

The Providence of God in Persecution

Acts 8:1-9 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. ⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ So there was much joy in that city.

❖ Recap

- **Stephen was preaching Jesus as Christ**
 - And a lot of priests were getting saved
 - So Leaders were getting very annoyed
- **Jewish leaders brought false accusations against him**
 - They twisted truth
 - Do not be surprised when you do the godly thing that others twist your words and ways
- **They bring Stephen before the council to question him**
 - He preaches an amazing sermon to Jewish people
 - He tells them the history of their people
 - He reminds them that the people of Israel have a habit of persecuting the messengers of God
 - So much so that they murdered His Son when He came
- **Stephen in his response to their accusations of blasphemy against him**
 - Tells them that it is the other way around
 - He is listening to God
 - But they are not
- **They become very angry and stone Stephen**
 - This was the beginning of war against the Christian church
 - Stephen was the first recorded martyr for His faith in Jesus
 - Except Jesus Himself...
- **Stephen our brother in the Lord**
 - Was murdered for His belief in Jesus
 - Yet in his stoning he was gracious toward those who hated him
 - And he asked God to not hold their sin against them

❖ Introduction

- Today we look at ch. 8
 - We see:
 - *“There was great persecution in those days. Saul led the persecution that found its catalyst in the stoning of Stephen. The floodgates of persecution were opened. Murdering, imprisonment and separation of family and friends followed the men and women who followed Jesus. This persecution led to the scattering of the church according to the providence of God. Those that were scattered went to Samaria and Judea where they promptly proclaimed Jesus. This proclaiming of Jesus led to great joy in those cities.”*

- **Outline:**

- 1) Persecution by a Future Disciple
- 2) Stephen Honored
- 3) Providence of God
- 4) Preaching by Followers
- 5) The Gospel Brings Great Joy

➤ **Application:**

- 1) Don't Fear Suffering
- 2) Trust the Providence of God
- 3) Live Well
- 4) Share Jesus
- 5) Jesus Gives Joy

➤ **What is God's Providence?**

- **Providence:** Divine Guidance – (Webster's Definition)
- **One Great Example is that of Joseph.**
 - Who God used his brothers to sell him into slavery and ultimately imprisonment
 - So Joseph would be exalted over the whole land
 - And would prepare the land for a great famine that was coming upon it.
 - **Joseph tells his deceitful brothers:**
 - ◆ Genesis 50:20 ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.
- **God's Providence in the story of Joseph shows that He had a plan all along**
 - And there was nothing that Joseph's conniving brothers could do to stop it.

➤ **Throughout the Entire Passage:**

- We see God's Providence weaving in and out of Luke's words inspired by the Holy Spirit
 - Providence – God's Guidance over His Creation

❖ **1) Persecution by a Future Disciple**

- **And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, ... ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.**

➤ **Look at the text:**

- **Saul approved of his execution**
 - He was on board with it
 - He likely opposed Stephen in arguments
 - He cheered the stoning of Stephen
- **Saul was ravaging the church**
 - Ravaging means: to do great harm... to destroy
 - Saul was not just serving people with papers...
 - He was out to destroy this religion of Christianity
 - And every person that followed the Way of Jesus
- **Dragging men and women out of their homes into prison**
 - Breaking up homes... taking husbands and wives from each other.

➤ **From Paul, we get an account of his actions:**

- Acts 22:3-4 ³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴ I **persecuted** this Way to the **death, binding and delivering to prison** both men and women,

- Acts 22:19-20 ¹⁹ And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I **imprisoned** and **beat** those who believed in you. 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.'
- Acts 26:9-11 ⁹ "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in **opposing** the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only **locked** up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were **put to death I cast my vote against them**. ¹¹ And I **punished** them often in all the synagogues and **tried** to make them **blaspheme**, and in **raging** fury against them I **persecuted** them even to foreign cities.
- **Saul hated the church... and he hated Stephen**
 - But God loved Stephen, and so did other men of God

