

How the Gospel both Delivers and Disrupts

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 January 2024

Preacher: Rev. Daniel Avitan

[0 : 00] It's been a while since we've been in the Acts of the Apostles. We'll continue on in this series until Lent. We'll have a Lenten series and then into Easter.

And then I think we're back in Acts after that. We have these scripture journals. Feel free to grab one at any time or a Bible if there's actual the blue color Bibles.

I think they're back there as well. If you don't have one of these, it is our gift to you. It has scripture on one side, lined paper for notes on the other. I'm going to ask the Lord's blessing and we'll open up his word together.

Father, as always, we ask that we will be people that are under your word, submitting to your word because they are your words, your ways, your instructions, your revelation to us about what salvation truly is and how we ought to live in light of that.

Lord, all too often we are tempted with making the scriptures fit our own lives. But Lord, we ask for your grace that we will not be the type of people that try to bend and manipulate your word.

[1 : 10] So Lord, as we dig into Acts 8, we ask your blessing this morning by your spirit. In Christ's name. Amen. So as I said, it's been some time since we've been in Acts.

A bit of a recap. The Jesus, the risen Jesus, he meets with his followers, his apostles. He commissions them to spread the gospel, not just to Jerusalem, but to Judea, to Samaria, and then he says to the ends of the earth.

He ascends up and then the Holy Spirit descends down. And now the previously cowardly, weak-kneed apostles are imbued with the power of God himself and proclaim the gospel across Jerusalem.

They suffer also for it. They were brought before the Sanhedrin. That is the ruling religious body of the land. And on two occasions, they were strictly forbidden to preach the gospel of Christ.

In both cases, they were beaten. And then finally, I'm skipping some chunks here, but finally in chapter 7, that would have been our last Sunday in Acts, Stephen was martyred.

[2 : 27] He was killed. He was stoned to death. And that is where we pick up the story. So we're going to look at Acts chapter 8, and we're going to look at three points that are going to lead us through this chapter.

The first is that we're going to see that there's opposition, and that this opposition to the gospel is both inevitable and invaluable. The second is that proclamation of the gospel that will come from opposition to the gospel, it both destroys historic hostilities and unites unlikely people.

And then the third and final point is that acceptance of the gospel does two things. It both delivers and disrupts the people that hear.

So we're going to jump right into it. If you have one of these sermon journals, sermon journals, scripture journals, I'm looking at Acts 8 on page 46.

So Christ was opposed throughout his ministry. This is nothing new. Constantly, his message was accepted, and then it was rejected. People opened their doors to him.

[3 : 42] The authorities tried to snuff him out. This was a constant for Jesus, and it would be a constant also for his church. Why? Because Jesus' church, as Jesus himself did, shone light in the darkness, and when you do that, you expose the reality of what's there in the shadows.

It exposes the real self and forces the hearer to decide whether they are going to remain in the darkness or see life for what it really is and throw themselves at the mercy of God.

Chapter 8 picks up where chapter 7 ends, and we see this opposition continue with the church, continue on after Stephen's martyr. And this is what it says, verses 1 to 3. And Saul approved of his execution.

I mean, you could even put verse 1, that one line up in chapter 7. It would make sense. It continues on the story. And Saul, who held the cloaks of the murderers of Stephen, approved of Stephen's execution.

And there arose on that day, that's Stephen's execution, a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

[5 : 04] 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.

The persecution happens not just against the apostles now, but it is against the whole church. Anybody who confesses Christ as Lord. It is so bad that there are the scattering of people.

The apostle Paul here, or the apostle Paul, Saul, who would be the apostle Paul, it says he ravages the church. It's hard to kind of understand this language because persecution sounds pretty much like he's like a ravaging of the church.

But think of it like persecution that is heightened, that it's on steroids, that sees red, that has a bloodlust. There's persecution that is deeply personal.

And this seems to be what is happening with the church. So they scatter. Sometimes it's very appropriate to flee persecution. Other times, we are called to stay.

[6 : 13] And throughout Acts, at least up to where we've gotten, there doesn't appear to be a prescriptive command telling us what to do. Whether we stay or whether we flee.

