

The Great Gospel

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[0 : 00] If you have your Bible, I'm going to encourage you to open God's Word at the Acts of the Apostles, Acts chapter 8.

And we're going to be reading the opening eight verses of Acts chapter 8, 1 through 8. It was a joy last Sunday for my wife Linda and I to have a Sunday where we could just come along and be amongst the people of God and worship.

And it was a joy to be here at Bells Hill. Great to hear out of the body of Christ different folks reading God's Word. And great to hear young Carl ministering God's Word and taking a sizable chunk of Scripture in the whole of Acts 7.

And somehow or other bringing us through that whole sermon, that whole message that Stephen preached, including his martyrdom.

And in fact, I was giving him a little bit of stick during the week because not only did he take the whole of Acts chapter 7, but if you'll remember rightly, he started getting to the first four verses of Acts chapter 8.

[1 : 16] And I'm sitting there saying, you've got me preaching eight verses next week. You know, was the whole of chapter 7 not enough? But he had a reason for doing that, and I've got reason this morning for picking up on the tail end of 7 into Acts chapter 8.

But let's read these opening eight verses. 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.

[2 : 37] 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 come out of many who had them. And many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

So there was much joy in that city. Amen. And we pray that God would speak to us as we look into his word.

Well, this morning, I do sense there is a very clear message from God for us as his people here at Bellsill.

And I want to say a number of things this Pentecost Sunday. This is that time in the calendar year when many churches will be thinking about the realization of the promise of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the church on the day of Pentecost.

[4 : 04] But I want to use a little word again and again and again today. And it's a little word that says something huge.

And the word is great. So today, if you don't walk out of this church using that little word in significant ways about something phenomenal, I will have failed.

But I'm convinced that God in his word by his spirit wants us to capture something. And I want to say, first and foremost, we serve, we believe in, and we trust in a great God.

Now, if you can't do that, you're not a believer, right? Now, we trust in a great God. But that great God has given us a great message.

And that great God who has given us a great message has placed within us a great power. God himself indwelling.

[5 : 19] That's who the Holy Spirit is. God indwelling believers that they might be empowered, that they might be enabled.

God the Holy Spirit working through us to proclaim the message of Jesus, to bring people to their knees in worship of a great God.

That's what we're thinking about this morning. And time and time again, whenever I was looking at this passage, I was just captured by the greatness of all that was going on.

And we're going to think a little bit about that this morning as we unpack Acts chapter 8. Look at the way this chapter begins.

And Saul approved of his execution. Now, you and I know Saul. We know him as the Apostle Paul.

[6 : 19] We know him as the one who on the Damascus Road, God in his grace was going to cause the scales to fall off his eyes.

And he was going to become the great apostle to the Gentiles. You and I, when we read through the pages of Holy Scripture, read spirit-inspired words that God chose to speak.

Great words from God that God chose to speak through the Apostle Paul into the heart and life of his church.

And where do you meet him? You meet him standing over the dead body of Stephen.

Saul approved of his execution. He said, This is where we meet Saul.

[7 : 55] Standing over the dead body of Stephen. Guilty as charged. Killing Christians. That's where you first meet the Apostle.

You see, all of us are in complete rebellion against God and his ways. And all of us stand if we don't love God.

Hating God and all that he is. And Saul actually believed that he loved God. But these Christians didn't. But he as a good Jew did. And so he was going to annihilate and destroy believers in Christ.

You know, of course, we find him standing there. But he'd witness something. He'd witness a great servant of Christ.

Go through a great martyrdom for Christ. And offer up a great prayer for Christ. That's what Stephen had done.

[9 : 04] Stephen had preached a great message. Now you could look at Stephen's message and you could think, In the company that you're preaching that Stephen, there's trouble coming your way. You know, my friends, when you take a stand for Jesus, often trouble comes your way.

Right? That just goes with the territory. But the reality is Stephen preached a great message. And he endured a great death.

He suffered and died for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we've often heard it said, haven't we? The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

And Stephen, in actual fact, was there dying for his faith. But, my friends, don't miss the prayer that Stephen offered.

And it's a truly remarkable prayer. As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

[10 : 13] And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. What a prayer.

As he was dying, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Even in his death, even in his death, he was praying that God, in his grace, might extend forgiveness to the very people who were executing him.

