

## Going with the Gospel

Acts 8:1-8

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Last weekend we focused on the beatitude of Jesus found in Matthew 5:4: ***“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”*** We were encouraged to lament our losses, to be sorrowful about our sins, to cry over the condition of Christians and non-Christians, and to weep for our world.

While weeping is the right attitude to have, we’re also called to action as witnesses. This week I’ve been convicted by this quote from John Stott: *“We should not ask, ‘What is wrong with the world?’ for that diagnosis has already been given. Rather, we should ask, ‘What has happened to the salt and light?’”*

If salt is going to do its work of preventing decay, it must get out of the saltshaker and if light is going to be effective it must go out into the darkness. Incidentally, our Mainspring Ministry, which is for college and 20s, is studying the Sermon on the Mount right now. If you’re looking to connect, they meet on Sunday nights out at the volleyball court. BTW, their outreach film called “The Magic Hour” just won Best Director and Best Editing at the Great Lakes Christian Film Festival.

In our passage, we’re going to see how God used persecution to propel His people into a decaying and dark world. The first Christians had become comfortable gathering to grow. Now it was time for them to scatter and sow.

LifeWay Research just released a study that found Christians are being shaped more by social media than Scripture. While 66% of evangelicals used Facebook at least once a day, only 32% say they read the Bible every day. To say it another way, Christians are twice as likely to open Facebook than to put their face in God’s Book. The authors of the study conclude, *“Is it any wonder then, that churches are unhealthy and divided, with Christians gorging on social media fast food and skipping feasts of the Bible?”*

I’m glad you’ve joined us today because we’re going to enjoy a feast from the Bible. If you’ve gotten out of the practice of daily Bible engagement, I pray this sermon whets your appetite to return to gorging on God’s Word on a regular basis. If you’re unsure where to read, check out the monthly Bible reading plan on our app or website.

We could summarize the call of the Old Testament like this: “*Come and see.*” People were invited to come to the city of Jerusalem for feasts and to the Temple for worship. In the New Testament we see a different call: “*Go and tell.*” As we pick up our verse-by-verse exposition of the Book of Acts, we’ll see God’s people needed a push to take the gospel from Jerusalem to the world. Jerusalem was still the central location, but now it serves as a missionary sending center. Here’s our main idea: *We gather to grow, and we scatter to sow.*

So, here’s a provocative statement: what if God is using this pandemic to get us to scatter so we sow the seed of the gospel like never before? While it’s not easy to gather right now, we’re all doing a pretty good job of being scattered. What if we were to take advantage of this time for proclaiming of the gospel?

This isn’t easy, is it? Especially with all the challenges we’re facing individually and as a church. Here’s a thought: *instead of being worried about what’s happening in the world around us, what if we worked harder to take the Word to the world around us?*

I like how Ray Majoran puts it in a post called, “The Great Distraction.”

*We are inundated with news, ideas, emotions, ideologies and data...each day we become more polarized in our viewpoints about what is true and what is false...God has put you here and now for a purpose. He has presented us with a massive opportunity for the love of Christ to be shared. Now is not the time to get caught up in the cares and controversies of the world; now is the time to be wise and use the time that God gives us.*

Let’s look at the first phrase of Acts 8:1: “***And Saul approved of his execution.***” This statement really belongs with chapter 7 where we read about Stephen’s martyrdom. Check out Acts 7:58: “***And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.***” Saul is the Hebrew name for Paul. The unsaved Saul was the chief persecutor of Christians who gave hearty approval of Stephen’s death.

Follow along as I read up through verse 8: “***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. 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. 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.”*

I see three truths from this passage:

- Persecution is a promise
- Problems are a platform for proclamation
- Proclamation unleashes power

**1. Persecution is a promise.** Stephen’s death was the starting point of great persecution in Jerusalem. The word **“great”** is the word *megas*, which means *“huge, widespread, intense, violent, large and loud.”* One pastor refers to the killing of Stephen *“like the pulling of the pin on the hand grenade of the devil’s wrath against the church.”*

Persecution is promised to every believer. Here are just two verses of many:

