

When the gospel foundations are threatened

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[0:00] Please have a seat, and if you have a Bible, please turn with me to Acts chapter 8. If you're using one of the church bibles, and you can find them up the back, page 1101. And we're going to read from verse 1 to verse 25. And we're going to see a time when the gospel foundations of the church are threatened, and what their response is. So, let's hear God's Word. The story picks up immediately after Stephen has been stoned and killed for his faith in the Lord Jesus, and Saul approved of their killing him. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him, but Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered in the church, and the apostles preached the word wherever they went, Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So, there was great joy in that city.

Now, for some time, a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, This man is rightly called the great power of God. They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Simon himself believed and was baptized, and he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them.

They had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered the money and said, Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit. Peter answered, May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money. You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin. Then Simon answered, Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.

[3:19] After they'd further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages. Amen. So, this is God's Word.

As we get into the text, let me give you an image. Some of you may have seen the movie The Perfect Storm. It tells the true story of a fishing boat in October 1991 called the Andrea Gale, somewhere off the coast of Massachusetts that was caught in a once-in-a-century storm. So, there was three pressure systems that came together. So, there was a Canadian cold front coming down from the south, there was a storm in the Great Lakes that was pressing east, and Hurricane Grace from the Caribbean was moving north-east, with the result that this boat was rocked by 120-mile-an-hour gale-force winds and waves and swell that topped 100 feet. And so, the movie tells the story of this boat trying to survive, but ultimately it was lost, and the boat and all six crew members went down. Now, we have just returned to the Book of Acts, and we have the story of an

infant church, because it's still very new, that has been growing. But we've just been introduced to the first person killed for their faith in Jesus, Stephen. And now what we see happen next is a perfect storm that rocks this infant church. So, there is persecution that comes in, and there are rival powers claiming loyalty, and then there is pride within the church, and all of these threaten to destroy. And so, our question this morning is, when the gospel foundations are threatened, what is it that will stop a church sinking? What anchor or foundation will hold? And what we'll see together is that the theme of chapter 8 is very much that the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord. And the church's anchor in any and every storm is the unchanging good news of Jesus crucified, risen, and ruling. And I think this is important for when we perhaps find ourselves hit by our own pressure systems. Maybe it will be new friends that challenge our faith. Maybe it'll be the reality that we have family or colleagues who find our beliefs to be difficult to appreciate. Maybe we'll feel overwhelmed by the claims of other faiths and worldviews, particularly if we're in school and maybe even at university. Maybe the pressure we will face will simply be our own self-seeking pride. Well, when any of those pressure systems hit, what are we to do? As chapter 8 says to us, when the gospel foundations are threatened, we turn in trust to Jesus and His gospel Word. So, let's look at each of these pressure systems together. We begin with persecution. Look with me again at these first three verses where we're told, on that day a great persecution broke out. So, we are rejoining the story of Acts. So far, it's all been good news up until the time of Stephen being martyred. There has been challenges, but the church has been growing, and now there's this campaign of terror that breaks out. And what we learn is that while Stephen is the first martyr, he will certainly not be the last. And we discover in verse 2, godly men who bury Stephen and mourn deeply for him and recognize that they are doing this at great risk to honor this first martyr. So, there's godly men, but there's also ungodly men. Verse 3, but Saul began to destroy the church, and he's dragging people off and throwing them in prison. And so, we're introduced to Saul who's leading this hate-filled attempt to stop the church of Jesus in its tracks. And we need to understand that behind all this lies Satan himself. Now, what is the response? What happens next? Look at verse 4, those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Okay, so back in Acts chapter 1, we heard Jesus say, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

So, scattering was always Jesus' design. And as they go, notice what they're doing. They are proclaiming, they are heralding Jesus as the Christ, Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus as God's King. So, they are scattered, but at the same time, they are scattering the seed of the good news. That the king that they serve and worship, he died, but then he rose again, and he's ruling in victory and in glory, and they can and they won't keep quiet about it. Another thing to notice in verse 8 is who is doing the talking?