And Saul, Saul was going to discover that God heard Stephen's prayer. And God, in Christ, was going to forgive Saul and make Saul, the apostle Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles.

Do you ever sometimes find yourself thinking, oh, it's just a prayer meeting? How many times have we heard those words?

I'll not bother, it's just a prayer meeting. It's great prayers offered up by the people of God and the will of God that bring about great moments in the history of the church.

[11 : 39] every revival is steeped in prayer. And here is Stephen leading by example and calling out to God and Saul is approving of his execution.

Oh, the prayer is not going to be answered right away. You know, because it tells us a little bit more, doesn't it? And there arose in that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem.

You know, we don't often think about applying the word great to persecution, do we? But in actual fact, it's there in Acts chapter 8. The church got persecuted.

It had been quite comfortable there in Jerusalem. It had been gaining a lot of ground. In actual fact, many of the people who used to go to the temple were now going to the church.

But then the persecution came. And look what it says in verse 3 about Saul. But Saul was ravaging the church and entering house after house he dragged off men.

[12 : 49] And my friends, you've got to see the horror of this. He dragged off men and women. Now that would have been unusual. But he dragged off men and women and he committed them to prison.

Why was he doing this? Because they were believers in Christ. When you and I read some of the stories of our brothers and sisters in lands where they are persecuted severely for declaring faith in Christ, it all flows out of the whole growth of the life of the early church which is focused on making known the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Saul Saul is right at the start of that. But we know there's a better day coming for Saul. But here's a thought. Does the church of Jesus Christ owe the salvation of Saul to the prayers of Stephen?

Now we know it's the grace of God. But what about our great prayers for God to do great things in the lives of great enemies of the church of Jesus Christ?

You know, sometimes we look and we think that person, they are so atheistic, so unbelieving, so hard against the church of Jesus Christ and we think they could never.

[14 : 25] well, Saul was standing over the dead body of Stephen. That's the same Saul that we owe a big bulk of the New Testament to, obviously under God, the New Testament to.

That's not a great moment in the life of the church. Well, you notice I've got a dear friend of mine. He's a wonderful brother in Christ.

He's been so faithful over so many years and he sometimes says to me, he says, John, he says, I hope come the day, he says, Acts 8 verse 3, that's what I'm looking for.

And you know what he's saying, you know, I hope come the day, listen to this, devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. And he says it with his tongue firmly in his cheek.

He says, I hope come the day when I go, there'll be great lamentation. You know, all his brothers in Christ will be mourning over his call home simply because we'll miss him so much.

[15 : 34] And he's a dear brother and I do believe that if I outlive him, then on that day I probably will have great lamentation over him. But I want you to notice something that happens even here in the context of it.

there's a great funeral. There's a great funeral because a brother came to the end of his course. I want you to notice that God was sovereign over it.

Stephen probably wasn't that old a man. But the work that God had given him to do had come to an end. Now because he'd been stoned and it shows you something of the influence of the church at that time.

Because he had been stoned to death, he would have been allowed to be buried. But any great public lamentation would have been banned.

But it says something about the boldness of the church. this little verse. That they made great lamentation over Stephen.

[16 : 49] It tells something about the influence and the impact of the church. That even although he'd been stoned by those in authority in the Jewish faith, the church of Jesus Christ didn't miss the opportunity to truly lament one of their own.

But of course all of this gave birth to a great persecution. And you and I could look at this if we didn't look at it in the light of the rest of Scripture.

And we could look at it and we could think oh my, things were going so well in Jerusalem. why this persecution?

But you know my friends, it is always the way that God uses the attack of the enemy for his greater glory.

and what happens when the church in Jerusalem is persecuted? Well, the church is scattered and when the church is scattered, they don't scatter leaving behind the message of salvation, the great message of the gospel.

[18 : 19] Instead, what they do is they take the great message of the gospel with them. And so what God does is he shakes up his church and he sends his church out.

Now, you and I know the revelation of God in Scripture. What was the promise that we read about in Acts chapter 1 verse 8? So appropriate for Pentecost Sunday.

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and into the uttermost parts of the world.

What's happening, my friend? The great transition is taking place. The good news of the gospel had went to the Jews in Jerusalem, to the center of Judaism, and many had believed.

But the promise of God was that when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

[19 : 38] And so we're in a great transition. What's happening is that God endowing his people with the Holy Spirit is now driving them out as a great persecution takes place.

