

Words and Deeds: Scattered But Not Lost
By Jason Huff
August 5, 2018
Ezekiel 34:11-13; John 10:11-16; Acts 8:1-25

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 8:1-25. May God bless the reading of His holy Word. “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city. Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.” They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.” Then Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.” When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.”

Sometimes the best things come out of awful circumstances. A man goes off to war and comes back with the love of his life. A trip to the ER after an auto accident allows the doctors to find and treat a much worse problem. A family persecuted in another nation gets a chance in the land of opportunity. The Holocaust of Nazi Germany gave rise to the modern state of Israel. Maybe you have your own story about something great coming out of something terrible.

Yet we wonder why God operates the way He does. Our first question when we have a major loss is “why?” We rarely ask the more relevant question, “What are you up to, God?” It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t mourn. The Bible is full of cries to the Lord – we even have a book called Lamentations in our Bibles that is full of lament about feeling abandoned by God. Yet today’s passage shows that God knows what He is doing, even in tragedy.

As a quick reminder, last week we studied together how Stephen became the first martyr of the Christian faith – the first man to give His life in defense of his trust in Jesus. That was horrible in and of itself, but now comes the first wave of persecution against the church. And it's serious – Luke says that Saul (who most of us know as Paul) was starting to destroy the church. He starts a house to house manhunt for Christians. Anyone who says they believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord is imprisoned for blasphemy – a capital offense subject to the same style of execution that Stephen faced.

And so thousands of Christians flee Jerusalem. The holy city of Jews and Christians alike is no longer welcoming those who say that Jesus is the Messiah. Now the apostles stayed in Jerusalem – why, we're not exactly certain. We have to assume they went into hiding, since they would have been the most valuable Christians to put on trial. We don't know for certain. All we do know is that the Christians are running for their lives from Saul and the Sanhedrin.

The first thing that comes to my mind is, “Why, God?” It isn't absolutely clear how long the church has existed by this point, but it's still young, a few years at best. And all these Christians have to flee, some of them losing family members as they are caught and condemned by Saul and the religious authorities. Where is God in the midst of all this? Why didn't God stop the tragedy of Stephen and the continuing tragedy of the persecution?

And it brings up our first thought today: *God is sovereign, and He allows the course of history to flow as it does, intervening as He chooses, for the eternal good of all His people throughout all time.* Now that's a lot to take in. It might be a little complex. What it means is that, as Romans 8:28 says, “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Every true believer in all of time, God is working for our good. That's a lot of people over a long period of time, and only God knows how history fits together. We trust the way He works through time because we see its benefits in passages like this.

What is the result of Stephen's life? People came to know Jesus. What was the result of Stephen's death and the persecution that followed it? The gospel gets spread to places it had never gone before. While Jesus had visited Samaritan territory during His earthly ministry, He stated clearly that He was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. Until this point, while there were Samaritans who had been taught by Jesus, maybe even started to become His followers in a sense, the Samaritan people had not been introduced to the resurrected Jesus. No one had yet preached to them how Jesus had risen from the dead and thus proved His words that He was in fact the long awaited Savior.

This is a huge event in the history of the church. At first, the passage might confuse us – why didn't the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit when they believed and were baptized? That's what happened with the earliest Jewish believers. But God is doing something here, and He'll do it again later in Acts. When Peter and John visit the Samaritans, they see that they are really believers, as true as any of the other converts. When they lay hands on them, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells in them and moves in power. What this tells the apostles is that Jesus is not just the Savior of the Jewish people. He will save the Samaritans as well.

Now the Samaritans were related to the Jewish people – they were the descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel that after over 300 years of disobedience wound up scattered to the four winds to come back in dribs and drabs with a strange hodgepodge of foreign religions and a northern-centered version of the books of the Law. The Jewish people hated them because they reminded them of Israel's sordid past – a past the southern kingdom didn't exactly want to remember either. But these people that the Jews of the day thought were distant cousins to be despised actually were being brought back into God's fold through Jesus. And the apostles confirmed it with their own eyes.

In reality, this story is only one of hundreds that could have been told. Because as the Christians flee Jerusalem, they share their faith as they head out. A lot of them had been staying in Jerusalem not because it was home, but because it was where the church was. Now the church is on the move. As they head back home, to their relatives and cousins and friends, they share the story. The movement explodes exponentially as word starts to reach distant communities within Israel. Out of a great tragedy, the church gets bigger and bigger. Jesus' salvation is believed in more and more places.

Now did God somehow love Stephen or the other martyrs of the early church less? Absolutely not. In life they came into God's Kingdom; in death they get to experience the presence of God fully. God worked out His purposes through what happened to them. God uses our sinfulness – in this case, the sinful refusal of the Jewish leadership to accept Jesus and their persecution of the early believers – to bring about His purposes. It doesn't change anything about human responsibility. We are still responsible for what we do, no matter how God works in spite of us. Yet that's the thing – God does work. Even in the worst situations, God brings people to Himself to experience His love, peace, and forgiveness.

There are many movements in modern theology to try and explain away why God allows bad things to happen to good people – at least good in the sense we think of, nice people, people who aren't at the top of the naughty list, not perfect but not deserving of awful fates. Certainly Stephen would qualify. One theory is that God intentionally does not bring to mind what He knows about the future so He can experience it with us – that when Stephen was stoned, let's say, God somehow put it out of His mind so He could experience the grief of that moment as if He'd never known it.

