

Acts 8:1-25 (PM)

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[0 : 0 0] Well, for those of you that don't know me, my name is Jordan. I'm one of the ministers here at St. John's. And if I don't know you, please introduce yourself to me. I would love to meet you afterwards.

Great joy in life, meeting new people and hearing new stories. We're in the book of Acts chapter 8, but before we kind of dive in, I just want to take a brief moment to orient us.

The book of Acts is actually book two of kind of a two-volume novel, in a sense. And it begins with these words in chapter 1, verse 1. In the first book, O Theophilus, this is Luke writing, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and say until he was taken up.

And so what he's referring to, Luke, is the Gospel of Luke, which narrates the promise of Jesus coming, his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection, and then his ascension to be seated at the right hand of the Father.

And then what the book of Acts does is it narrates when Jesus gives what he promised he would give to the church, which is the risen and ascended Christ gives his Holy Spirit, pours his Holy Spirit out upon his people, and then by the power of the Spirit, Jesus continues to work through his people to do his mission in the world.

[1 : 1 7] So that's why at the very beginning of volume two, it says, I recorded in the first book, O Theophilus, all that Jesus began to do and teach, the implication being Jesus is still teaching and he is still actively at work in the world, but the way he's doing that is through his Spirit-empowered church.

And so in Acts chapter 1 verse 8, Jesus makes this promise to his disciples, but he does not tell them exactly how the promise is going to be fulfilled.

He says, Acts chapter 1 verse 8, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses, and then all this geography, in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth.

Now, so often the difficulty or disappointment that we experience in the Christian life stems from a perceived dissonance between, on the one hand, what God promises to us, and on the other hand, how we expect that promise to be fulfilled in our lives or the lives of others.

This perceived dissonance. And here in Acts chapter 8, in a surprising turn of events, we are told that it's the persecution of God's people in Jerusalem that becomes the means by which God fulfills his promise to his people in Acts chapter 1 verse 8, that they will go to the ends of the earth and bring the gospel.

[2 : 4 1] They're scattered into Judea and Samaria to bear witness to the good news about Jesus. So what I want to talk about with you this evening has three points to it.

The first is that opposition is an opportunity for mission. The second is that the mission is to spread the message. And the third is that the message both creates unity and it exposes iniquity.

We'll talk about what in the world that word means later. So first, opposition is an opportunity for mission, and we see this in the first two verses. Chapter 8 begins where chapter 7 left off with an execution.

The first Christian martyr, the first person to die for believing in Jesus and proclaiming him to others. This is Stephen. But interestingly here, at the beginning of chapter 8, Luke is not just interested in the details of Stephen's death.

He draws our attention to Saul's attitude towards his execution. So in stark contrast to those who are lamenting and grieving his execution, Luke wants us to see that Saul is approving of it.

[3 : 48] In a weird way, he is delighting in somebody's death for the name of Jesus. He is seeing a Jesus follower sharing Jesus' fate, and that brings him joy in this instance.

Now, why does Luke tell us that at the beginning of this story? On the one hand, it could just be because he wants us to know that historically, this execution unleashed a wave of persecution, which scattered the people of God into regions they hadn't gone before, and that unleashed a corresponding wave of evangelism.

On the other hand, I think the details about Saul are of more than historical interest. Luke, I believe, is nodding towards chapter 9. He's nodding toward the retentive power that is at work in the church's mission.

Because Saul is soon going to become Paul. The Lord Jesus is soon going to shine his light on him, deliver him from the domain of darkness, and transfer him into the kingdom of his beloved son.

And the church persecutor is soon going to become the church planter. All this is going to happen in chapter 9. And so Luke is weaving together here at the beginning of chapter 8, these three themes of persecution and mission and redemption.

[5 : 08] There is redemptive power at work in the persecution and mission of the church of Jesus Christ. I had the privilege last week of going to Rwanda for a week.

I was in Kigali, the capital city. And I was gathered with 1,300 Christians representing 53 countries for five days. It's quite a privilege to sit in one room with Christians from 53 different countries.

And we were in a conference. We were praying together. We were visioning together. We were sharing stories. We were encouraging one another. And there was one man from Sudan who shared his testimony, and it was powerful.

He shared how he was raised in a Muslim family. In fact, his parents were Muslim religious scholars. So when he became a teenager, they sent him off to school for two years, where he had to memorize the whole Koran on the one hand.