Those who were scattered, they go out. But they go out with a great message. And they go out, notice what it says there in verse 4, preaching the word.

Why do we want to equip and resource and enable the church to know the word? because it's as we proclaim the word that God moves in power in bringing people to himself.

And so there's so many great things happening here. We've got a great death, we've got a great martyr, we've got a great prayer, we've got a great enemy who in time is going to become the great apostle, you know, we've got a great persecution rising up against the church, but that great persecution is the mobilizing of a great people, with a great message in line with the great word that God has spoken, that he'll empower his people, that they will go and be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria.

Isn't that incredible? It's only eight little verses of scripture, but we can't underline the greatness of what God is doing enough. We can't underline it enough.

[21 : 13] And so the people of God, they move out, and they're scattered, and they're preaching the word. And then we meet Philip. And Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and he proclaimed to them the Christ.

There it is, my friends. Have we got a great God who's given us a great saviour, that same God who empowers us with the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim Christ, to make Jesus known.

And Philip goes down to Samaria. Now let me just say a couple of things here. We've met Samaria before, haven't we? We don't quite know whether it was the same part or a different part, but it was certainly the Samaritans, the great distinction that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans, the distant cousins and the great enmity.

Remember Jesus in John chapter 4? Come see a man who told me everything that I've ever done. Come meet a man.

Remember a woman at the well tenderly spoken with by Jesus who testifies to the authority and power of Jesus.

[22 : 53] I just want to say in the passing, sometimes we live with a false concept of what God calls us to do. I want you to tell you something.

Nobody comes to faith unless God opens their eyes. Nobody comes to faith unless God draws them to himself. God is the great evangelist.

God is the one who opens blind eyes. God is the one who breaks down hard hearts. God is the one who draws people to himself. Here is the thing. God is the evangelist.

You and I are responsible for sowing the seed of God's word. That's what God asks us to do. You sow the seed of my word. Sometimes we have lived with a false model where we think somehow or other we are responsible for moving somebody from position A to position Z and every other bit in between.

There are very few times when God uses the same person to bring somebody from nowhere to a living faith in Christ. More often than not God uses the whole of his church just to be speaking words of love and grace and the good news of the gospel sowing the seed of the word and in time a person comes to faith in Christ.

[24 : 20] When I came to faith in Christ I could have said this man preached and I became a believer. But you know the interesting thing? after I became a Christian I discovered there was a whole army of people had been praying.

One of them was an accounts teacher, my accounts teacher. I hated my accounts teacher. I was the most obnoxious pupil she had and I didn't even know she was a Christian and I didn't even know she was praying for me.

I was just an obnoxious pupil and I made her life a misery. Christian teacher. And she used to go home and she used to pray.

And this was a prayer. I found this out long after I became a Christian. Lord take this young man and do something special with his life. Didn't find that out until a number of years after I became a Christian.

Remember going to the meeting in which I shared testimony and saw her and I thought oops this is going to be difficult. It was then that I found out. But there were many people who had been praying.

[25 : 31] I discovered that my parents had sent me along to Sunday school. I had Sunday school teachers who had actually taught me the word of God and been praying for me. It just seemed to be going in one ear and out the other.

But God was doing his work. And so when the person that preached on the day in which I became a Christian got up, the word of God had been well sown.

It had even been watered. But it had never come to life until that day. we've met Samaria before.

And Philip, we know about Philip, he was one of the deacons there in the church. And he went down there to Samaria preaching the word, proclaiming Christ.

Look what it says in verse 8. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip. You know, my friend, I believe when Jesus was passing through and he met that woman at the well in Samaria, God in his sovereignty, a great and sovereign God already planting, already sowing, there's a harvest.

[27 : 01] You know the interesting thing about the harvest, isn't it? The Bible is always honest about this, Jesus says it, there is no problem with the harvest. There's no harvest shortage, there's a labour shortage.

So pray, pray that the Lord would raise up labourers and send out into his harvest field. And Philip, and that great persecution sent out great message and a great revival.

A great revival takes place in Samaria. Don't associate revivals with the person. God is at work. God is at work.

And there's Philip. He goes down to the city of Samaria and he proclaims to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention. And when they heard him, and what he was saying was accompanied by great signs, they saw the signs that he did.

Unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice come out of many who had them. Those who were paralysed or lame were healed. God was moving. It's always the case when God moves in revival that many things that we cannot quantify, that we cannot explain, that we cannot fully comprehend start to take place.

[28 : 17] But a great revival, a great work for God took place there in Samaria. you know, my friends, just for a moment or two, just to encourage you, flick forward, fast forward in your Bible to Acts chapter 21.

So Acts chapter 21, I just want to encourage you about the greatness of God, and the greatness of the gospel, and the greatness of the power of the Spirit of God working in people's lives.

because in Acts chapter 21, we get a beautiful little picture of Paul, I've got the right text, of Paul going there and staying with Philip.

Sorry, I might be one too early. But Paul, basically, by time you get to Acts chapter 21, Paul goes to stay with Philip and his, Philip the evangelists, and his daughters, who are prophetesses.

Paul and Philip. They're incredible. They're in the greatness of God, Saul, who becomes Paul, in his evangelistic journeys, ends up with Philip and his four daughters.

[29 : 48] Philip the evangelist. Isn't that incredible? That these two men, by the grace of God and the greatness of God, should end up together in incredible ways.

And, you know, time and time again, I've got the reference wrong, I'll get that right for you. But, what do you call it? You know, it's phenomenal when we look at what God is doing, when God is building up his church and drawing people to himself.

And Paul and Philip later in life were ministering together for the glory of God and building up the church of Jesus Christ. And every time I see these things, I just marvel that this is all the work of a great God, this is all the power of a great gospel, this is all the power of the Holy Spirit doing what God and Christ wants to do for his glory, by the power of the Spirit in the lives of the believers.

And it's absolutely incredible. So when we come back to that little text that we've been, it says there, so there was much joy in that city.

Now it wasn't a joy that was unaccompanied or not accompanied by any kind of opposition, because in actual fact there was a lot of magic in that area, and we're going to find out about Simon, the magician, and all the different things that go on there.

[31 : 17] But there's where we leave it for today. So there was much joy in that city. What is all that joy about? That joy is about a great God doing a great work with a great gospel, by the power of the Holy Spirit, working in great ways through his people.

And he's an unchanging God, and we've got an unchanging gospel, and in Pentecost Sunday, a reminder that we're filled with the same Spirit of God to do the work that God has called us to do.

And when we find ourselves as the Church of Jesus Christ doing all of this, there is great joy. Go back to what I said about the word one-to-one.

we want to raise up joyful Bible sharers. Because if you cannot open the pages of God's word and look at the greatness of this message and have a smile that is greater than that of any Cheshire cat, I've never seen a Cheshire cat.

I've no idea how big their smile is, but ours ought to be greater. Because the reality is God is doing his sovereign work.

[32 : 40] So there was much joy in that city. You know, whenever God visits us in revival days, amongst the many things that happen, I know from reading so much of the history, there is always great joy.

And so we find ourselves in Samaria, great joy. But you know something, I think there was great joy and glory, because the promise had been given, you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And I don't want you to miss the fact that Saul, who started holding the jackets and watching the death, was in actual fact going to become the apostle, that we start to reach out into the ends of the earth.

And by the time you get to Acts chapter 16, he's moving into Europe. Great God, with a great message, great plan, great purpose, pouring out a great power message, and the power of the power of the people of God, that the glory of God, and that God might bring to his people a great joy.

I could put great in front of absolutely everything, but we do have a great God, don't we? And we do have a great message, and the power of the Spirit indwells you, and enables you, day by day, to become more like Christ, and to proclaim Christ.

[34 : 27] And when Christ is proclaimed, in the will of God, for the glory of God, great things happen. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you for your word.

We thank you for this great transition moment in the book of Acts. We thank you, Lord God, that as we start to just peel back some of the layers, we see something of your greatness, something of what you are doing for the glory of your great name.

And Father, we long for more of that in our day. Father, we acknowledge that you and you alone are God. We acknowledge that the gospel and the gospel alone can save a soul.

And Father, we thank you that you call us day by day to be filled with the Holy Spirit, that in the power that you provide, we might do great things for your honour and for your glory.

And in doing them, there would be great joy. Father, would you move in our community, would you move in our church, would you move in our lives, for the glory of your great name, in Jesus' name.

[35 : 49] Amen. Well, we're going to sing the Lord's my shepherd. And I think it's the shabby. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.