

The Spread Of The Gospel

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Date: 13 August 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Jireh. He is the God who cares and provides. And he's the God who sees us and he's the God who leads us. And just very thankful for that. Now turn in your Bibles to Acts 8.

Acts 8. So returning to Acts in chapter 8, we are getting to a difficult time in the life of the church. See, in the first five chapters of Acts, the teaching of the apostles and the ministry of the church was widely accepted and respected. They met in the temple courts there and they met with their group. There was thousands who came to faith in Jesus. They were baptized and that baptism in and of itself is a testimony of the washing away of their sin and the new life they have in Christ and their commitment to follow Jesus.

At the end of chapter 6 and through chapter 7, we saw the trial and the unjust execution of Stephen, a faithful follower of Jesus, at the hands of the religious elite, the Jewish council there in Jerusalem.

[1 : 1 7] And this event was the spark that lit the fuse of persecution against the church, resulting ultimately in the spread of the gospel message.

So let's go ahead and read Acts 8 verses 1 through 4 and then see a few thoughts here. And Saul approved of his execution.

I'll go back to verse 58 of chapter 7. So the witnesses, those who were stoning Stephen, they cast him out of the city and they stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Chapter 8 verse 1, And Saul approved of his execution. 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.

[2 : 2 4] 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. So a few things to make note of here in these four verses of chapter 8.

First is that we see that Saul was active in the martyrdom of Stephen. It's important. I mean, I'm not sharing anything that most of you don't already know.

Saul, we know, becomes the Apostle Paul. Later on, used by God to reach the Gentiles with the gospel. But we see here, he's introduced. And then in chapter 9, we get his conversion story.

But we see here in chapter 8, he was active in the martyrdom of Stephen. So the definition of the word approved, it says that Saul approved of his execution. The definition means to decide with someone else that something is preferable or good.

[3 : 3 2] So it wasn't just, you know, like, yeah, he's just, okay, approving. He's saying this is a good thing that's happening. He believes what's happening to Stephen should be done.

And it would be the start of it all. That word approved, it's the same that's used in 1 Corinthians 7.12, where if an unbelieving wife consents to live with a believing husband, he's not to divorce her.

So that consent, she's like, yeah, this is a good thing and a preferable thing. I'm going to do this.

He's not to divorce her. That's what's happening here. Saul is approving. He's saying, yes, this is a good thing.

Stephen being put to death is what ought to be happening. So through his approval, Saul's ultimately becoming an accomplice to their actions. And, you know, from law, or maybe you don't know, an accomplice is equally as guilty as the one who committed the crime.

And so Saul's lumping himself in with their decision to kill him. Stephen. This active, thought-out decision by Saul I thought was very interesting.

[4 : 39] And, you know, the decision by the Jewish council to kill Stephen because of what happens in chapter 5. Do you remember what happens in chapter 5? Just see if you remember without looking.

I see some of you looking. What happened in chapter 5? Around verse 38 or so. Nope, later than that.

Who feels comfortable answering the pastor's question? Acts 5 verse 38. No?

See, I got people guessing here. Let's go back to Acts 5 verse 38. So, in the present case.

So this is Gamaliel speaking with the Jewish council after they had arrested the apostles, right? And they wanted to end this preaching of the gospel.

[5 : 50] And Gamaliel stepped up, right? And so he steps up. Verse 34. He's a teacher of the law held in honor by all people. And he gave orders to put the men outside for a bit, the apostles.

And then he's speaking to the council. And he's giving them a little history lesson about people who had raised up thinking that they were somebody with a message. And he said, look, these people, they were either killed and their message fizzled or they died and everything went away.

And he's saying, so in verse 38, he says, So, in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone. For if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail.

But if it's of God, you'll not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God. So, remember, Gamaliel instructed the council here. He's saying, let them be.

Leave them alone. They've got their message. You know, they've got their followers right now. But if it's not of God, it's going to fail anyway. You know, but if it is of God, you're going to be found fighting against God and you're not going to be able to stop it.