John 15:20: *“If they persecuted me, they **will also** persecute you.”*

2 Timothy 3:12: *“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus **will be** persecuted.”*

When persecution broke out, *“they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”* The apostles stayed back to anchor the Jerusalem church while other believers were *“scattered.”* There are two different words for *“scattered”* in Greek. One refers to being *“dispersed so the item is gone,”* like ashes in the wind. The word used in Acts 8:1 and Acts 8:4 means, *“to be scattered in order to be planted.”* That’s beautiful, isn’t it? Persecution led to planting. This is actually a fulfillment of what Jesus said in Matthew 10:23: *“When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next...”*

In one day, these persecuted believers lost their key leader, their safety and security, their ability to gather as a large group for worship, their sense of togetherness, their ministry momentum and their contact with the apostles. My guess is you can relate to some of this in light of the season we are in as a church. In addition, they had to leave family, homes, jobs, and possessions, much like many persecuted believers are experiencing around the world today.

Would you notice where they went? They were sent to ***“Judea and Samaria.”*** Judea is the area surrounding Jerusalem and Samaria was the region where the hated Samaritans lived. Here’s a brief background to the animosity that lasted for many centuries.

When the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 731 B.C., many Israelites were taken to Assyria as captives, but some remained in the land and intermarried with pagan foreigners. These half-Jewish, half-Gentile people became known as the Samaritans. They created a religion the Jews considered to be heretical. To them, a Samaritan was more revolting than a Gentile. As a result, there were irreconcilable differences between them.

John 4:9 says, ***“Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.”*** In fact, Jewish people were known to walk around Samaria when traveling north or south, even though it was shorter to go through it. I wonder, is there anyone you’re avoiding right now? Any race or culture or subgroup that fills you with rage? Ask God to change your heart.

In spite of the hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans, Jesus broke down these barriers when He ministered to a Samaritan woman as we read in John 4:4: ***“And He had to pass through Samaria.”***

If we go back to Acts 1:8, the early church was given a clear command from Jesus but they delayed obeying it: ***“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”***

I wonder if these believers were like those described in Amos 6:1: ***“Woe to those who are at ease in Zion...”*** Two years passed since Pentecost and because the Christians had become too comfortable, God used the persecution of Acts 8:1 to move them to fulfill Acts 1:8.

We see in verse 2 how ***“Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.”*** They honored Stephen in his death and lamented the loss of his life.

Verse 3 reveals the persecution was pervasive as ***“Saul was ravaging the church...”*** This is a very graphic word meaning, *“to injure severely, to destroy and annihilate.”* The picture is of a wild beast ravaging and tearing a carcass to bits. The verb tense indicates this happened continuously. Acts 9:1 says it this way: ***“Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples.”***

Look at the second part of verse 3: “...and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” The phrase, “dragged off” involves the notion of violence.

*We gather to grow, and we scatter to sow.*

**2. Problems are a platform for proclamation.** Verse 4 reveals how these persecuted believers responded: “*Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.*” They had been gathering to grow and now in their scattering they were sowing the gospel. Wherever they went, they preached the Word. To “preach” is the word “*evangel*,” also translated as “*evangelizing the good news*” or “*publishing good tidings.*” One pastor refers to it as “*gossiping the gospel.*”

When Jesus taught His disciples about the promise of persecution, He also reminded them that their persecution will be a platform for proclamation in Luke 21:10-13: “*Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness.”* Did you catch that? A time of pestilence and persecution were their opportunity to bear witness.

Throughout the Book of Acts, when persecution came, the practice of believers was to proclaim the gospel. Acts 11:19-21 says, “*Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word.*” As a result, Acts 12:24 says, “*But the word of God increased and multiplied.*” Because believers saw their problems as a platform for proclamation, Acts 19:20 states: “*So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.*”

Notice, they were committed to preaching and speaking the Word. This is a good reminder for us. In the midst of all that is going on in the world today, our primary message should not be our convictions about COVID, or our political persuasions, but a proclamation of the Word of God. Actually, our strong views may put up barriers to the gospel message. Instead, we must do all we can to build bridges to people. Or to say it another way: *Be the bridge, not the barrier for the gospel.*

I was embarrassed to hear about what happened when a pastor in Tennessee got into a heated argument about a COVID-related restriction with an employee at a Dunkin Donuts and then made a video about it. Calling out the employee, I watched and listened as the pastor reflected on his encounter, *“I said, ‘If you call me a liar one more time, I’m going to take these work boots and I’m going to kick your teeth down your throat.’ Yes, I said it. And in the moment, I meant it.”*

This makes me mourn and at the same time I wonder if my attitude and anger has ever put up a barrier to sharing the gospel of Christ with someone. I don’t want my hatred or self-righteousness to be the cause of someone not hearing the gospel and ending up in the never-ending flames of Hell.

