

God's Grace in the Darkness

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Date: 21 January 2018

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[0 : 00] And surely as we were reading again these words, we were gripped in our love for this martyred saint, this godly man who even in the throes of death would cry out, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

And so in his life and in his death, we'd be seeing grace upon grace. You know, there's this man before a crowd of hate-filled leaders, religious leaders, we've been seeing this one man, Stephen, grace upon grace and focusing on this one man in contrast to another individual, to another individual who's been standing by, who's been watching and approving what's been happening to Stephen.

Of course, this other man we see here is Saul, who would later be the Apostle Paul. Paul, who would be the missionary preacher of the Gospel to non-Jews, to Gentiles.

And yet we have to say this surely, that grace was working in Saul's heart, Saul who became Paul. Grace changed Paul. Grace changed that man who once approved of the brutal stoning of this godly saint.

And God would use the circumstances of Stephen's death to bring about change. To bring about a change, not just in the church's life, which we'll look at that in a moment, but surely also in the life of, we'll just refer to him now as Paul, the Apostle Paul.

[1 : 30] And there are lessons, of course, for us to learn in the section in the book of Acts, remembering the overwhelming message that we see here, that God's grace, God's grace, saves even the most hardened of opponents to the Gospel.

And we see surely then that grace isn't static. Grace isn't unmoving. God's grace reaches deep into the hearts of even the most hardened and rebellious of sinners.

God's grace reaches the lost. And see here that God will reverse. God will reverse even the most apparently negative responses to the cause of the Gospel.

And God will show his grace even in the saving of many souls. I mean, if you know the famous expression that was used regarding the early church, about the work of God, the amazing power of the work of God, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

And we'll come back to that later. So we don't despair. I mean, if God could save a wretch like Saul, a wretch like Paul, he can save any wretch who's the object of his favour.

[2 : 50] And if God could use the death of Stephen to bring about the spread of the Gospel message, so we can see that God can use apparent setbacks to the faith and bring many to glory.

We proclaim salvation in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. And so we do see, can see and will see God's grace even in the darkness.

Now I know that we, you know, naturally we just want to race ahead and see Saul's conversion. I mean, this man that stands there approving of Stephen's death. But I think we do have to slow down a bit.

And really for us this morning to see the way that Scripture, God's Word, brings out the wonderful work of God's grace, seen in overcoming the darkness, God's grace seen in his overruling providence, bringing good from evil.

We see here God's purpose is carried out for God's glory and for the good of God's church. And we see, of course, that seen in the saving of souls.

[3 : 59] So, let's look at three things, three main things this morning with you then. You see in your notes, firstly, the persecution of the church, secondly, the scattering of the church, and thirdly, the preaching of the Gospel.

So, let's consider firstly the persecution of the church. I mean, when we were reading there of Stephen's death, to all intents and purposes, it would have seemed the cruelest blow to that very young church, that fledgling church.

Here's Stephen, this young man. This man who just a little time before whom the church had chosen, had carefully chosen to alleviate the sufferings of fellow believers in Jerusalem.

And now this man is killed. Killed by a religious elite. And that religious elite had wanted to silence Stephen once and for all. The only way they could think to do so was to kill him, to store him to death.

I mean, the church, that early church had never had a martyr in its short existence. So now, just a few years after Jesus' death and resurrection, we see one who followed the Saviour in life.

[5 : 08] Now followed him in death. And with this dreadful, horrible act, this horrible act of putting to death the saint of God, a man in whom the church had pinned so many of its hopes.

What do we see? We see that it immediately follows a persecution of the church there in Jerusalem. It's a great persecution. And it's not the political authorities who are doing the persecuting, it's these religious authorities, Jewish leaders who hated the name of Jesus.

These leaders who wanted nothing to do with the Lord Jesus Christ. These leaders who were prepared to go to the most extreme lengths to silence the name of the Lord Jesus by silencing believers.