[6 : 58] So, it's almost like, you know, now a couple of short chapters. This is a short period of time, really. Later, they're taking their stand against Stephen. They decide it's a good thing to execute them.

And then not even that, to use that as a springboard to go and kill other Christians. It's almost like Gamaliel is like, yeah, you know, he was the man of reason.

And then reason just goes out the door, right? And it's like, eh, forget that. Whatever. We're just going to kill them all. So, I just thought that was interesting.

Such a short time later, the Jewish council ignores Gamaliel after they had listened to him. And so, what we see here, ultimately, with Saul and the Jewish council, now the preaching of the gospel became too much for them to bear, and so they tried snuffing it out by any means necessary.

And what we see here in this coalition is that the unrighteous man will always seek out others who will affirm their unrighteous deeds.

[8 : 09] That's what you have going on here, right? I mean, we've already established the fact that this trial of Stephen is a farce, just like the trial of Jesus. There was nothing there. They had to bring in false witnesses to stand against Stephen and make false accusations against him.

I mean, it's a complete mockery of justice. And then, after Stephen gives his defense, and in his defense, he's showing how he is actually innocent of everything they're claiming, but they themselves are guilty of everything they're claiming he did, they get upset, they get angry, they get convicted, and they are being convicted, so they're cut to the quick, right?

And then, instead of reacting appropriately to their conviction, they lash out and they kill him. And Saul was there approving it.

So it was like they were looking for this affirmation of their unrighteous deeds. And this is exactly what we're told in Romans 1 happens. Romans 1 verse 32.

So after a long list of things that Paul writes in Romans 1, condemning people of the world, he says, Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them.

[9 : 33] Unrighteous people look for people to affirm their unrighteous deeds. And Saul acknowledged this himself in Acts 22 verse 20, when he's giving his testimony.

And he says, And when the blood of Stephen, your witness, was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving, and watching over the garments of those who killed him. He's saying, I'm supporting this group.

They're doing something wrong, and I'm supporting it. In the United States right now, you don't need to look much further than the month of June to see the approval and affirmation of unrighteousness in our nation.

Pride Month is designed to support and celebrate the lifestyles that are offensive to our holy creator God. Within the spectrum of the LGBTQ, there's a strong desire for gender-affirming care, because unrighteousness loves the approval of others.

I mean, just think of that gender-affirming care. Like, people need, they recognize that there's something not right, and they need people to affirm and come around and support them.

[10:42] A whole month of June, Pride Month, it is a celebration and a supporting of lifestyles that are an offense to our holy God. And since unrighteousness loves the approval of others, we see in our text, Saul's approval of the unrighteous execution of innocent Stephen.

It happens, it's happening in this text, it happens in our nation, and these are different ways in which we see it. This case, it's religious elite trying to snuff out this, what's to them a new teaching.

Now, in the case of our nation, it's people who followed after their own desires, and God has given them over to a depraved mind, Romans 1 tells us. So that means God is allowing people to go as far as their minds and thoughts will take them, and that's what we're seeing.

And in either case, when it comes to unrighteousness, it loves company. It loves to be affirmed and built up. So Saul was, he was active in the martyrdom of Stephen.

We see also that Saul led the persecution of the church. And so it says that it arose that day a great persecution against the church.

[11:57] And verse 3 says, Saul was ravaging the church, entering house to house, and taking them, dragging them to prison. Saul was ravaging the church.

He was relentless in his pursuit to wipe out the existence of believers. His own testimony in Acts 22, verse 4. He says, I persecuted this way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women.

He saw that he was actively standing against the truth of the word of God, and he was dragging men and women to prison, ultimately to be falsely accused, bring false witness, this one farce trial after another, and to put these people to death.

We know he didn't just stay in Jerusalem. He also went outside those bounds and bringing people in to be killed.

And there was no discrimination by Saul in his pursuits, as both men and women were targeted and taken away. And as I was thinking about that, that possibly could have left some children alone.