What is told us to do is that we do not deny Christ. But in this case, where the church scatters, there isn't any implication that they are sinning against God by fleeing.

They are scattered. There is a great persecution. And so they run. It's interesting because Stephen did not flee. Maybe he didn't have the chance to flee.

Maybe he did. The fact is, he didn't. Both cases, whether it be Stephen, who stayed and died, or the church that scattered and fled and lived, in both situations, they're talked about in a positive light.

And with the flight of the church comes an invaluable opportunity. And this is where opposition can be invaluable to the gospel. We see it in verse 4. Now when those who were scattered went about preaching, sorry, now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

[7 : 27] And trying to quench the Holy Spirit, destroy the church, Satan only provides the very means by which the Spirit will connect and touch even more people.

Again, I've talked about it in previous weeks. God often uses the plans against him to thwart the people that try to destroy him or his church.

He flips the bad, evil, diabolical plans on their head. And that becomes the very means by which he accomplishes his goal. And this is what we see here.

The scattering in verse 1 and 4, it's the same language used of a farmer having a bag of seed and grabbing handfuls liberally and just tossing it.

Walking to and fro the field, tossing liberally. Seed everywhere. As the people are scattered, so they share the faith. This is the case in Acts 8, but it's also been the case through Christian history.

[8 : 31] Many of you would be familiar with Hudson Taylor, the great missionary in the China Inland Mission in the 19th century. What he spearheaded continued to grow and grow and grow until in 1949, Mao's Communist Party defeated the national government and all 600 plus missionaries were expelled.

Great fear and tragedy fell upon the mission agencies and the missionaries themselves thinking all of their decades of hard work would be lost.

And yet what ended up happening, a third of those missionaries were spread with lessons learned and experience had across Southeast Asia and parts of Japan. And then the indigenous church in China grew in strength and in number.

And nobody knows for certain how many Christians are in China, but some estimates are over 100 million Christians in China. When the enemy tries to destroy the church, it provides an invaluable opportunity for the church to grow.

It's been like that from the very beginning. But it's not only opposition that affords opportunities to share the faith, but it provides invaluable opportunities to identify with Christ, to suffer like Christ for Christ.

[9 : 53] Something that will bolster not just our faith, but the faith of those around us. I mean, I mentioned Hudson Taylor, but we have stories throughout Christian history of martyrs, St. Perpetua, Ignatius of Antioch, John Wycliffe, even Jim Elliot.

All martyrs who were put in a situation where their faith rose up and their stories were told that bolster our faith today. Such stories have fed Christians the world over for centuries. Not Jim Elliot, because he died in the 50s. But nevertheless, the stories of strong faith in the face of opposition. The testimony of God's people.

It is food for our soul. There's little to no chance that we will suffer here in Canada. Physical persecution, I mean, on the streets and suburbs here in Ottawa.

But many of you face opposition for holding to the truth of Christ, especially when you feel pressure to conform and celebrate things that are contrary to the faith that we hold dear.

[11 : 05] The obvious example is Pride Month or Pride Season. The pressure to conform in little ways, in big ways, or suffer career stagnation or even termination.

It's very real. I don't suffer this way as a minister. You do. You guys have it, and I mean this, I don't want to say infinitely harder than I do, but incredibly harder than I do.

And I pray for you because it is tough, it is difficult to navigate secular jobs and stay true to the faith that you hold dear. But remember, with opposition comes opportunity to bear witness, to grow in our faith.

And whatever you may lose for standing for Christ, I don't want to say that you will gain even more, but my goodness, your soul will be free and you will love Christ in deeper measure.

And maybe people will come into the kingdom at the very least, your joy will overflow in Christ. But it will not be for your joy only, for we will see in this next section that the proclamation of the gospel, it always has the effect of breaking down walls of division and hostilities, uniting those who would otherwise be enemies.

[12 : 26] And in short, the proclamation of the gospel makes one church made up of many members. Look with me, verses 5 to 8. 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 came out of many who had them and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

So there was much joy in the city. The significance of Samaria in our text is twofold. The first is that the risen Christ told the disciples that they would bear witness to not just Jerusalem but Judea and Samaria.