Another pastor writes:

*“I know you think that the entire world needs to hear your opinion on politics, COVID, masks, school and business openings, conspiracy theories and everything controversial. But the truth of the matter is, they don’t. In fact, I would argue that in most cases, it does more damage than good. If you’re going to burn a bridge with someone, do you really want **that** to be the bridge you set on fire?”*

I’m reminded of what the reformer John Knox once said, *“You cannot antagonize and influence at the same time.”*

I’m reading a new book right now called, *“Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers”* by Dane Ortlund. It’s been a breath of fresh air for me. Listen to this quote: *“The cumulative testimony of the four Gospels is that when Jesus Christ sees the fallenness of the world all about Him, His deepest impulse, His most natural instinct, is to move toward that sin and suffering, not away from it.”*

During this time of being scattered, let’s move toward sin and suffering and sow the seed of the gospel. Evangelism is the very lifeblood of the church. Ponder these words from Philemon 1:6: ***“I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.”*** When believers live on mission, we’ll see Acts 19:20 lived out in our community: ***“So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”***

Verse 5 tells us another deacon stepped up during this time: ***“Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.”*** The word for ***“proclaim”*** is a bit different from preaching and has the idea of *“heralding a message by announcing publicly.”* The text indicates he continually did this.

It’s interesting in this section of Acts it was regular people, not the Apostles, who were doing the work of sowing the gospel. That’s actually the New Testament pattern – the gospel was spread by ordinary Christians who received power from the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses.

Among these ordinary, Spirit-filled servants were Stephen and Philip, two of the original deacons mentioned in Acts 6.

Edgewood is blessed with many great servant leaders – I think of our deacons and trustees in particular. The trustees met this past Sunday afternoon and this this past Tuesday night during our deacon meeting it hit me that our deacons stand in a long line of faithful leaders going all the way back to the first deacons. One example of how seriously they take their role is they’ve been meeting on Monday nights to study a book that is helping them learn more about the roles and responsibilities of deacons. Also, they are meeting twice a month for their regular meetings for prayer, planning and policy development. In addition, they are involved with shepherding the flock. I consider it an honor to serve alongside them, especially as we seek God’s wisdom during the challenges of COVID.

So, here’s a question. Do you see your problems as a platform for proclamation? That’s how the Apostle Paul approached his imprisonment. Philippians 1:12 says he found God’s purpose in his problems: ***“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”***

I heard something this week which made me smile. A young couple I know has had difficulty finding a new home. During all their struggles and stress, one of their Christian friends gave them some very godly advice: *“Don’t stress too much about it. Focus more on the people you can reach for the gospel because of where your house is at, rather than the house itself. God will take care of the other stuff.”*

This reminds me of the tagline for our weekly “On Mission” preaching program on Moody Radio: *“When we gather together, we meet on 38<sup>th</sup> Street in Rock Island and when we’re scattered, we strive to live on mission all over the Quad Cities*

area.” You can catch this broadcast every Sunday at 11am and 7:30pm. Special thanks to EBC member John Gunther for his role as executive producer.

*We gather to grow and scatter to sow.*

**3. Proclamation unleashes power.** Check out verse 6: ***“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.”*** It’s fascinating to me these crowds came together in ***“one accord,”*** which means they were unanimous in their interest to hear more. When good news is shared in love, people want to learn more. When they see signs of life-change, they want to see if their lives can change as well.

I answered the phone during the lunch hour on Tuesday and had a nice chat with a counselor from the Center for Alcohol and Drug Services in Rock Island. She wanted to know if Celebrate Recovery was meeting again because she has a number of clients she wants to refer! I told her it meets every Friday night and asked how she heard about CR. She said, *“I don’t remember but it was shortly after I arrived in Rock Island. Celebrate Recovery has a great reputation.”* She’s paying attention to what God is doing through CR because God’s power to change lives is being unleashed.