And as we saw to cap it all, one man in particular seems to be singled out, or is singled out for his venom, for his hatred against the church.

This man, Saul. Saul who became Paul. This man, Saul, who was present when Stephen was stoned to death. This man who had watched over the outer garments of those who were actually stoning Stephen to death so that they could, you know, have that freedom to throw these rocks at Stephen.

[6 : 24] This man who was approving what the Jewish council were doing in their execution of Stephen. So, what are we seeing? We're seeing the church under attack. It seems that darkness is all around.

And yet we see Stephen is buried by devout men. He has this act of defiant courage against those who had killed Stephen. So, when all around there's this clamour of hatred in the hearts of those who wanted nothing to do with the name of Jesus.

We see one man, Saul, who seems to be championing the cause of those who hated the Lord Jesus. We read here, if I'm going house to house, seizing Christians, making sure that they're being transported to prison in all likelihood today.

So, the church is under severe persecution. Saul, it seems, is right there at the front line in these acts of persecution. And, you know, if you actually look at verse 3, even the very language that we see being used here of Saul's hatred, you can see how deep his hatred was.

We're told there in verse 3 that he ravaged the church. And that word that tells us that, a sort of relentless desire to destroy the church. That's in Saul's heart.

[7 : 40] And then we're told there that he drags off men and women. And again, that word that tells us of forcibly removing men and women from their homes, doing so without mercy.

And then we're told, thirdly there, he commits them to prison. So, in other words, he's handing these believers to conditions, to absolutely brutal conditions, where they're going to face humiliation, they're going to face starvation.

And ultimately death. You see the measure, even in that one verse, how deep Saul's hatred was for the church. He's brutal. He's utterly committed to destroying the church.

So, first Stephen, silence, and then other believers. And what next? You know, in many ways, the reality of experience of persecuted Christians in many parts of the world.

On Wednesday evening, and this morning, we're praying for believers in North Korea. And we were focused on North Korea. On Wednesday evening, the country that we're told is the number one persecutor of Christians.

[8 : 49] And there the church is ravaged. There the believers are dragged from their homes. There Christians are committed to horrendous prison conditions, where torture takes place.

And you might say, is there hope for North Korea? Yes, of course there's hope. Why? Because God is sovereign. God is sovereign. And then we ask, are those who are persecuting these Christians, whether in North Korea or elsewhere, are they beyond the saving grace of God?

No. Of course they're not. Why? Because, again, God is sovereign. I mean, those who at this very moment are Saul-like in their determination to destroy the church, they are not beyond the reach of God's saving grace.

And so we pray. We pray. We don't just pray for those who are being persecuted, but we pray for those who are doing the persecution, who are persecuting our brothers and sisters in Christ in North Korea and every other part of the world where our brothers and sisters in Christ are being tortured for their faith, for suffering, for righteousness' sake.

And we pray with the words of Psalm 7 that I keep every Wednesday, O righteous God who searches minds and hearts, bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure.

[10 : 10] Well, certainly in Saul's case, Paul's case, his violence against Christians, well, of course it came to an end after his conversion.

Now, later we'll be looking particularly at that conversion on the Damascus Road, when Paul encountered the Lord Jesus, and the Lord Jesus encountered Paul, and Paul's converted.

But we do know this. Many, many years later, I think we estimate around 25 years later, 25 years after this event, when Paul himself was speaking before his accusers, and he was giving his defense, 25 years later after this, Paul would look back, and Paul spoke about his former life as a persecutor of Christians.

And Paul would speak before his accusers in Jerusalem. And he actually recounted that very day when, as he says, when he stood and watched with approval the death of Stephen.

You can read this in Acts 22, verse 20, 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.

[11 : 24] You see, Paul never forgot that day. That day was so impressed in Paul's mind, it was so impressed in his heart, he'd never forget it.