And here we have that commission taking place that Jesus' words didn't fall flat. But the second thing that's significant is that there had been a millennia-long hostility between the Jews and the inhabitants of Samaria and it dates all the way back to when the United Kingdom of Israel separated.

And the ten northern tribes became their own kingdom and they turned away from Jerusalem and two tribes remained loyal to Jerusalem, to David's line.

[13 : 47] By the time the first century comes around, Samaritans were a distinct people. They were not quite Jews nor were they pagan Gentiles but they were despised by all. Even the disciples despised Samaritans.

If you remember, maybe you don't, it was a long time when we looked at Luke chapter 9, John and James but especially John which is significant and we'll get to it in a bit. John calls for hellfire to fall down and consume Samaria.

Not just, let's not go to Samaria, I don't like those people. God, Jesus, wipe them out. Now, they hear the gospel from Philip.

They see the confirming signs. They believed and were baptized. And now, as we see in verse 8, there was much joy in that city.

We'll continue verses 14 to 17. Now, when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

[15 : 03] Notice that John is mentioned. Didn't he, in Luke 9, call for their annihilation? Change hearts all around here. John is coming along with Peter to lay their hands on them.

For he had, for the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. The apostles in Jerusalem as a sign of approval and acceptance and a right hand, so to speak, of fellowship sent Peter and John to lay hands on the Samaritans and bless them.

And like I mentioned, John, the genocidal apostle, maybe that should be his name in history, is there and he's not genocidal any longer. He is blessing and extending fellowship to the Samaritans. And we see here in Christ a millennia long hostility is erased and in a sense a divided kingdom after a thousand years of division is no longer divided.

[16:12] But now it is not in the same way that Israel looked where it was just a group of ethnicities broken up into twelve tribes but now the kingdom was expanding.

It expanded from Jerusalem into Judea. Now it was going to hit the Samaritans. Soon we will see especially starting in the next chapter and the chapters to come that that gospel, that nation, that kingdom will expand out and expand out into all the known worlds.

we actually get a glimpse of it in the next portion of chapter 8 when Philip evangelizes to the Ethiopian eunuch as a sign of what was to come.

Here, in short, in God's church there are no second class citizens. Anything that divides ethnicity, culture, gender, rich, poor, wherever you may be, as the apostle Paul says in Galatians chapter 3, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

Verse 28, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is no male and female for you are all one in Christ. Paul isn't saying that those categories don't exist, but that there is an equal place for all, that there is no adult table and kids table in the kingdom of God.

[17:46] Only the gospel can repair what is irreparable by human standards. The real conflict is found not in geopolitics, not in the economy, but in the human heart.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn says very famously, the line separating good and evil passes not through states nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart and through all human hearts.

And how do you repair a heart that is full of evil? You need a new heart. And that is what Christ does, that is what the gospel of Christ will do.

That is why schism and division among the church of Christ is such an affront to the gospel because it seeks to separate what God has brought together.

The church is not unified in our world. It is something we ought to pray for. In fact, we stand on the shoulders of many people that left the Anglican Church of Canada over 10 years ago because of the presenting issue was the acceptance of same-sex blessing, but really it was a departure from the scriptures.

[19:07] And we see that separation and a lot of people accuse what we're a part of now as a denomination of schismatics. We are not.

We have held to Orthodoxy, but for 15 plus years before Anik was created, before these number of churches left the Anglican Church of Canada, there was 15, 20 years of hard work across the country calling the Anglican Church of Canada back to Orthodoxy, back to her first love, pleading, begging, wrestling, arguing, trying to avoid seeing a separation of what Christ had united.

How do we fight against the perennial temptation to drift from God's gospel? If that is the thing that separates, how do we avoid that?

Jude tells us in verse 3 of his short letter, and this is what he says, beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you, here it is, to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

We never can, if we want to contend for the faith, we can never stop hearing and valuing and applying and contending for the gospel. We can never treat the gospel as the front door, now we're into the Christian faith and that's kind of like junior varsity, we're on to the bigger things.