Those who had been scattered. So, we're told the apostles stay behind for a time. So, as the mission of Jesus expands, it's regular Christians who are bringing the message of Jesus with them into new territory. Sometimes we use the expression of gossiping the gospel. This isn't people necessarily standing up preaching. This is people though whose lives and whose words are preaching that Jesus is alive and that Jesus has transforming power. And so, they're talking with people that they meet about Jesus. And then we meet Philip in verse 5. Philip, who's a deacon, not an apostle, he went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. So, he takes the good news now into new territory, into Samaria. And this isn't neutral. This is huge. This is going beyond the borders. Many people would have seen this in Jerusalem as going into enemy territory. Some people spoke about the Samaritans as dogs, but Philip, now that he's filled with Jesus, he wants to make disciples. And so, he comes to these Samaritans. And these Samaritans, they're also waiting for a Messiah, a king who would be sent.

[10:20] They had been taught that he would be like Moses. He would be someone who would redeem people to bring them back to God. He would restore God's people back to life with God. And so, Philip can come and say, the Messiah is here and his name is Jesus and he's the Son of God. And to back up the message, verse 6, when the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said.

Wonderful miracles, acts of healing, delivering people from evil. And so, the crowd pay attention, not to the signs, but to the message, which is all about Jesus. With the effect that, verse 8, in this Samaritan city, we're told, there was great joy. So, think about what's just happened there.

The goal of the destroyers, like Saul, let's shut the church down. But the goal of Jesus, well, it's seed dispersal. And so, the people of Jesus, they take the message of Jesus wherever they go. And so, it's true to say that they went much more as missionaries, more than as refugees. And so, the kingdom and the mission of Jesus grows despite persecution.

So, some things by way of application. First of all, to think about the pattern of the persecuted church. Let me give you a couple of numbers. Here's the first number, 4,491. That number represents the number of Christians martyred this year in sub-Saharan Africa. People being killed for their faith is still happening. Let me give you another number, 338 million. That's the number of Christians recognized as being highly persecuted in the world today. But remarkably, we see this, that while the world continues to do its worst, Jesus continues to build His church. And Christians continue to find joy in Jesus even while facing suffering. Some of us in this church, we have a friend called Adam, part of a nation whose regime tried to kill, torture, imprison, destroy the church. But wonderfully, Adam and people like him can tell of the church that is growing incredibly rapidly. Believers are meeting in secret and they're using technology, but there is no stopping the good news of Jesus from spreading.

And so, maybe a question to ask ourselves if we're Christians is this, do we have the same gospel confidence that we see in Acts 8 and we see in the persecuted church? Do we believe that the message of Jesus is true? That it is transforming? That it is powerful? And that it is a message about a Jesus who must be personally experienced? I came across the testimony of a minister called Festo Kivineri.

[13 : 49] He was working in Uganda in the 1970s. The brutal regime of Idi Amin slaughtering hundreds of Christian leaders. And he said this, he said, without bleeding, the church fails to bless. So, there's a pattern for persecution. These verses also give us, I think, a pattern for everyday living because we're given a snapshot of what it is like to be a regular everyday Christian in the early church. And what we see are people who are willing to share Jesus as their ultimate reality. As Arthur was praying, Jesus more important than anything else in their lives. And maybe since we're at the beginning of a new term, let me encourage you if you're a student here or if you're a school pupil, ask God for the courage to identify as a Christian early among your flatmates, course mates, your peers.

And ask that God would give you the wisdom to share what you believe with others. Ask for the help to live consistently for Jesus, knowing that there are times when that will bring pressures, to tell people honestly what Jesus means to you. For all of us, we may suffer when we do that. We may be mocked or we may be understood, but we recognize that He is always with us. And let me remind us of the promise that Jesus makes to all of us. Because when we think about the cost of following Jesus, we may ask ourselves, is it worth it? And so, it's good to remember the gospel, to remember that the good news is true. So, yes, it absolutely is worth it. So, what is the good news? If you're not a Christian, what do you need to believe to follow Jesus?

Let's think about it this way. The Bible tells us of God, and God as eternal creator, and God as a trinity of perfect light and life and love. And God made us in His image to enjoy life with Him, to walk in His light, to share life with Him, to receive His love. But ever since the beginning, since Adam and Eve and everyone since, we have turned our back on God. And when we turn our back on the one who is light and life and love, the result is darkness and death and disconnection.