Why? Because he'd be reminded again and again of what he once was before God's grace changed him, before that grace transformed his life from being an out-and-out persecutor of Christians to an out-and-out defender of the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

And surely for you who know the Lord Jesus as your Savior, you must never forget what you once were before you were converted. As you recall how great the grace of God is in saving a hell-deserving sinner such as yourself and such as myself.

Because God rescues each and every sinner on whom his favor rests and rescues each and every sinner in grace. Because we see God's sovereign grace ruling, overruling, doing so for God's glory.

Even in the saving of souls, saving of those who outwardly might appear the most unlikely of converts. Because you see, if Stephen had a reputation for godliness, Saul had a reputation for the most intense opposition to the name of Jesus.

[12 : 48] But God in his infinite wisdom, God chose, God chose, and from all eternity, God chose that Stephen's life would end in the manner that God had decreed.

That death that would bring glory to God. That would bring glory through Stephen's witness. And of course the same God chose, God elected, that the once opponent of Jesus, even the one standing as Stephen's been stoned today, that once opponent of salvation through Jesus, that this Saul who became Paul, this man would proclaim Jesus and bring glory to God through that missionary work and through his epistles.

On that very day when Stephen's been stoned to death, nobody, surely nobody would have imagined that that young man who was guarding the clothes of Stephen's murderers, that man who approved of the death of Stephen, that he'd become the greatest, the greatest New Testament author composing his epistles under divine inspiration.

But you see, that's the grace of God. Even in the midst of intense persecution, persecution, God is working out his plan or has already from eternity worked out his plan for his church.

Saul would be converted. Saul would be used mightily of God. Saul would prove beyond doubt the efficacy of saving grace. Even to Paul who called himself the chief of sinners.

[14 : 15] sinners. And we see in chapter 8 there these verses God's plan for the furtherance of the gospel.

You see in verse 1 and verse 4 we see well we see something very particular. We see the scattering of the church. Look at the particular this particular expression about scattering.

There arose in that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered. First use of the word. Scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria sent the apostles and then verse 4 now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

So what are we seeing here? The death of Stephen. Stephen's death signals a dispersal of believers away from Jerusalem going to other parts of that particular landmass initially going into Judea to the south and then Samaria to the north.

The scattering of these peoples is traumatic. You know when families have to leave their homes and their livelihoods for the you know we see this in modern society.

[15 : 29] It's a most traumatic situation. Being forced to leave their homes their livelihoods the uncertainty of the future grief bewilderment.

Do you know anything about the history of Eastern Europe and the Second World War you'll know that there were millions of people tens of thousands of families from Eastern Europe who were displaced at short notice leaving homelands for places they'd never been to before.

There was so much anguish bewilderment simply because of these people's ethnicity. Of course you see in recent times tens of thousands displaced from the Middle East families having to flee persecution from their homeland and all the pain and the heartache of the movement of these peoples you see it.

Look here look at this there's no indication here of grief or bewilderment from those believers who have been forced to leave their homes in Jerusalem.

You see what do we find? We're told that those who were scattered abroad went about preaching the word. So there's this great purpose in the scattering. The word of God was spread to other places so from the point of the devastation of Stephen's death the result in forceful scattering of many of the believers in Jerusalem.

[16 : 54] So from the fruit of adversity was the preaching of the gospel the preaching of the word. Now we're going to look more particular than that preaching in a moment particularly the preaching of one man Philip.

But I do think we need to pause here and reflect on something really of crucial importance when we look again at why Luke has used this particular word twice scattered scattering. It's actually a very unusual word found I think it was three times in the book of Acts and in each of these three occasions the word is connected with Stephen's death.

You see it as we said in verse 1 verse 4 and actually see it again in chapter 11 verse 19. And so there has to be significance in all this because it's a word that speaks of scattering a seed scattering a seed in a field.

We actually use that word today when we speak of the movement of a people across the world from one place to another. That word that we speak of diaspora you speak of the highland diaspora particularly in relation to the highland clearances.