[20:47] That's kindergarten, we're on to grade school and high school. The gospel is every part of the faith and we need to feed on it, to come to Christ daily. And how do we do that?

By confessing our sins, by looking to him, by fellowshiping, doing what we are doing today, by being very, very, very aggressive by God's help, by the Holy Spirit's help, to put away darkness in our life, to not think we've arrived.

So, we see that the gospel, when it is opposed, it provides opportunities for growth. We see that when the gospel is proclaimed, that hostility and division is broken down.

But when the gospel is accepted, we see two things, deliverance, but we also see confrontation. Look with me at Simon, starting in verse 9 and on to 13.

That's what it says. But there was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great.

[22 : 04] they all paid attention to him from the least to the greatest, saying, this man is the power of God that is called great. And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.

But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed.

And after being baptized he continued with Philip and seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. You see, the problem with false religion is not just that it is untrue, but it is deeply deceptive and harmful.

Simon here, you don't know exactly who he kind of fashioned himself as, but through history and tradition, we know that the Samaritans, although they held to the first five books of Moses, they had a whole tapestry of beliefs and a part of that was this prophecy that a messianic prophet would come named Tahib.

And it appears that Simon styled himself as that prophet and he deceived many. It says from the oldest to the youngest, the implication here is that all Samaria was following this man.

[23 : 31] And we see a bit later on that he was doing this not because he thought he was doing good for the people, but because it brought him great power and wealth. He was motivated by power and money, especially as he is trying to buy that spiritual authority in that next section we'll see from the apostles.

Simon held the people in spiritual bondage. And oftentimes spiritual bondage looks something like this, not an exhaustive list. You have to work hard to achieve various levels as you hope to one day gain salvation.

Spiritual bondage looks like this. You have to give and give and give and give to gain access to spiritual enlightenment. If it's granted to you.

Or maybe spiritual bondage looks like this. You must sacrifice things and people that are dear to you to curry favor, to grow, whether that's to grow crops or to make money or to live well.

We look at that list and we think of pagan religion but not much has changed in our day. False religion spiritually manipulates and puts people in bondage.

[24 : 48] It always demands more than we can give and takes more than we can have. Many of us used to be a part of a church that had deep ties to Jericho Road and I remember a friend who was clean for years and years over a decade.

He described what it was like to live in addiction and he described it as always chasing after the first high.

Other people call it chasing the dragon but always desperate to get that first high so that you're going into every time you're using with this massive hope that it's going to give you everything you need but every time you take a hit it leaves you more destitute and more broken and more in bondage.

False religion is like that. It promises a lot. It promises enlightenment. It promises joy but it never ever delivers. Verse 12 this is what true freedom looks like.

But when the people believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ they were baptized both men and women even Simon himself and then the oh previously in verse verse 8 it says there was much joy in the city.

[26 : 16] That is what true freedom looks like. In the gospel you are made free. Not by your own doing or your own giving or your own sacrifice but by the doing and giving and sacrifice of Christ.

Our job is to confess that we can do nothing. That is that's our job. It really is to come empty handed to admit that we are broken and we are hopeless and that our only hope in life and death is Christ alone Christ alone.

It is so powerful this true religion this true faith Christ on the cross that even Simon can be forgiven. Although we are saved by Christ the gospel also disrupts our life because Simon here he is seeing that the gospel is great news for his pocketbook and great news for his prestige and his reputation. His life is not yet disrupted for he is trying to fit Christ into his existing structures. We see this in verses 18 to 21.

Now when Simon saw that the spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles hands he offered them money saying give me this power also so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.

[27 : 37] Sounds kind of great. Divide and conquer. We'll give it to Simon. he can be an extension of the church. But Simon is not wanting to bless the Lord.

Give glory to Christ. For we see it in the next verse in verse 20. Peter sees right through it and he says to Simon may your silver perish with you.

It's literally to hell with you and your money. May your silver perish with you. Simon wanted godly authority and godly power for personal glory and not glory for Christ.

He sought to buy an office. Interestingly that simony is in our vernacular and it describes the buying of office in the church. Paying money for religious glory, for religious office, for religious reputation. Simon sought to manipulate the gospel message to fit into his existing worldview instead of bending a knee to Christ. But the gospel is not a better act. Christ is not a cool magic trick.

