Samaritans) for he who eats their bread is as he who eats swine’s flesh.” There was even a popular Jewish prayer at time of Acts 8 that said, “And, Lord, do not remember the Samaritans in the resurrection.”

This reminds us that it is one thing to tell your neighbor about Christ, as good as that may be; but it is quite another thing to leave your comfort zone and reach people who are very *different* from you. But this is Christianity 101. While the day of Stephen’s death may had seemed like a loss to the church, God actually used it to open new doors of opportunity to reach unreached people for Christ. <sup>[slide 11]</sup> And consider then just exactly what it is that God did as a result of this dark day.

**First**, the Samaritans learned about Christ. In verse six we read that the crowd “heard” the truth about Christ. Romans 10 tells us that faith comes by hearing the Word of God. And Philip, in like manner as Stephen, told them the bad news and the good news. The bad news—they were sinners facing the wrath of God. The good news—Jesus the Messiah came to save sinners from God’s wrath, and He did so by dying as a substitute on the Cross and rising from the dead. That is the greatest news that can be told anyone, that “whoever will call upon the Lord will be saved. But there is more...

<sup>[slide 11]</sup> **Second**, the Samaritans saw the power of Christ. In verses 6 and 7 we read that the people saw the signs, the attesting miracles of the truth concerning Christ and so we read in verse seven, *For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed.* By such signs God authenticated Philip’s message as being true. But there is one more thing...

<sup>[slide 11]</sup> **Third**, the Samaritans experienced the joy of Christ. In verse 8 we read that the people experienced “much rejoicing” in that city; that is in Samaria. We see here that Jesus came for all kinds of people; not just Jews, not just Americans; but for men and women from every tribe, every tongue and every nation. He wants people that are *unlike* us to be saved. And how does God intend to reach this people who are unlike us? In part, but scattering us; whether in a city, in a region, in a state, in a country or around the world. Amazingly, God used Philip to bridge a gap between two alienated people groups. He turned groups of people who could not stand each other into brothers in Christ. Beloved, this is the power of the gospel to bring peace to those who are at war.

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned.

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He commented, “If Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu.” Just as one person like Stephen, could be used to bring people to Christ, one person’s prejudice and insensitivity can not only betray Jesus but also turn a person away from trusting Jesus as Savior. Today we need more people like Stephen and Philip. Men and women who will speak the truth and build bridges for others to hear the gospel.

Let us remember that God is always at work and that even when things appear the darkest, through the life of just one faithful believer, God may open greater doors of opportunity. It is no different today and so let me close by sharing with you three applications that come from our text. <sup>[slide 12]</sup>

## 1. We learn what God is like.

We are reminded of at least three attributes of God we must always remember. First, God is sovereign; He is in control and nothing catch Him off-guard. Second, God is wise; we must never wonder if God is just “winging it” and hoping it will all work out somehow. Third, God is good; He always has our best interests in mind and His glory in view. We may not always see this, understand, or even feel like it at times, but never forget that God is sovereign, wise and good.

## 2. We learn how God works.

<sup>[slide 12]</sup> Because we do not like it, we need to be reminded constantly that God uses trials and difficulties to help His children grow. God works through our difficulties and dark days to cause us to trust Him and obey Him more. So do not fret the dark times.

## 3. We learn what God wants

<sup>[slide 12]</sup> And what is it that God wants? Simply put, He wants us to be witnesses for His Son, Jesus Christ. That is the mission and so He will use any and all things to accomplish that mission. From the highest of highs to the lowest of lows; from the brightest of days to the darkest of nights, let us remember that God does indeed, “**cause all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.**” (Romans 8:28).

May I ask you? Do you love God? Do you love the Son He sent to pay for your sin and to transform your life? Are you living according to the call of His purpose which is to be a witness, a testifier, a proclaimer of the glories of His Son? This is what God wants; and this is what God grants to all who believe on Jesus as Savior and Lord. With just one person, God turned Jerusalem upside down. I just wonder what God would do with an army of Stephens and Philips. Let us dare to find out!

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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