❖ 2) Stephen Honored

- ² **Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.**
- **What an honor:**
 - The thought of this causes me to consider my life
 - I want you to see the glory of Jesus in the burial and lamentation over Stephen
- **Devout men buried Stephen**
 - **Devout men:**
 - These were pious men. They were Godly...
 - And they were known to be this way
 - There was no wondering what kind of men these guys were
 - **Luke calls them Devout Men.**
 - Men who were Devout to the cause of Jesus
 - They were pure in their walk with Jesus.
 - These were great men in the early church.
 - **These great men buried Stephen**
 - They were at his funeral
 - They spoke at his funeral
 - They remembered his life, and how he died...
- **They made great lamentation over him**
 - **Great lamentation: They wept over Stephen... They loved him**
 - He had made a difference in their lives
 - His death was not in vain, it was a life well spent
 - **They were filled with sorrow over his death**
 - In case you thought all the early Christians were just looking to be martyred you are wrong
 - Death affected them like it does us
 - They missed Stephen their brother...
- **But Stephen lived in such a way...**
 - That devout men buried him and wept over him.
 - They did not run from his burial
 - They did not blame him for what he did.
 - They did not second guess his actions...
- **Because Stephen was faithful:**
 - Faithful men came to his funeral, and they wept over him
 - Stephen was Faithful to Jesus... And He glorified Jesus in his death
 - So much so, that He saw Jesus up off His throne standing as Stephen died
- **Application #1: Live Well**

- We ought to live in such a way
- That there is a long line of believers coming to our funeral
- We ought to live in such a way that the church misses us when we are gone.
- You want to be remembered by the church
 - As a godly man or woman whose void will be hard to fill
 - We do not want to die without affecting the world around us with Jesus
- **What ending is your life writing?**
 - Will you be remembered as a selfless lover of Jesus who put others first
 - Or a Selfish lover of Self who put others down

❖ 3) Providence of God

- ...and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles...

➤ A little more detail is given later in ch 11

- Acts 11:19-20¹⁹ 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 to no one except Jews.²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

➤ They were scattered:

- The word scattered here is a word that would be used of spreading seed
- If you were telling someone that you were spreading some seed
- You would use this word
- **The church was being persecuted and was therefore scattered... except the apostles**
 - Many wonder why the apostles remained in Jerusalem.
 - I guess there were a number of reasons as to why
 - One, is that is where Jesus wanted them at that time.
 - And I think the Jewish leaders were afraid of them...
 - **Eventually they would all be killed... but right now they stayed in Jerusalem**
 - ◆ The apostles would not stay only in Jerusalem, but would travel to share the Word with the World.

➤ 1) Persecution led to being scattered, which led to other peoples hearing about Jesus

- They were scattered to where?
 - Judea and Samaria
- **Where did Jesus tell the disciples they would be witnesses to in Acts 1:8?**
 - Jerusalem... and they had been there for about 5 years....
 - He also then said Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth
 - ◆ And Jesus uses persecution to scatter them to where he told them they would go

➤ 2) God used Paul to scatter believers to spread the gospel, then uses Paul to take the gospel even further

- **This is one of the greatest proofs of God's guidance over men**
 - Here is this Jewish fanatic named Saul.
 - And Saul follows the law as much or more than anyone in Jerusalem
 - So, when this new Jesus thing pops up, He is totally against it
- **As you have seen already... He is very zealous in his opposition to it.**
 - So much so... that he is voting to kill members of the Way of Jesus
 - He is arresting them and bringing them to prison to be done away with
- **Yet, God knows every hair on the head of Saul.**
 - And when Jesus was ready, He appeared to Saul...