[13:12] Some children may have been, obviously if their mother and father are taken out of the home, they might have to go live with someone else, or they may have to fend for themselves. Now this is speculation, right?

We're not told this in Scripture that this happens and takes place, but it only makes sense for it to happen. And then think about what that does for that kid and the impression it makes on them.

Oh, well, if mom and dad, we were talking about Jesus and following him, and now they were taken away and killed, I don't want to do that. I don't want that to happen to me.

So it's just, and it's devastating. Just think of a kid being abandoned, their parents taken from them. And they didn't have orphanages. They didn't have foster homes, per se.

It was either the family took care of that child, or they were left alone. What I found, excuse me, what I find interesting in this whole scenario is the way that this whole thing is contrary to what worldly expectations and understanding might be.

[14:31] If people are being killed, sought out, snuffed out, and the intent for Saul and the Jewish council was to ultimately stop the teaching in the name of Jesus, worldly wisdom is, well, don't do it.

Right? I mean, if you're going to be killed for it, these people are this, like, is it really worth dying for? Just don't do it. But we see that God uses the persecution and martyrdom of believers to further spread the truth of the gospel.

Consider that. God uses the persecution and martyrdom of believers to further spread the truth of the gospel. Think about that. Take a look at a brief glimpse at church history.

This might be, like, one part of a class hour with me when I was teaching this. So John Fox wrote a book in 1558 or so, 1563, called Fox's Book of Martyrs.

It's still available in print. I have a copy I'm reading through right now. In the first 20 pages of this book, he covers what's referred to as the 10 primitive persecutions of the church in Rome.

[15 : 54] And so he lists the ruler and the year that the persecution took place. So we start with Nero. So these are official proclamations against the church.

This isn't the religious elite, the Jewish council going and killing Christians. This is, like, this is the government. Now, this is Congress, though.

Congress didn't work as Congress. You know, the Roman emperor just kind of made decisions and they went with it. So, now, this would be an edict being passed down from our government saying, okay, we need to take out Christians.

They're bad people. They've got bad teachings and we need to kill them. We need to take them out. So, in AD 67, Nero, who nearly destroyed Rome with his fiery decisions, Rome burned under Nero. But as a scapegoat, he pointed to the Christians. And so, under Nero in AD 67, we see incidences such as Paul being beheaded, Peter being crucified upside down.

[17 : 11] Some Christians were sewed up in skins of wild beasts and wounded by dogs till they died. Some were set on fire in Nero's gardens in order to illuminate them. So they were given, like, a wax shirt or whatever.

I can't remember exactly what Fox, he describes what happened, and they were burned. They were basically the torch to light the gardens for Nero. That was under Nero.

Not even the worst, by the way, but pretty bad. In AD 81, you had Domitian, was the ruler at this time. Under Domitian, John, the apostle, was boiled in oil, but miraculously delivered.

And after he was boiled in oil and delivered, he was exiled to Patmos, which is also where he penned the book of Revelation. Timothy, Paul's young protege, was beaten to death with clubs. Under Trajan, AD 108, Ignatius, one of the, an early church father, was taken to Rome and thrown to wild beasts.

[18 : 21] Polycarp was burned at the stake, and that's an interesting, interesting thing that happened with him because the fire never, the fire did not consume him. He was actually put at the stake and burned, but the fire wasn't consuming him, so they, they stabbed him, and his blood ended up putting the fire out, but then they restarted the fire, and it was all done.

But that was interesting. It was like God was kind of delivering him, and they got sick and tired of that. AD 162, and by the way, I'm not covering all of them, I'm just giving highlights of individuals that you may know or things that took place.

AD 162, Marcus Aurelius Antonis, Antoninus, we saw under him that many thousands of believers were crucified, beheaded, or thrown to wild beasts.

Severus in AD 192, again, more beheading, dying by the sword. He did a lot of persecution, went to North Africa and Egypt under him.