She couldn’t talk long so I quickly thanked her for partnering with us to help people in need. She said, *“It’s a joy.”*

My mind goes to Romans 1:16: ***“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...”*** This power is put on display in Acts 8:7 where we see people freed from spiritual and physical bondage: ***“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.”*** The gospel breaks bondage and barriers.

When proclaiming the gospel unleashes God’s power, we can’t help but to rejoice. That’s what happened in Samaria according to verse 8: ***“So there was much joy in that city.”*** The word ***“much”*** is a superlative, meaning *“an abundance of exaltation.”* Our cities in America need joy today, don’t they? That will only come as we take Jesus to them. This idea is captured in 1 Peter 1:8: ***“Though you have not seen Him, you love Him. Though you do not now see Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory...”***

Our passage begins with great persecution and ends with great joy, all because regular believers saw their problems as a great platform for the proclamation of the glory of the gospel.

*We gather to grow, and we scatter to sow.* Let's summarize...

- Persecution is a promise
- Problems are a platform for proclamation
- Proclamation unleashes power

One of the most challenging aspects of our faith is to trust Christ when we don't understand what is happening.

### **Truths to Hold on To**

Allow me to pull together four truths to hold on to.

1. Prosperity can cause inertia, while problems can invigorate believers to live on mission for the glory of God.
2. God uses problems, pandemics and persecution to demonstrate His power, justice and mercy.
3. In the beginning of a tragedy, we rarely see what God intends to do in the end.
4. We must respond with compassionate gospel witness toward sinners and sufferers.

Let's affirm today that God is sovereign, and Christ is head of His church. He is building His church and He will use the coronavirus and all the unrest and the polarization for His purposes. And part of His plan is to use His people. So, let's do all we can to *gather to grow in order to scatter to sow* the gospel. Let's build bridges and not barriers. Actually, let's be the bridge for the gospel to travel to hurting hearts around us.

### **Action Steps**

We started with a quote from John Stott. Let's circle back to it now as we consider some ways to live out what we've learned today: "*We should not ask, 'What is wrong with the world?' for that diagnosis has already been given. Rather, we should ask, 'What has happened to the salt and light?'*"

Here are some action steps.

**1. Look for ways to extend love and grace to everyone you talk to.** Consider Colossians 4:5-6: *“Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”*

I came across a phrase some time ago that I come back to often: *“You will never look into the eyes of someone God does not already love.”* God wants to use us to reach all people, even those we might not like, or who might not look like us, or who disagree with us politically. He loves to send His people into places where we are stretched to trust Him, so we see others like He does.

As a way to put this into practice this past week, I called the City of Moline after I saw the Department of Public Works pick up some large branches from the storm we had put out by the street. When the woman answered I told her I wanted to pass along a compliment, not a complaint. I could tell she wasn't used to a call like this, so I told her how pleased I was with the work they were doing. I asked her to let the workers know. I can't be sure, but I think she started to break down because she sniffled a bit before thanking me and hanging up.

**2. Pray for the peace and welfare of our country.** After being deported to Babylon, Jeremiah gave some helpful exhortation about how to handle living in a godless society. Jeremiah 29:7: *“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”*

Should we vote? Absolutely. Should we express our thoughts and concerns respectfully? Of course, we should. But we must make sure we're praying and seeking the best for our community and country through our engagement and involvement. I'm thrilled that many of you provided backpacks for Youth Hope this week and I look forward the Baby Bottle Project and Walk for Life for Pregnancy Resources next month.

**3. Look for creative ways to build bridges so you can share the gospel of Jesus Christ with people.** When someone is talking about something controversial, ask them to explain more about their thoughts. You may discover the person is afraid or worried or unsettled. If we listen carefully, we may hear people wondering if life is worth living. Use these conversations as a bridge to the gospel message.

***2 Corinthians 5:18-20: “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”***

If you are not yet reconciled to God through the new birth, put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ right now. You could do so by praying this prayer.

*Jesus, I admit I'm a sinner. I repent by turning from how I've been living and trust what You did on the Cross when You died in my place, shedding Your blood to pay the price for all that I've done. I want to be at peace with You. I believe You died on the Cross and rose again on the third day, showing Your victory over sin, Satan, death and fear. Now I receive You into my life. I open the door to You. Save me from my sins. I want to be born again. Now give me resurrection power to live the rest of my life for You and under Your leadership. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*