Thousands upon thousands of people from the highlands forcibly removed from their homes and scattered across the world. Canada, America, Australia, New Zealand particularly.

[18 : 15] But when we think here of the Christian diaspora as we see here in chapter 8 there is that emphasis on the scattering of seed. The sowing of the seed. The seed of the gospel.

The seed that would bear fruit as a result of this persecution that arose from the death of Stephen. And of course people actually question that statement the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church but I think we can see this clearly in the case of a scattering of the seed of the gospel as a result of Stephen's death.

The seed was sown beyond Jerusalem. In Tjudae and Samaria as we certainly see here initially and we go into chapter 11 in Acts you see it was scattered further into the eastern Mediterranean coastline and then into Cyprus.

So the seed of the gospel has been scattered further and further from Jerusalem from the centre. In other words God is overruling.

God was overruling in the death of Stephen. God is bringing about through Stephen's death the spread of the gospel. That's exactly as what Jesus foretold. Remember just prior to Jesus' ascension and Jesus sent his disciples you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[19 : 38] So the word of God wasn't going to be suppressed by the actions and intentions of those who were trying to silence that word through violence and persecution.

That wasn't the case then 2000 years ago and it's certainly not the case today. However much secular opponents of Christianity are trying to stifle the word of God the word of God will not be smothered it won't be silenced.

And however much secularists try to erase from civil life references to the word of God even trying to silence the preaching of the word there will be and remain faithful witnesses who maintain God's word who testify to the living truth of salvation the Lord Jesus because lives will only flourish by the preaching of the word.

And however much opponents of Christianity try and remove preaching of the word from our lives from our towns our cities Glasgow city of course once was let Glasgow flourish through the preaching of the word that last statement of course removed.

But Glasgow will still hear the preaching of the word and the preaching of the word will continue it will continue in the public domain and elsewhere the preaching of the word will continue why?

[21 : 09] Because there is that diaspora that the seed is being sown and there is a harvest of souls even through this Christian diaspora because God has so ordained it to be for his glory for the furtherance of his kingdom and people will continue to hear the word preached and lives will continue to change and be transformed as a result of the preaching of the word so from the darkness of persecution from the darkness of repression and opposition light comes light comes you see that in the case of the preaching of the word there in Samaria as you see in verses 4 to 8 the preaching of the gospel so what are we seeing here now many people of course we were told are scattered in that first Christian diaspora immediately after Stephen's day but interesting only one individual is actually highlighted in the proclamation of the gospel that's this man Philip he's popularly known as

Philip the Evangelist and you see in these verses 4 to 8 and in fact beyond in fact even later in chapter 8 but what a work God had given this man Philip to do and what an example Philip shows us today about our witness to the gospel so what about this man Philip we were introduced to him here but we're not actually introduced to him just here in verse 5 because we're actually told earlier in Acts in chapter 6 Philip's one of these seven men who were appointed by the church to help in the distribution of aid to the destitute in Jerusalem so you see his name mentioned at the start of chapter 6 so obviously he's a man who worked with Stephen he obviously knew Stephen in fact interesting if you go to the start of chapter 6 you notice his name is listed immediately beside Stephen so only

Stephen and Philip of these seven are actually mentioned particularly mentioned in scripture as doing particular works of evangelism so here's a man who knows Stephen who's worked with Stephen his name must have said listed besides Stephen he would have felt the loss of Stephen greatly now we're not told if he's actually one of these devout men in chapter 8 verse 2 these devout men who buried Stephen lamented over him but certainly because of his close association with Stephen undoubtedly he would have felt the pain of his loss as any of us do in the loss of a servant of God even as many of us are doing today in the loss of Kenny MacDonald but there's Philip himself he's part of this dispersal from Jerusalem he's himself suffering from that persecution so if you like there's that double blow the loss of Stephen and now being part of that dispersal that diaspora because of persecution but that loss of his dear friend and companion and coupled with that quitting from Jerusalem it doesn't deter