235, you had Maximinus. I quote it directly from what Fox says. He said, numberless Christians were slain without trial and burned indiscriminately in heaps, sometimes 50 or 60 being cast into a pit together.

[19 : 36] AD 249, Decius, a lot of hatred toward Christians due to the church buildings being full of worshipers and the heathen temples being forsaken. So thousands were dragged through the streets with nails driven into their feet, scourged, torn with iron hooks, burned, beheaded, just killed.

I mean, right? I mean, any possible way they could think of. And Valerian in 257, confiscated property of Christians, exiled some of their leaders, forbade them to assemble and worship, ordered all clerical and lay leaders executed if they refused to renounce Christ publicly.

So probably the softest of the 10. Aurelian, that was Valerian. Aurelian in 274. There were a few that were directly martyred by him because some of his own people killed him.

But his successors continued his intended purge of Christians. Diocletian in AD 303 is the last of the 10. The scriptures were burned. Christians were forbidden to assemble.

Church buildings were set on fire. Christian homes were burned. Christians were weighted with stones and thrown into the sea. This persecution under Diocletian is the worst of the 10.

[20 : 53] Yeah. And so that's the first 20 pages of Fox's Book of Martyrs, which is an extremely lengthy book. But it's just one after another. You just see how in history, and I appreciate the fact that he wrote this when he did, because you see in history that Christians, by and large, are hated.

The truth of the gospel is trying to be snuffed out by unrighteous men. And it's still going on. So fast forward to modern history.

2014, ISIS invaded northern Iraq. In the process, they spray painted the Arabic letter noon or N on the homes of businesses of Christians, indicating that they were Nazarenes.

They're followers of Jesus of Nazareth. The property owners were given a choice to convert to Islam, leave or die. Most believers refused to deny their faith. More than 100,000 fled with nothing more than just the clothes on their back to get out.

Many were also put to death in order to terrorize other believers who refused to deny their faith. So I'll give you this brief glimpse in church history, and I apologize if it was maybe a little more graphic than you would have liked.

[22 : 14] But I don't think it benefits us any to just to ignore that either. We're not talking about just discrimination.

We're not just talking about, like in America, we don't have persecution. We have discrimination sometimes. But we're talking about like persecution where lives are lost.

Livelihoods are lost. No homes are burned, and there is no respite for Christians in these areas at these times. And it's still happening today.

Is it likely? Will this happen in the United States of America? I don't know. It doesn't seem likely. But, you know, I'm not the one in power.

I'm not the one making the decisions. God's the one who raises up leaders and puts them down. He's the one who raises up nations and puts them down. He directs the affairs of all people. It's possible that something like this could happen in our country, especially the further we get away from the truth of Scripture and the righteousness of God and the more that we glorify and celebrate unrighteousness.

[23 : 31] So what started in Acts 8 has been going on for almost 2,000 years of church history. people are constantly targeting the gospel and believers as enemies to be rid of.

But, right, man, we're down here right now. If you're at where I'm at, I'm really discouraged, right? Like, I'm just like, man, it's one thing after another, one negative thing after another, right, in history. And that's only, that's not even 300 years of history right there. Thousands upon thousands of Christians. Thousands of Christians being killed every year. Shame on me.

I meant to bring, I have a stack of, of like business mailers if you wanted to sign up. If you don't already get the magazine, the free magazine each month from Voice of the Martyrs, I highly encourage you to get it.

Because it really is, it puts in the front of Christians, especially in the United States of America, where we're very comfortable with our lives, the very real persecution that's taking place in the world.

[24 : 55] But anyway, I've got, I've got a bunch of them. I'm about to put them right here for you and I'll grab them after service. But this has been going on for almost 2,000 years of history.

Christians are just being waylaid, taken out. But the gospel continued to be preached. Notice that in verse 4.

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. they knew what was happening. They understood Saul's intent.

They knew what the Jewish council was doing. They knew what happened to Stephen. And they knew what was going to happen to them if they stayed, so they scattered. But they didn't just scatter and forget. They scattered and they preached the word.