And that's why God sent Jesus, His Son, into this dark world to be both our Savior and our brother. Jesus on the cross, He went into the darkness as He faced God's judgment. He faced death for us. He felt disconnected from the Father as He was loaded up with our sin and guilt and wrongdoing. And why did He do that? It was because of His love. And because three days later, Jesus rose again, you and I, by trusting in Jesus, we can once again live every day in God's light.

[17 : 23] We can experience the joy of life with God now and for all eternity. And we are free to enjoy God's love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus came to give us the life that we were always made for, a life that never ends. And that's why following Jesus at whatever cost is absolutely worth it.

And that's why that first pressure system of persecution, it wouldn't stop these joyful Jesus followers. Well, that's the first pressure system. Now, the second one we meet in verses 9 to 13, we can call it the pressure system of rival powers. It's something that you see in the Bible, it's something you see through history that the claims that Jesus makes will always clash with rivals.

Jesus says, I am God, I have ultimate power and authority, I have come to give true freedom, true life, lasting joy, everlasting glory, perfect peace, and hope that endures. It's a wonderful message. But we all hear multiple other voices from our other idols that would say to us, no, no, I can offer all you need. You don't need Jesus. Just trust me.

And that takes us to the second pressure system because here we meet a man called Simon. And look at him in verse 9. For some time, a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. So, this is a guy who is connected to dark spiritual forces, connected to the forces of Satan. And look what else he's doing. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people both high and low gave him their attention and exclaimed, this man is rightly called the great power of God. So, he's boasting in himself. He's grabbing attention for himself, and likely people are saying of him, this is God's representative on the earth. There is the great power, and then there is Simon here on earth representing him. And then Philip arrives in town, and Philip is a preacher. Verse 12, but when they believe Philip, as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. So, so Philip really is connected to the life of God by the Holy Spirit. Notice who Simon is boasting in, not him setting up Philip rather. He's not boasting in himself. He's boasting in Jesus. Jesus really is the greatest power. He is the Son of God. He's the Savior for the world. And Philip works with the power of

[20 : 16] Jesus. And people are being turned away from what's false to what's true. People believe, and so they're baptized. Now their loyalty, now their amazement is not given to Simon, now it's given to the Lord Jesus.

And by the time we get to verse 13, even Simon recognized he can't rival this, and he is drawn to what he sees. There's a little warning sign of what's to come there. He's only drawn to the signs, not the message behind the signs. But here we have another example. Here we are in Samaria, and the church of Jesus, they're facing rival spiritual powers. And what we see is that Jesus keeps building his church. And we have this wonderful reality that the power of the gospel is uniting the people of God, Jewish people, Samaritan people, neither part of the same church.

And the power of Jesus is such that he's drawing hearts and minds away from what is false, what is lies, to the truth. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness. And when people see their lives are transformed. Now let's think about this fascinating spiritual encounter for ourselves. Up until recently, texts like this were maybe quite tricky for us in the West to know what to do with. You know, by and large, people wouldn't have considered themselves to be very spiritual, people not really open to higher powers, but maybe until relatively recently. Now maybe in personal experience, you know what the surveys are telling us, that our culture is becoming more spiritual. There is that desire to connect with higher powers. There is an openness to something more. That's drawing some people to the Bible and some people into churches. It's also drawing some people towards pagan religions and the use of crystals and all kinds of spiritualities. And if you walk around Edinburgh, go down Candlemaker Row, you will see a real interest in the occult and other spiritualities. But how should we respond as Christians and as a church if we sense that the door of opportunity has been opened even a crack?

Here's two practical things. The first, I think this is an invitation for us to recover the power of personal testimony. There can be a sense for us as Christians that we can lose the wonder of what we have.

And so we don't share something that's so important to us with others. But just stop and think about what's happening even now. We believe that God is right here with us. And we believe that God speaks when His Bible is opened and when His Word is preached. And as individuals, we can talk as followers of Jesus about having a personal relationship with the risen Lord Jesus Himself. That every time we open our Bibles in our home, in our dorms, we are hearing God speak to us. And every time that we pray, we are talking directly with the Creator of the universe. And we believe by the Spirit that He lives with us and He's in us.

