

Message #18
“THE CHURCH SCATTERED”
Acts 8:1-8

Beginning the day of Stephen’s death, persecution broke out with great ferocity. Saul, who had approved of Stephen’s stoning (8:1), now began to destroy the church. This great persecution led to a great dispersion with all but the apostles being scattered. The scattering of the Christians was followed by the scattering of the good seed of the gospel, for those who were scattered preached the word wherever they went. This was the first great missionary outreach by the early church.

The flight of Christians from Jerusalem is very significant in terms of redemption history. In the Old Testament, the Jewish temple represented the absolute centre of God’s presence among His people. According to the Jews, Jerusalem was the only place where God’s special presence was found. Thus, the exodus of Christians from Jerusalem marks the end of Jerusalem’s centrality in salvation history. This end had been announced by Jesus as He cursed the fruitless fig tree and then cleared out the temple, the place of real fruitlessness (Mark 11:12-21); and it was underlined by the utter destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 AD.

Acts 8 shows that Jerusalem is no longer the centre of what God is doing in His world, nor is it the place where God is most present in His world – His “holy temple” is now the gathered church, a “dwelling place (of) God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:21-22).

Why do you think some people (and religions!) tend to think of God’s presence only being confined, or limited, to a certain place/places? Is this something you struggle with?

Do you have a “special place” where you find it easier to sense God’s presence/commune with Him?

This passage (8:1-8) sees the commands of Jesus start to be fulfilled. Jesus commanded His disciples to “go into all the world” (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15) and, in Acts 1:8, He told them that they would be His witnesses in “Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Up to this point, the followers of Christ had been in Jerusalem. Now, with this intense persecution they were being “kicked out” and the rest of the command was about to “kick in”.

In this passage we are also reintroduced to Philip, one of the “magnificent 7” deacons elected in Acts 6. Philip is forced out of Jerusalem and ends up in Sebaste (Samaria) (see Acts 8:4-8). This was very significant due to the hatred between Jews and Samaritans.

The hostility between the Jews and Samaritans had lasted a thousand years. It began with the monarchy in the tenth century BC, when ten tribes defected, making Samaria their capital, and only two tribes remained loyal to Jerusalem. It became steadily worse when Samaria was captured by Assyria in 722 BC. Thousands of its inhabitants were deported and the country was repopulated by foreigners. In the sixth century BC, when the Jews returned to their land, they refused the help of the Samaritans in the rebuilding of the temple. Not till the fourth century BC, however, did the Samaritan schism harden, with the building of their rival temple on Mount Gerazim and their rejection of all Old Testament Scripture except the Pentateuch. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews!

So, given this background, why was it so significant for Philip (and other Christians) to end up in Samaria, sharing the gospel of Jesus?

In Acts 8:4 it says that wherever they went, the believers preached the word of God (the Gospel). As Everett Harrison said, "The church was scattered...but it went as missionaries, not refugees."

Do you see yourself as an evangelist? Explain.

The gospel would be welcomed by the Samaritans (the Holy Spirit having prepared the hearts of the people to receive)...but would the Samaritans be welcomed by the Jewish believers? Would there be separate factions of Jewish Christians and Samaritan Christians in the church of Jesus Christ? We will see, as the story unfolds, how questions like these were answered.

The message of the gospel was received "with much joy" in Samaria. Recall your own conversion. How did you experience the joy of discovering who Jesus was and coming under His rule? How might you recall that joy each day, so that it continues to be a mark of your life?

Saul.

We were introduced to Saul in Acts 7:58 – 8:1). It was only a small, cameo appearance in those verses, but it did indicate that he was in total approval of the killing of Stephen.

Now, in Acts 8:3, we see Saul come into a more prominent, and hate-filled role.

Acting with the authority of the Sanhedrin he set out to destroy the church. No one was spared from his attention and persecution. He literally tore the church apart – an act that he would regret in later years.

Read **Acts 22:3-5; Acts 26:9-11** and **Galatians 1:13** to see how Paul spoke of his regret of earlier years.

Have you ever regretted things that you did, or attitudes you had, in your earlier years?

How do you think the promise of verses such 1 John 1:9 help us to move forward from such regret?

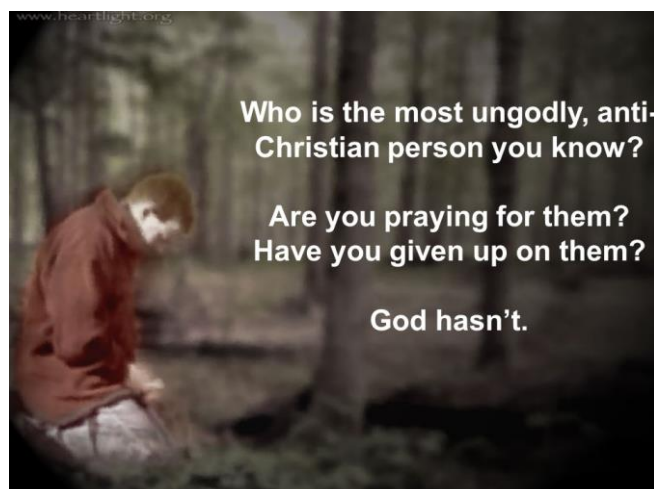
Of course, the most incredible thing about all this is that Saul (later known as Paul) was the fiercest opponent of the followers of Jesus...yet even he was not beyond the reach of God's grace, mercy and forgiveness.

We can be really good at judging people to be "lost causes" – yet God uses Saul as a lesson for us that says that He can overcome any obstacle.

How can this be an encouragement to us as we pray for, and long for, the salvation of family members and friends to know the love of God in Christ?

Saul, the Sanhedrin and persecutors down through the centuries have made one huge mistake. They have thought that if you killed the people who believed, you killed the gospel.

Christianity is not a human thing! Christianity is Christ!
You can kill Christians, but you cannot kill Christ!



What things might hold you back from being obedient to God's call to "Go into all the world"?

Like the early church, let us remember, that wherever we go, and under whatever circumstances, we must take Jesus with us!...We go as missionaries, not as refugees!

You are either a missionary, or a mission field!