And on the other hand, they inscribed in his heart, trained his heart to hate Christians and Jews in particular. They were seen as enemies. So when he returned to public school, his first day of school, he was sitting next to one of his classmates, and he asked his name, and his classmate said Zechariah.

[6 : 17] And for those of you that know that in Central Africa, Northern Africa, if somebody has a biblical name like that, it's quite a clue that that person's Christian. So he and his friends find Zechariah that night, and they beat him to death and leave him in an alley.

And Zechariah never came back to school. Years later, this man, one of his friends, had a daughter who was ill and who was in the hospital, and so he went to visit his friend and console him to comfort him.

And when he arrived, there was a Christian who was laying hands on the daughter and praying for her. And when he said, In Jesus' name, Amen, the daughter opened her eyes. She was on death's door.

She opened her eyes and got out of bed. And this Muslim man said, If that is what the name of Jesus can do, then Jesus has to be Lord.

And so he became a Christian that evening, and he went back to his Muslim family and communities in Sudan, and he started evangelizing. He started telling people about this Jesus and how he can heal and how he can raise the dead and how he can transform and how he can forgive.

[7 : 28] And persecution started coming towards him. So he had to flee Sudan and go to Kenya. Fast forward 20 years later, after becoming a minister and a pastor of a church, the persecutor is now the pastor of a church.

A man walks up to him after Sunday service and says, Pastor, it's good to see you again. And this man sees scars on his face, scars on his arms, scars on his legs, as if he has been beaten to death.

And the man realizes that it's Zechariah, the man that he had beaten. And Zechariah said to him, Because you persecuted me, I have been praying for you ever since.

I'm glad God has answered my prayers. See, we learn in Acts chapter 8, verses 1 to 3, that Christians will face opposition. But opposition in the power and grace of God becomes an opportunity for mission.

Isn't it marvelous that Jesus says, Love your enemies and bless those and pray for those who persecute you. And the mission that we're given by the Lord Jesus is to spread the message.

[8 : 40] Look at verses 4 to 8 with me. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. 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 that city. So you get this image of the word of God sounding forth. And then the power of Jesus' own ministry liberating and healing people to confirm the word that is being proclaimed.

And as we go through this whole passage, you see this language of speaking is all over the place. So in verse 4, it's preaching the word. In verse 5, it's proclaimed the Christ. In verse 12, it's preached good news about the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ.

Verse 25, they testified and they spoke the word of the Lord preaching the gospel. So in our passage, from beginning to middle to end, the focus is not only on what is being said, but how it is being said.

[9 : 56] And Luke uses three main verbs to describe the mission of the church in terms of the message that is being shared. It's to preach, it's to proclaim, and it's to testify.

To preach and proclaim and testify. Three different Greek words. To preach is this compound word. It has the word good and then messenger. So it is somebody who comes bringing a message that is good news for the hearers.

It's what the angel said on the night that Jesus was born. Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all people. Now this word comes from the ancient world of kings and emperors and battles.

So the way it normally goes is that a king or an emperor is off fighting a battle, and once the battle has been won, and if they're victorious, they send a messenger back to the city that they're seeking to defend and protect from the enemy, and the messenger goes into the city and says, Hear ye, hear ye, victory has been won.

I bring you good news of great joy. And so what we see here is this image that what the church brings as it's scattered is the church shares a message of a victory that has been won by God on the cross of Jesus Christ.

[11 : 10] A victory that has been revealed on Easter Sunday when God raised his son from the grave, never to die again, and a victory that has been sealed in our lives and our hearts and minds when he sends upon us the Holy Spirit.

It's as one missionary, E. Stanley Jones, once said, The early Christians did not say in dismay, look what has come of the world. They said in delight, look what has come to the world.

So preaching is what they're doing, but they're also proclaiming. And once again, this comes from the world of kings and a victory won, but this focuses on the fact that what is the victory that is being won is a victory that has significance for all people.

So it's a new public reality that is being declared. It's what Jesus said at the beginning of his kind of ministry. He said, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Have any of you seen the musical Hamilton? Anybody? Okay, I've got... Man, that's rough, guys. That's only like 30% of you.

[12 : 30] So your homework when you leave here is to go watch Hamilton. It's pretty great. There's this point in Hamilton where it's like whenever the king comes out, who's supposed to be a comedic relief during a pretty intense thing, it goes, A message from the king, a message from the king.