[29 : 09] The gospel is a free gift. It delivers all who believe but it will certainly disrupt our lives because although it is free, it demands that we bend a knee to Christ and friends, that means not bending a knee to many other things in our lives including ourself.

our allegiances have this problem. They oscillate.

They, you know, as Christians on Sunday I am for Christ alone to my dying day and then on Monday I am for Daniel alone to my dying day.

I'm for my stomach, I'm for my bank account, I'm for my house, I'm for whatever promotion awaits me, I am for and then you put in whatever it is and it's not Christ, it is a problem.

We are for Christ one day and wary of him the next. Where is the hope for us type of people whose allegiance oscillate? Go back and forth.

[30 : 19] We have divided hearts, divided allegiances. The answer here is in verse 22. Peter says this, Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord that if possible the intent of your heart may be forgiven you for I see that you are in the gulf of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.

We must repent. We must remember as it says in morning prayer that we are miserable offenders, that we have no health in us, that we desperately need the Holy Spirit to remind us and to help us to see the error of our ways and to help us grow in holiness.

That is not a weight of guilt to say that if you are not perfect, you are in the same spot as Simon. No, we confess our sins as often as we sin.

We get real about the darkness in our life because Christ is shining a light on it. Will we pretend that it's not there? Will we bend a knee? This is the Christian life.

This is why, by the way, if you've been coming to the church for a while and the liturgy, you're just like, man, we repent a lot, Debbie Downer, I need something a bit more uplifting.

[31 : 34] It's because we need it. We forget all too often. So we repent. Why do we repent? It's because Christ is willing to forgive and to extend mercy.

If he wasn't, then why would we repent? But because he is abounding in steadfast love, he is rich in mercy, we repent and we bend our knee to the merciful God.

We ought to pray that God will continually deliver us from our sin but also disrupt us so that we see the sin in our lives. And this may be very uncomfortable but it is a life worth living.

I mentioned Jim Elliott before. Some of you may know his story, others may not. His wife actually is the more famous one, I should say his widow, Elizabeth Elliott.

Jim died at 28 in the 50s. He and a few others went to Ecuador to preach the gospel to an unreached people. He and five other missionaries were speared to death.

[32 : 41] I look at his life and I think, I'm sure there was another way, drop leaflets from an airplane, I don't know, figure it out. You're 28, you have a wife at home, think about her.

And yet, at the same time, Jim Elliott was bending his knee to Christ and the opposition to the gospel, it cost him his life.

But because of his sacrifice, that tribe now is a Christian tribe. Many confess Christ and it is in no small part because of the sacrifice of Jim and the other missionaries.

Jim has this famous line, he says this, he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. You will never be left wanting if you bend your knee to Christ.

You will never be poor, in the real sense of the term, poor, if you bend your knee to Christ. If you proclaim the gospel and trust in him, you will never, never be left wanting.

[34 : 00] Jim Elliott is a very rich man. Even though he died a horrible death, I don't even know if there's a grave, where his body was buried, who knows.

But Jim Elliott is a rich man. It's not to say that we're all going to our deaths, but friends, let us not be people that see the gospel as a Sunday thing, or a 5 to 9 p.m.

thing after we're done work, or when we're not in class, or when we're with our families, we'll just shove that in our back pocket. Let us be people that proclaim the gospel wherever we go, and trust that God through his Holy Spirit will bless.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for St. Perpetua and Ignatius. Thank you for John Wycliffe. Thank you for Thomas Cramner.

Thank you for Jim Elliott. Thank you for the countless unnamed missionaries that have given their lives for the gospel. The martyrs, that number, I'm sure, in the millions that we've never heard of, Lord, that valued not their life unto death.

[35 : 14] Help us to be people to feed on you, to trust your gospel, that your gospel will both deliver us and disrupt us from our sin. And Lord, we pray that you would bless us now as we continue on in this service, and we pray this in Christ's name.

Amen. Please, now is the time to sign your kids out of Maasai Kids.