See, God and the gospel are not defeated by human opposition, however evil and intense it might be. The efforts of the Sanhedrin and Saul to halt the preaching of the gospel and wipe out the early church only resulted in expansion and wider impact.

[26 : 06] The attempts by Roman rulers to snuff Christians out for 300 years failed immensely. Then Constantine came along and that would no longer be a major issue in the Roman Empire.

the attempt by ISIS to eliminate believers in the Middle East has failed. ISIS in and of itself is, I mean, it's still kind of around but it's not what it used to be.

Every attempt by man to snuff out the truth of the word of God and the preaching of the gospel has failed immensely. they have failed and they have gone on.

They have died. That's what I'm saying. They've gone on. They've died. But the word of God remains. Now, they may have gotten some but the gospel continues to be preached.

And in his book Apologeticus, Tertullian writes around A.D. 197, so in the midst of those persecutions taking place in the Roman Empire, he says the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

[27 : 22] What he's saying there is that as the blood of the martyrs is spilt, the church continues to grow. The seed is continuing to be thrown and the gospel is continuing to be preached.

See, persecution leads to gospel growth. And it's not because a mission plan is approved and put into action by leaders of the church.

It's not because leaders of the church are sitting down at their desks and they're writing out, okay, how are we going to reach so many people and how are we going to do this and do that and what's our game plan?

I'm telling you with as many articles that I've been exposed to and I've read over the years and as many books as I've had exposure to about the ways in which you grow your church and this, that, and the other, I don't know what Small Paul put out here.

Some people may have picked up what, I think it was about church growth or something. So I don't know, there's books like that ad nauseum. Go to Christian book distributors, look up church growth, you'll probably get a thousand hits at least.

[28 : 24] I mean, they're out there and it's one strategy after another, it's one game plan after another, it's like this is how we got thousands of people in our church or this is how our church has been growing like this and this is how, why we need three services a day and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

And the bottom line is this, there's a lot of stuff out there that sounds good and sounds awesome and churches have implemented and put it into practice and it's worked for them but what it is is ultimately it's a worldly model of how do we grow whatever it is that we have, whatever our company is or whatever our intent is, whatever our business is, how do we grow it?

and there's a lot of worldly ways in which to do that but the bottom line point is that it's not those ways that it's going to grow a church especially in rural Shapley, Maine by the way, well rural I say, sort of rural, some of the, a lot of these books are written by pastors who are in New York City and in Los Angeles and in Chicago, you know, where they've got millions of people that they're connecting with and contacting, they're not written for people like 3,000 population Shapley, Maine and I'm telling you these models, they may have worked for these churches but the bottom line the only model that works for any church that is true to God is the preaching of the gospel, is the sharing of the gospel, so it's not the, it's not the actions of leaders that implement game plans but it's ordinary believers that who take the opportunities given to them to preach the message of the gospel wherever they go, so why was, why is it that in the midst of persecution that the church grows?

Because, because Christians who are faithful to the word of God spread out and wherever they're at anyway they're already preaching the gospel, they're already telling people about Jesus, they're already warning them about the judgment to come, so whether they're doing that in this city or this city or this country or that country, wherever it is, if that's in them to do anyway, the church is going to grow in wherever they're at because the gospel is being preached.

And I can't emphasize that enough, the gospel is being preached. It's not about programs. I am so sick of conversations about programs and churches.

[30 : 58] Throw them all out and bring the word of God to bear on people's souls. This is where people get saved. This is how people get saved is the preaching and teaching and sharing of the word of God.

Programs come and go but the word of God stands forever. And this needs to be it. This needs to be at our heart. So how do we want this church to grow?

Right? I mean, it's the burden of every church I've ever been in. The growing of the church. There's concerns. People are getting older. Kids are growing up and they're leaving.

They're going to college. They're never coming back. Whatever it is. And I'm telling you, it's a burden because one reason why it's a burden and I hate this too by the way, I love our trustees and our treasure.