- **Notice: Jesus could have appeared to Saul at anytime He wanted...**
 - He could have revealed himself to Saul before Saul consented to the death of Stephen
 - Before he began to split up families by throwing them in prison
- **Jesus Waited:**
 - He used the zealous hatred of Saul against His very own church
 - To scatter them to Samaria and Judea and other parts of the earth
 - So other people would hear His name
 - And when Jesus had used Saul's sinful natural nature for God's glory
- **Then Jesus let Saul know that the Jesus he was persecuting, was the Messiah, the Son of God**
 - God did not cause Paul to sin. That was Satan
 - Satan wanted to kill of believers... He wanted to foil the plan of God
 - But God know how to, as Paul would say later in the book of
 - ◆ **Romans 8:28...all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**
 - ◆ **That verse continues like this:**
 - **Romans 8:29-30** ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.
 - **Let me simplify this verse just a little bit for us...**
 - **And let us be convinced of God's providence**
 - **Notice:** God **foreknew** His people
 - In Eph 1:4 we read that **God chose us before the foundation of the world**
 - In Revelation 13:8 we learn the His Children's names **were written in a book before He made the foundation of the earth.**
 - **Notice:** God **predestined** us
 - The case of Saul could not make it any clearer
 - God had determined before Saul was even born that Saul would be His
 - **Notice:** It starts with God's gracious and merciful **choosing** us
 - Then it moves to Him **calling** us (**he also called**)
 - As you see, He had already chosen Saul... It isn't until ch.9 that He calls Saul
 - **Notice:** Those He calls He will make right with Him
 - He will Justify them... declare them righteous
 - And He can do so **legally** because the sacrifice of Jesus
 - Allows God to place the punishment that people deserved on His Son
 - **Notice:** Saul benefits greatly from the Sovereign Providence of God
 - Saul was in the middle of working for the kingdom of Satan
 - And God snatches His beloved child out of the enemies camp
 - Makes him right with God by the blood of Jesus
 - And puts him to work for the Kingdom of God
 - **Notice:** Finally, those whom He justifies... He will also glorify
 - We have a day coming where God will glorify us
 - And He will restore and make new our bodies to be like Christ...
- **The Providence of God in all Things**
 - Even since the beginning
 - He Created Man in His image
 - Man sinned... God immediately tells them about His plan to provide a way for their saving

- God providentially chooses Abraham, Isaac, Israel, His children, David and then through all of this brings them the answer.... His Son Jesus
- This has been the plan of God since before He created the World

➤ **Application #2: Don't Fear Persecution**

- God uses persecution to His advantage.
 - God will strengthen you and grow you and accomplish His will when you suffer for Him
- **How did He use persecution in the early church?**
 - To scatter His fruit bearing seed across the world
 - So that they would bear fruit in other cities
- **I understand no one wants to suffer... no one wants persecution.**
 - But, we must have the mind of Christ in this... We need the Mind of Christ...
 - **In Matt 5:10-12 ¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**
 - ◆ We are told by Jesus that our response should be rejoicing and gladness.
 - ◆ I am not telling you to act like a martyr
 - ◆ Just go about your business as a believer and let whatever happens happen
- **Do not fear persecution: Welcome it.**
 - Make sure you are living the type of life
 - That would lead to persecution, because God is glorified in our Godly Life

➤ **Application #3: Trust the Providence of God**

- Trust that God knows what is best for your life.
- Even in the fear of death, the early Christians were trusting and rejoicing in the plans of God
 - Trust God with your life... who else are you going to trust?

➤ **Do you think your Salvation was an accident?**

- Do you think you are unnoticed by God even right now?
- God is completely involved and aware of everything about you.

❖ **4) Preaching by Followers**

- **⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.**
- **Once Again: The Preaching of Jesus is Central in the working of the church.**
 - Even when the church isn't at church
 - Even when the church has to go hundred of miles from its home base
 - The proclaiming of Jesus continues...
- **True Discipleship = Sharing Jesus**
 - In Deed and in Word
 - **It is very clear that those who were being persecuted because they were Christians**
 - Spread out to other cities...
 - And from there, they began sharing Jesus with others...
 - That is what the church of God does
 - And the church of God is made up of individual members...

➤ **Application #4: Share Jesus**

- You are called to share Jesus...
- It drives me bonkers when I hear a person say... that is not my gift...
 - Sharing Jesus with other people is not my gift.
- **Well, receiving Jesus was your gift...**
 - And sharing Jesus is our calling!
 - Sharing Jesus is our calling, regardless of what kind of Spiritual gifts you think you have
 - Our spiritual gifts help us in sharing and exalting Jesus
- **We are making excuses...**
 - Do not make an excuse... lets tell the truth
 - We are afraid
 - We are unprepared
 - We do not love Jesus enough to share Him with others
 - Or we do not love others enough to share Jesus with them
- **Let's just be honest**
 - Say, I know I should, I just struggle with it.
 - We must get it out of our heads that we are not all called to do it
 - **That is a lie that Satan has infected the church with**
 - ◆ Cause he can not kill off the Christians...
 - ◆ So He is trying to deceive them with vain conceit
 - So they worry more about their own spiritual giftings than others knowing Jesus
- **Share Jesus**