And then this character comes out and everybody stops, the whole drama stops, and everybody listens to what he's saying. And that's kind of the thing here is that what is being proclaimed has significance for every single person.

And so it's something that everybody are to stop and pay attention to. See, the early Christians didn't believe that Christianity was just about accepting Jesus into your heart and then resting content with a private faith and a personal piety.

That's just not in the book of Acts. They shared openly of their Savior to everyone and anyone who was crucified publicly and who they thought now reigns comprehensively and so lays claim to every aspect of life.

There was this Dutch Reformed politician that once captured this beautifully when he said, There is not one square inch of the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine.

[13 : 42] So the early Christians said, We've got to preach, but we've also got to proclaim this good news for the whole world. But they also testified. Now this is law court imagery.

This is testimony. You're before the court of law and you are speaking from personal experience. You've either seen the events that have happened, you're either, or you're intimately acquainted with events, or you have been deeply affected by the events of this Jesus.

And it's interestingly that this word is the word that we get the English word martyr from. So it describes those who are so deeply affected by the good news about Jesus Christ that they are actually willing to testify about him in any situation, even if it's going to cost them their lives.

Because they're so personally involved. They're so personally transformed. They're so personally committed. And so the early Christians did not just share an abstract gospel that merely addressed the intellect and said, Here's a new knowledge.

The early Christians lived a gospel that transformed all of their life and offered the world a costly, yet a wonderfully hopeful healing. So those are the three verbs, this preaching, this proclaiming, and this testifying that describe the mission of the church in Acts chapter 8.

[15 : 00] And it sounds great, but in our actual lives, it's often very subtle and hidden work. It's life on life. It's one-on-one.

It's person to person. Some of you may be fearful of sharing your faith or feel utterly ill-equipped to do so, like myself. Some of you may be exploring the faith for the first time and saying, What is this all about?

And if either of you are in that place, I just want to recommend this little resource, which is called The Word One-to-One. It's a little guide through the first chapter of the Gospel of John.

On one page, it just has like one or two verses. And then on the other page, it just has a few sentences to explain those verses. And it's a really practical way to get introduced to who this Jesus person is.

Because the reality is that Jesus is the most influential person in human history, whatever you think about him. I think he's got the most interesting diagnosis of what's wrong with the world that you can find out there.

[16 : 08] And he offers the best solution to what's wrong with the world that you can find out there. And so one of the wonderful things is just getting to explore who is this Jesus that the early church was so motivated to share with others.

And I think these words, preaching and proclaiming and testifying, they invite us to ask certain questions of ourselves, like preaching, do you believe that the message about Jesus and his kingdom is actually good news?

Or proclaiming, do you believe you've been authorized by Jesus to speak publicly about his victory? Or testifying, are you willing to testify in the courts of public opinion if asked to give a reason for the hope that is in you?

So the first point is that opposition is an opportunity for mission. The second point is that the mission is to spread the message. And the third point is that the message both creates unity and it exposes iniquity.

And iniquity is just a Bible word that means what is wrong with the world and our lives? That Jesus came to forgive and to heal and to transform. So the message creates unity and we see this in verses 14 to 17.

[17 : 24] Did you guys notice that interesting bit about the Samaritans receiving the word of God but then not receiving the Holy Spirit until the apostles Peter and John came down from Jerusalem to lay hands on them and pray for them?

So there's kind of this delayed receiving of the Holy Spirit going on there? Well, this has sparked a ton of debate and conjecture in the church throughout the ages, right? And for many, they've interpreted this as kind of paradigmatic for the whole experience of Christians in all times and all places.

So it means that the Christian life has kind of like a two-fold initiation in some way, shape, or form. But when compared with the rest of the New Testament, I think it's a little bit difficult to uphold that because in the rest of the New Testament, it's clear that the gifts that are received by faith in the gospel are held firmly together and they're consistently two-fold.

It's forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and to receive the Holy Spirit. And those two things are everywhere held together throughout Scripture.

So I think it's probably best to understand this not as a prescriptive pattern but as a descriptive exception to the normal pattern. But if that is the case, then it makes us ask the question, why this exception to the normal pattern?

[18 : 44] Why this separating of the receiving of the Word and this delay in receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit until the apostles come and lay hands? And I believe the answer is found in two things, the context and the name.