Philip from doing what God has called him to do he's not going to cower in depression he's not going to hide his light under that bowl he's going to proclaim Christ and he's going to do it in a place that would have seemed so contrary to a field of harvest of gospel harvest because Samaria was a place that was so opposed to certainly to the Jewish people but Philip was faithful to God's calling God's sending and if Stephen was the first Christian martyr then we have to say that Philip was the first Christian missionary to Samaria certainly following Jesus footsteps because Jesus of course himself had preached the gospel in Samaria now we're not certainly going into the details about the hostility between Jews and Samaritans but there's enough surely to say here that there were racial and religious differences that created the division but here's

Philip now remember Philip here's this Jewish convert this Greek speaking Jewish convert and he's going to Samaria and he's going to preach the gospel there and he's going to show his willingness to break this prejudice why?

[25 : 49] because the Samaritans needed to hear the gospel just as much as any other people need to hear the gospel and in fact we know from scripture that the Samaritans actually were looking for the Savior the Messiah the Christ you go back to John chapter 4 and you read there when Jesus was in Samaria and he was speaking to that Samaritan woman and that woman tells him that she knows that Messiah is coming and Jesus makes himself known to her as Messiah as the Christ and what do we find in John 4 we're told that in turn she tells her fellow Samaritans that Messiah has come they believe in Jesus and the seed of the gospel has been sown there in Samaria and interestingly too it's in Samaria on that very occasion when Jesus is there that Jesus utters the words the fields are white unto harvest and Jesus tells of the need to reap the effects of the sowing of the seed of the gospel and now here's

Philip he's sowing the seed again and a harvest being reaped souls are being saved you see that in this little section here in Acts 8 so the lamentations over Stephen they're now being overcome by the joy of salvation held far away in Samaria as we read there in that little section signs and wonders have accompanied the preaching of the word so from Stephen's death God's purposes are being fulfilled even in the harvest of souls through the preaching of the word so from what appeared a calamitous situation Stephen murdered then a large scale persecution of the church God's people scattered to different parts of that Mediterranean world the darkness of these events has been overcome by the sowing of the gospel seed the word has been preached souls have been saved for the glory of God the miracle of conversion happening there in

Samaria soon going to be followed by the miracle of the conversion of Saul God's church is on the march however much Satan and his forces try to stamp out the spread of the gospel and erase the name of Jesus and so I pray that this is a look at this chapter is an encouragement to us all because yes when we look around we do see the church attacked whether it's the low level persecution in our own land or the high end persecution of believers in other parts of the world we know and trust that God will overrule in the schemes of man man who's opposed to the name of the Lord Jesus because we know that Christ who's the victor and so we rest in hope in his name and we will continue to preach the word we'll continue to proclaim that word we'll continue to tell others of the saviour who died for sinners we won't let apparent setback hinder the work of proclaiming the truth so when you're tempted to be downhearted in the face of so many attacks in the church that we see even today don't be downhearted don't be discouraged remember

God is sovereign God is on the throne he's not going to give his glory to another so we give praise to our God and saviour this morning he is sovereign he is in control he is building his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it so be faithful continue to be faithful Stephen was faithful the dispersed believers were faithful Philip the evangelist was faithful and it's for you and me to continue to be faithful to the calling that we've been given to do to proclaim the name of the Lord Jesus so be true to your calling and yes trust in God even even through the darkness because the darkness will not overcome the light of God's grace and we cry out and praise him he is Lord we praise him now for that fact we praise him always so we conclude with these words may his name be praised amen let us pray our Lord our God our gracious heavenly father we give thanks to you for your grace your saving grace we pray

Lord that our mouths will not be stopped that we will continue to utter the name of Jesus and show forth him in his saving grace Lord bless we pray this the time of worship that you continue with us Lord and our fellowship one with another be with us through the remainder of this day to your praise and to your glory we ask these things amen well let's close in psalm 126 on page 171 singing the whole psalm my along puedo go this in how do you