➤ **Lets Go Back: To the question I asked previously**

- **Do you think your conversion was an accident?**
 - Or was there a purpose to it?
 - There were many purposes to our salvation... but one of them was bearing fruit
- **Ephesians 2:10¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.**
 - We are the workmanship of God
 - Created in Christ Jesus...
 - To walk in good works
 - That God had prepared beforehand...
 - **God has planned works for us to walk in...**
 - ◆ I believe the work that stands out the most for Christians
 - ◆ Is the work of bearing the fruit of more believers...
- **Jesus tells His disciples in John 15 that He is a vine... and they are branches...**
 - And as branches, they should bear fruit....
 - That is what a branch does... it bears fruit.
 - **Jesus then tells the disciples that His Father is the vine dresser**
 - ◆ He is the One that takes care of the vine and the branches
 - **Jesus explains that the Father does 2 things...**
 - ◆ **1) He prunes the branches that are bearing fruit...**
 - So that they bear more fruit
 - ◆ **2) And He cuts off the fruitless branches**
 - And throws them into a fire to burned up
 - Judas was with Jesus... and He was a fruitless disciple
 - So he was cut away from the vine

- **Throughout the book of John**
 - We see countless people following Jesus and the other disciples
 - Who either left when the Words got to hard for them
 - Or Jesus told them He knew what was in their heart
 - **Believers bear the fruit of other believers...**
 - Some branches are very fruitful
 - Some bear a little
 - Each according to what God has given them to do
 - **Non Fruit Bearing Branches will be cut off**
 - **Your being here in this church is no accident**
 - **Your hearing this message today is no accident**
 - God is speaking to all of us today to be more fruitful
 - To be more purposeful in reaching the lost people that we know
 - **By:**
 - Preparing ourselves through meditating on God's Word
 - ◆ So that we know it well enough to share it
 - Praying for those we know or think are lost
 - Being purposeful to engage in conversations that lead to our sharing Jesus with them
 - **I want you to take your responsibility of sharing Jesus more serious today...**
 - Today is the day that we wake up and see the great responsibility and privilege and get to it

❖ 5) The Gospel Brings Great Joy

- 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ So there was much joy in that city.
- **Philip went down and proclaimed to them the Christ**
 - The previous verse ends with Luke giving us a specific example of someone
 - He uses Philip... and He tells how Philip went and proclaimed Jesus in Samaria
- **Philip was performing signs through the power of the Holy Spirit**
 - And as He shared Jesus as the Christ...
 - People were getting saved...
- **This led to Great Joy in that City.**
 - Notice... The gospel brought joy...
 - One of the reasons I think it was such a joyous occasion for the people in this region
 - Is because of their past.
- **Samaritans were not considered the greatest of people...**
 - The Jews living in this region had been taken into exile years ago by the assyrians.
 - The assyrians then sent other peoples to live in this area.
 - When these Israelite people returned, they married in with other nations...
 - The problem was not what nation they were from, the problem was their worship
 - These people worshipped false gods...
 - And these northern Israelites continued in the worship of those false gods...
- **Therefore, they had a mixed race**
 - And the Jewish people would have nothing to do with them,
 - They would not even speak with them
 - Yet, they continued in the **tradition of their father Abraham** and wanted to worship the true God
- **And here comes Philip with the Gospel of Jesus as the Christ**

- They had been waiting for Him as well...
- And here it was that those people living in great darkness
- Heard about a great Light
- And saw the light of Jesus through Philip
- **And they were given another chance...**
 - So, there was much joy in that region because God has come to them
- **Application #5: Jesus Gives Joy**
 - Coming to know Jesus brings great joy...
 - Knowing Jesus should give us great joy... not matter what else may be wrong in the world
 - I know Jesus...
 - And we should be confident, that whoever you are led to share Jesus with...
 - Will be joyous when they receive Him...
 - Because Jesus gives us great joy...

❖ **We Have the Same Power**

- We have the same Holy Spirit
- We have the same God who will do mighty things
 - We just do not have the same faith
 - We do not have the same obedience
 - We do not have the same trust
 - We do not have the same Holy Lifestyle