So note the context. This is the first time in the book of Acts when the message about Jesus is moving outside strictly Jewish territory.

So note that. Samaritans were considered half-breeds and heretics to Jews. There is huge tensions between them. And so one of the major questions that was asked in the early church is are the Gentiles, are those that aren't Jewish, going to receive the good news about Jesus Christ?

And our passage has already told us yes, it's happening. But a question that immediately follows on that first question is well, are the Jewish Christians going to receive the Gentile Christians on equal footing in the body of Christ?

And I want to say that our passage is answering that affirmative as well. And one of the keys here is this name John. Notice how Luke says they sent Peter and John.

[19 : 55] Now Luke told us in his first book in chapter 9 that John disliked and despised the Samaritans so much that he actually wanted to pray that God would rain down fire from heaven and destroy a Samaritan city.

He despised them. So isn't it interesting that the church of Jerusalem sends John with Peter as if to highlight the transforming and uniting power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is John who has to come and extend hands and lay hands on those that he once wanted destroyed in an act of blessing, extending the hand of fellowship.

So I think what is being depicted here is that the message that is coming into the world is creating, it's crossing boundaries and it's creating a unity that only Christ can create.

As there is one spirit so there is one body by that one spirit. But this message not only creates unity, it exposes iniquity.

[21 : 05] And I think this is the point of Simon and Simon the magician basically. I think Simon shows us that it's possible for people to receive the news about who Jesus is and even want to join this Jesus movement, be interested in being a part of his people, but do it for the wrong reasons.

With Simon in particular, we're showed that he starts joining this Jesus movement, he even gets baptized, identifying himself with it. But the dangers of desire for power and greatness have not been checked at the door.

In a sense, his desires for power and greatness have now just been brought into the church and he wants what the apostles have, not just the gift of God, but he wants the power to be able to give people the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And why is this such a big problem? Because you may think, well, being able to give people the gift of the Holy Spirit seems like a pretty good thing to be able to be doing, right? But here, it's clear that Simon thinks he can buy a gift from God and therefore, he fundamentally misunderstands the gospel at its core.

The gospel cannot be bought. God cannot be bought, but he freely gives and that's the point. And so Simon wants to use God's gifts to further his own power and greatness and it shows that his heart is not transformed.

[22 : 26] And this is one of the reasons why throughout the ages, Christians have often talked about the distorting power of ambition in the Christian life. So what do we learn from this Simon who is asked to repent and pray for forgiveness because of his untransformed heart?

Well, I think we learn a couple things. It's that conversion of the heart is much harder to find and more desirable to seek than the power to perform the greatest miracles or have the most amazing influence on other people.

And I think it's also that repentance and prayer for forgiveness, more than personal giftedness and more than a powerful ministry, it's repentance and prayer for forgiveness that is true evidence of a saving faith in the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And so Acts chapter 8, when we kind of zoom out, I think answers a really important question for us and this is where I want to end tonight. as the gospel goes out into the world, what kind of conversion or transformation is it seeking to bring about in the world?

And the answer that we get in Acts chapter 8 is it is seeking to bring about transformation of believing the message about Christ, of receiving the gift of Christ, i.e. the Holy Spirit, and of pursuing a heart transformed by that Christ.

[23 : 54] because in the end, the church doesn't need just more gifted people with more impressive and powerful ministries. The church needs more transformed people who are deep and holy and rooted in Christ.

And this is precisely what the gospel has come to do. Jesus the doctor came not to seek those who think they are healthy, but those who know they are sick, those who know they are poor in spirit, and he came to them and said, yours is the kingdom of God.

He came to seek and save the lost. He came to go after the one sheep and the one coin that nobody else was going after. And he came to do it to transform and bring renewal and then to send us out into the world so that we might share that transformation and renewal with others.

And this is precisely what Acts is all about. From beginning to end, God gives grace so that grace can be shared with others. Never meant to end with us.

We're meant to be conduits of blessings to the world. And the amazing thing is that in God's goodness and providence, he's not going to let us stay still and let us stay comfortable without not sharing grace.

[25 : 06] He may even allow persecution to come in order his first church to scatter if that's how the gospel is indeed going to go to the ends of the earth. Brothers and sisters, it's a privilege to be a part of this.

And so I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.