Can I say that very much? I thank you all for taking on the things that I absolutely hate. I hate money. I do. I mean, I need it, right? We need money to live. I hate money.

[32 : 02] Money is the root of all sorts of evil, right? That's biblical. I just hate dealing with it. And you go to budget meetings.

You have your annual meetings. The things that, obviously at a budget meeting, the thing that's going to be the thing that we talk about is money. Oh, we are another seven grand in the hole or,

you know, or at an annual meeting.

Well, we're looking at a projected \$17,000 loss. Oh, man. From a worldly perspective, that's so deflating. And I hate to deal with that.

And I'll be the first one to tell you, and I know there are people in here who can vouch for this because I've said it. Man, I just cut my salary. Cut it out. We don't have to worry about losses anymore. And let us deal with how to get our own money.

But it's like, it becomes the concern of the church. Now we don't have enough money to survive. We're not going to be around. And we can't pay the bills. And we can't replace the roof. And the fascia on the youth group room has been exposed for 75 years.

[33 : 07] And when are we going to get that fixed? In process, by the way. I have been in touch with somebody. But the fact is, it's like we're always worrying ourselves about these things. And it's like, well, we need more people to come in to give more.

Oh, man. I'm sorry. I'm going off script here. I'm literally four sentences from ending this sermon. But I'm just telling you, I've had these conversations, and like I've had somebody literally like refer to people as tithing units.

And I almost died in that meeting. I held back so much. Can I tell you something? I've heard that when you get older, you get like less, like you get more vocal about things.

I don't consider myself very old, by the way. I feel very old today because we had a softball tournament yesterday. But I'm telling you, if I ever hear anybody refer to somebody as a tithing unit again, I might smack them with a Bible.

But I've had that. And unfortunately, people look at it that way because they look at the church from a business perspective. And the church is not about business. The church is about souls.

[34 : 22] The church is about the truth of the Word of God. So you want to see this church in Shapley, Maine grow? Then we need to make our obedience to the Word of God first and foremost.

See, Christians, as I mentioned, they're not persecuted in this country. Now, there may be discrimination, but there's no persecution, truly. But many professing believers are content never to open their mouths in the name of Jesus outside the four walls of the church building.

Bring them in, and they're happy to sing songs all day, and they're happy to put up with a pastor's sermon for 30 minutes maybe. Now, they're happy to be here and say, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

But you leave this many. Leave these walls. Leave the walls of a church building where we're meeting or in a home where they're meeting for Bible study or whatever.

It doesn't matter. They leave that meeting and never once utter the name of Jesus or tell people about the gospel message.

[35 : 34] And we wonder what's happening. It is not the model of church. It is not the model of church that is the thing that matters.

Do you meet in a home? Do you meet under a tree? Do you meet in a large cathedral building? It doesn't matter where you meet as the church body. But what does matter is are you living obediently to the truth of the word of God?

What I'm seeing is it doesn't matter if people are meeting in a church building, in a home, under a tree, in a half-built building in Africa.

They're not uttering the name of Jesus and the truth of the gospel message when they leave that gathering. And it's especially true here in the United States of America. You know, supposedly 70% of people believe the Bible and identify as Christian.

I scoff at those things. I'm like, no, they do not. They may say they are, but their life says otherwise. If 70% of this nation were true Bible-believing, obeying Christians, our nation would not be in the toilet that it is now going down at rapid speed.

[36 : 53] So ladies and gentlemen, I've gone on. I wondered what God had in store today because I couldn't come up with a single thing to share. But now I can't get myself to stop.

But the bottom line is this. Let's take the example of what we see in Acts 8. Let's choose to preach the word wherever we are and in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in.

Our relationships with our neighbors are very, very important. Very important. But let me tell you something. Something I've heard many times. It's along the lines of be the gospel that people see or preach the gospel through the life that you live.

But let me tell you something. That is true. You need to be a good, obedient, loving Christian. But the life you live in the good, kindness, compassionate life that you have is not what saves