[23 : 55] That in all of our life, we connect to the Creator. And so we have this wonderful opportunity to share together and to share with others the difference Jesus makes to our lives. How God has been teaching us and helping us. How God gives us hope in hard times. How prayer helps us when we feel anxious.

Because often the question people want answered now is not so much, is your faith true, but does your faith work? And that's where we can say, absolutely, our faith does work.

And so we get the chance to show and tell with our own personal story. My faith in God, it really helps me to settle into a new family. It gives me a new church family. I have peace when I feel anxious because I can listen to God in the Bible and I can talk to Him.

I can face death with confidence knowing this is not the end, the best is still to come. So in this moment, we have an opportunity to recover the personal testimony and its power.

But also, like these first Christians, we can show Jesus as the answer to all of our searching. Just as that Samaritan city discovered 2000 years ago, Jesus is the something more that truly satisfies.

[25 : 26] Jesus would use the image of Himself as the stairway to heaven. Jesus connects us to the living God. Jesus used the image that He is the gate. He is the gateway to real personal life with God.

He is the way to God because He has dealt with the sin that stands as a barrier between us and a holy God. He has paid for that sin in full on the cross and that now He is alive.

He grants forgiveness and eternal life and God's Holy Spirit to us. So now we don't need a pilgrimage and we don't need a set of special conditions.

We have our Bibles. We have prayer. We have church. All that we need is to believe in the Lord Jesus and we will be saved and we will become children of God.

So that's the second pressure system. So we've considered persecution and we've considered rival powers. The third pressure system is that of pride and seeking of personal glory, which we find in verse 14 to 25 of Acts chapter 8.

[26 : 37] John Stott, who was maybe one of the more famous British preachers of the 20th century, he said this. He said, Pride is your greatest enemy. Humility is your greatest friend. He expanded that. He said, Pride is the single greatest enemy to effective Christian ministry and to personal spiritual life.

And it's exactly what we see in the life of Simon. God, here is someone who wants to be a somebody and to claim glory and so there is a threat.

I think it's really important for us to just pause and recognize that the seed of pride lies in all of us. It lies in me and it lies in the leaders of this church and in each one of us. And so it's important that we pray and we seek humility. But before we get to the problem of pride, let's step back and let's see the mission of Jesus advancing. So look at verses 14 to 17. So back in Jerusalem, the apostles hear what's happening in Samaria. And so they come to investigate and what they see is that Samaria had accepted the word of God. And when they arrived, they prayed for the new believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit. What's happening here is a new phase of the mission of Jesus. The Spirit was sent in chapter 2 to the church. Now the Spirit will come to the Samaritans. And then in chapter 11, we'll see the Spirit being granted to the Gentiles. And so Jesus is continuing to expand the horizons of mission. And this is amazing when we recognize who are these Samaritans.

So we've mentioned them, but we've not really thought about them. I did say that they were known as dogs. Sometimes they were known as like hybrid dogs. I have a hybrid dog. I like my hybrid dog.

[28 : 52] But it wasn't a compliment. Why were they called hybrid dogs? It was because they were mixed racially. So they weren't true Jews. And they were mixed spiritually because they didn't practice the true religion. They'd set up a rival worship center, not Jerusalem. And they rejected all the Old Testament books except the first five. If you were to read in Luke 9, John, who lays his hands on them so they would receive the Holy Spirit, he's with Jesus and they're on mission. And they come to a town in Samaria and the Samaritans don't want to know Jesus. And so John's question is, Jesus, can we call down fire on that Samaritan town? Now, here is John as he understands the mission of Jesus. He is celebrating, God sent Jesus down for you. That you and we might be in the same church, might be in the same kingdom, because Jesus loves you and Jesus loves us. And so we're seeing again that Jesus and the gospel, it creates a unique unity, a barrier-breaking power. So Jesus continues to build His church.

And we're discovering that in Jesus' church, there are no outsiders, and there is no one who's beyond God's grace. That continues to be a wonderfully true and hopeful message. But within the church, the storm clouds are gathering and this next pressure system hits.