Another theory is that God doesn't have everything planned out; that He doesn't know everything; instead, He just makes His will occur as things go along, keeping His promises but letting human free will run where it may. His desire for us to be saved, for example, is limited by our choice whether or not to believe in Him. That way, God can't be at fault in any way when something bad happens.

What I'm going to tell you is that a lot of these ideas that segments of the church believe on this are just rubbish – just garbage. Not because they don't sound nice, but because they do not follow Scripture, which says that when God chose us to save, “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise” (1 Corinthians 1:27.) 2 Thessalonians 2:13 says “God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved.” In 2 Timothy 1, we read that God saves us “because of His own purpose and grace.”

God is directly involved in our salvation, and in the running of the universe. In Isaiah 45:7, God says, “I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things.” Daniel says to King Nebuchadnezzar, “God changes times and seasons; He sets up kings and deposes them.”

I don't want and I cannot believe in a god who sees a disaster and can only throw up his hands in despair, who cannot answer prayer because he cannot affect the future. I don't need a touchy-feely god who feels the way we feel, because I know my feelings, and they get mixed up really easily. I don't believe in a god who is a servant to our wills, a god who would send his son to earth and then to a painful death in the hopes that someone might believe somewhere.

I need God to be God as He proves Himself in Scripture, who has a purpose behind every suffering even if we don't know that purpose, who not only is in charge but takes charge. I need God to be able to say in the face of the persecution of the church, in the face of Andrew Brunson still sitting in Turkey under false charges, in the face of Chinese churches having buildings destroyed and people intimidated not to go to worship, in the face of the Iraqi and Syrian Christians having to leave behind everything due to Muslim violence, “None of what you suffered was a surprise to me.”

God is working out everything for His people. Who knows what people have heard the gospel because of Andrew's testimony to Jesus in the court record? Who knows how many people have become sympathetic to Jesus because they know the Christians who have lost their churches to be people of honor and faith? God is making Himself known, and He does it in ways we don't often understand. But we do know is that through His plan, He will bring all of His adopted children into His Kingdom forever – not one He has chosen to save will be lost.

When the persecution in Jerusalem started, the sheep – the believers – were scattered but not lost. As God said through Ezekiel, as Jesus said as our Good Shepherd, God was with them the whole time. And those sheep made more sheep as they preached the gospel of Jesus. And that's the second thing we're going to look at this week: *when God's plans come to fruition, the end result is great joy.*

What happens when Philip arrives in Samaria? Right from the passage – he proclaims Christ. Evil spirits are cast out and the lame are healed. People see all the miracles and they really start listening closely. Men and women alike come for baptism. (It's important that it says “women” because it means that they weren't becoming Jesus followers because their husbands did, which was the custom of the time – to worship your spouse's gods as well as your own. These women were coming to personal faith in Jesus.) The whole thing is summed up in one phrase – “so there was great joy in that city.”

When God allowed for the church's persecution, He had the joy of the Samaritans in mind. This people group that had been sandwiched between Rome and Israel, hated and despised, who only had a corrupted version of Scripture and a limited relationship with the God of their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, now they were once again part of the Kingdom, accepted by Him and loved because of the gift of the Son who covered their sins and claimed them as His own. Out of the tragedy of persecution came eternal joy for the Samaritan people.

Our patience with difficulties in our lives – tragedies, losses, setbacks, struggles, even hatred and persecution – often runs parallel with how deeply we believe that God is working things out for our eternal joy and the eternal joy of others who have believed or will believe. It doesn't mean we don't struggle, that we somehow become masochists and enjoy suffering, no! And yet the joy to come makes it worthwhile.

In John 17, as Jesus prays to the Father, He asks that the disciples would “have the full measure of my joy within them.” In 2 Corinthians 7:4 Paul writes, “In all our troubles I am overflowing with joy.” In Philippians 1, Paul talks about how his imprisonment has only spread the gospel more and more, and so he says, “Christ is preached – because of this, I rejoice.” And Hebrews 12:2 encourages us to fix our eyes on Jesus, who “for the joy set before Him endured the cross.”

Are you looking for the joy? Does it change your outlook? Are you eager for God's will to be done so that there might be rejoicing? I understand the Bible to teach that there are no random accidents, and that while many things happen due to the sickness of sin in this world that God allows, God is working things out for eternal joy.

We can't expect to see all of what God is doing. Stephen never lived to see that his death and the violent reaction of the Sanhedrin to his message would actually wind up spreading the gospel far and wide. Yet Stephen now knows and rejoices in heaven alongside the Father and the Son of what good came of it. What suffering you are going through, I can't explain. I can only tell you that if you believe, if you continue in faith through the struggle, you will find eternal joy further down the road. Maybe in this life, maybe not. But it is real and it is coming.

My friends, latch on to joy in God. Expect it. Plan on it. Wait for it. Everything in this world will eventually disappoint. But God is good, and His mercy endures forever. Joy is coming! And if you have godly joy, you will shine brightly in a world that has so little joy, and so much of that a counterfeit. Set your eyes on Jesus, and you will be filled with it.

This passage is so rich and deep that we have to return to it next week. God has a lot to say to us about the Holy Spirit that we will look at this passage again and focus on Him next time. But for now, know this: God is on the move. Nothing stops His will, not even tragedies. He will bring joy to all His chosen ones, all believers. Trust in the grace Jesus provided on the cross, know that He is working everything out for the benefit of those who believe, and have His joy.