Look at verse 18 and 19 when we see it. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit. He wants to buy the gift of God. He is jealous. I used to be a somebody. He's full of personal pride. I want to be special again. I want to be able to

do what they do.

Perhaps we know the expression that money talks. We see it, don't we? Wealth can buy influence. Wealth can give you a voice. Wealth can give you a status in society. But that must never be true in the church.

We follow Jesus, a humble servant savior. And so humility, not pride, must be our marker. Well, hear how Peter responds, verse 20. Open rebuke. May your money perish with you because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money. You have no part or share in this ministry because your heart is not right before God. He exposes his heart problem. So again, remember, Simon, he was attracted by what the church was doing, but there was no personal relationship with Jesus that really changed his heart. But what Peter does is he applies the Word of God to him. What you must do, Simon, is you must repent of your wickedness. You must seek God's mercy that would bring you forgiveness. What you need is true faith that would break the chains of sin in your life. It's still the same principle today. And then the section ends. After they'd further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages. So the message of Jesus proclaimed around Samaria, the mission of Jesus advancing despite the pressures, despite the storms. Now, let's just go back to this problem of pride for a moment. Remember, John, stop. Pride is your greatest enemy. Humility, your greatest friend. Why is pride such a problem when we think about the Christian life? Well, pride in the first place can stop us from admitting that we actually need Jesus. Pride is what will stop us from becoming a Christian.

[32 : 48] Or pride might make us say, well, I can trust myself and my own resources, and I can save myself. I don't need help from outside. Pride can also be a problem when it leads us to fight for influence, or to be jealous of the gifts that God gives to others. Pride can be a problem when, like Simon, we apply the wrong knowledge. I feel I should be a somebody. I'm a somebody at work or a business or in my school or my university, so I should have prominence in the church. What's Jesus' value system?

He opposes the pride but gives grace to the humble. We've been using the image of the perfect storm. Just to stay out at sea for a moment, sometimes they talk about the rules of the sea. When you're on a boat of any kind, the captain is in charge. And what becomes clear is that there is to be no special treatment for rich and powerful in the event, say, of an emergency. The rule is women and children first. You read a story like the story of the Titanic, and you'll find stories both of millionaires being refused entry onto lifeboats because women and children were going first, or others giving up their spaces. There is no room for claiming pride and privilege and prestige in Jesus' church. Jesus is our captain, and his voice is that everybody matters. There's no room for personal pride because all our boasting is to be in Jesus. And the antidote to pride in the church, as we see from Peter and John, is to keep proclaiming the gospel, to remind ourselves that we are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, by trusting in Christ alone. Not my efforts, not my merits, not because I am worthy, but because Jesus is.

So as we leave this section of Acts chapter 8, we are being reminded to face the storms with Jesus. We get a snapshot of a young church facing this perfect storm, pressure systems pressing on them. In the story of that fishing boat back in the 90s, the pressures, the storms were too much, and the ship went down. But praise God, that's not the story of Jesus' church in Acts chapter 8.

That persecution or rival powers or personal pride, none of those stop the good news of Jesus spreading, the mission of Jesus growing. And so it says to us, when our gospel foundations are threatened by these or any other storms, our one refuge is Jesus, our Savior, and His word of truth. We keep proclaiming it.

[35 : 43] We keep living it. And as we do, we trust that people's lives will be transformed, and that His kingdom will keep on growing. Let's pray together. Our God and our Father, we thank you that in every storm and difficulty and challenge that we face as Christians or as a Christian church, our foundation, our rock, our refuge, our anchor remains the same. It's Jesus and His gospel word.

And we thank you that it is a true and living and powerful and life transforming. And we pray that we would love Jesus, that we love the good news at the center of our salvation, and you'd help us to live it, and you'd help us to share it.

And thank you that for each one who's trusting in Jesus, we have our own story of what you have done and what you continue to do in our lives. We pray even this week that we'd have a chance to share it with somebody else, and maybe somebody we've never met before, maybe somebody else

in church to encourage them, but help us to be on the mission of Jesus.
But most of all, we thank you that He is still building His church and that nothing and no one will stop Him. So we give thanks as we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.