

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Acts 8:1 as we continue our journey through the book of Acts.

It is God's record of the early church. We have mentioned to you several times by now, but hopefully by then it'll get in there and stay there, that this is really a report of the work of the Holy Spirit as He is poured out after the ascension of Jesus and how the gospel, through the believers, was preached, lives were changed, thousands were saved; and for the next thirty years - from the time that Jesus ascended - the book of Acts takes you forward to give you a report. Our focus in Acts, as I think it should always be, is twofold. Number one - you get a model of the early church. This is the 1st century church. This is the first work of God. And so there's a lot to learn as to what God would want to do with us as a church. What should the church be involved with? I'll tell you what you don't find the church involved with at all in the book of Acts. Politics. They're into preaching the gospel. The best way to change the culture is to preach the good news of Jesus. And so there's lots to be learned in terms of - what should the church focus on? The other thing is - what kind of people did God use? And can we be those kinds of persons? Can we make ourselves available in such a way that we can be more usable for His glory?

We've spent the last four weeks in chapter 7 of the book of Acts focusing on the life and the ministry of Stephen, who God raised up as the church began to grow. In fact, he was one of only seven guys in this church of thousands that was marked by the people as being men filled with the Spirit, that were Hellenists. In other words, they came from Greek cultures even though they had Jewish faith. They brought along their idiosyncrasies, if you will, from these different cultures, and foods and habits and all. They had their own synagogue in town. And he was chosen, just because of his faithfulness, to begin to deliver food to widows who were also Hellenists, who felt like they were being ignored or prejudiced against. He was faithful in the little things. He began to be used by the Lord to meet at this Synagogue of the Freedmen (you can read about it in chapter 6:9), where a lot of these folks out of town came together. And he began to share his faith with them, and who Jesus was, and rather than being excited about the fact that they were being brought good news, a lot of these religious folks got angry. They first

sent their smartest guys to argue with Stephen. They couldn't win. They were frustrated, infuriated - even the religious leaders - and so they, instead of asking for an explanation or trying to understand, turned on Stephen. They accused him of blaspheming God and Moses and the Temple and the law. They had Stephen arrested by the Sanhedrin, the seventy-member council that really is the, and was, Supreme Court of Israel; also the religious leadership, if you will, their political force. And they gave Stephen, after hearing the accusations against him, an opportunity to answer for himself, and most of chapter 7 is that - fifty verses of Stephen answering the charges that he was a blasphemer against God and Moses, the law and the Temple itself. And Stephen did something remarkable. In giving these men a history lesson, he showed them how the nation had failed to identify God's deliverer time and again. They had rejected Joseph, they had set Moses aside, and now Jesus, the Messiah - the One that had been promised, had come, and rather than submit to Him, they had sought to kill Him and remove Him from the scene. Instead, they fell back upon their works and upon their religious practices. And Stephen says in his message, "Look, Abraham learned and taught us that it's faith that God's looking for. Nothing else." So Stephen, in verse 51 of the last chapter - chapter 7, made personal application, and he basically says to these astute men, "You're just like your forefathers. You're not listening when God speaks. You won't believe when He calls. You don't follow Him when He speaks to you." And rather than taking it well and repenting, they reacted in an uncontrolled rage and, like a pack of animals, they dragged Stephen outside of town where they stoned him to death. But as they did, Stephen looked up, and God opened the heavens, and He showed him Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father, standing to greet His first martyr, if you will. And, with words of forgiveness, Stephen dies, and he finishes well. We are told (in verse 58 last week) that standing there, as he is being killed, was a man watching the clothes of those who were throwing the stones - the accusers, and his name was Saul; "a young man named Saul" is what we are told. And Saul will be, over time, and not too long of time, a fruit that comes out of Stephen's faithful life and death.

Between Stephen and Paul, though, is a new deacon (one of the other seven guys) named Philip, who is going to be instrumental in leading the church away from the comfort of Jerusalem and leading them away from the religious, legalistic practices of Jerusalem, and beginning to carry the gospel (because this is God's plan) to the world beginning in Samaria (outside of Jerusalem), to the north as well; eventually getting to the Jews as well as the Gentiles. If Stephen spoke about the relationship between the law and the Temple and the sacrifices to faith in Christ,

Philip is sent to the Samaritans. They're almost that halfway point. There are the Jews here. There are Hellenists who are Jews with a lot of Gentile and Greek habits. There are the Samaritans, who we will discover are kind of half Jews and half a lot of other things. And then there are the Gentiles that we will find being reached here in a couple of weeks as well. So, there are these connecting kinds of ministries, if you will - Jewish roots for the Samaritans, religious ways of the rest. And Philip will also be sent to accost, to share with, to minister to, to win over an Ethiopian leader who was a convert to Judaism, was a Gentile but yet had come to believe in the God of the Jews, and he's going to get to go back to his nation with the gospel as well.

So chapter 8 focuses on Philip. Chapter 9 we turn to Paul. And, in the increasingly violent climate that precipitated after Stephen's murder, God's ongoing work continues.

Tonight we just want to look at eight verses as the flock is scattered, if you will. We will spend the next three weeks (including tonight) in chapter 8 with Philip. I think there's a lot that we can learn. But we are also given a couple of insights into Paul before he is kind of set aside until we get to chapter 9.

Verse 1 says this, "Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." The name Saul is a Hebrew word meaning one who is desired. The name Paul, which he will take after his conversion, is a Latin word that means to be small or diminutive. It is almost understood that Paul took a name like "I'm nothing compared to the Lord that I serve." But, in any event, he takes that name after he is converted. We mentioned to you last week, as we were finishing chapter 7, that Stephen's death had a tremendous impact on Saul's life. But that's not immediately apparent. In fact, if you read these first few verses here and then you go to chapter 9, and you read the first couple of verses there, it was everything that Saul could do to keep the fires of hatred burning to crowd out the conviction that was being brought into his heart. Until the day that he would relinquish his life to the Lord, the words of Stephen were just brewing in his heart. He's a pretty good guy as far as reminding you and me that you should never stop praying for people that you think have no chance. Maybe you were one of those people. I remember when I got saved. I went to my 10-year high school reunion. There were a couple of Christians there. And a lot of people thought I was nuts, but they said to me this,

"We thought you'd never get saved." Maybe you're one of those people. Certainly Saul was one of those people that would never get saved. But look, you never realize or can really fully understand the impact that your life is having. Stephen never got to see this at all. He just died. He was murdered by a bunch of wicked religious folks who had enough self-confidence and self-worth in their understanding of who they were to believe that killing Stephen would be the way that God would want them to go. This is some eternal fruit that you never get to see.

So we read in verse 58 (chapter 7) and again here in verse 1 that Saul, when Stephen was killed, was onboard. He was "consenting." The word literally means approving. He was seeing this action of these religious folks against this preacher young man as justice and not murder. Religion had blinded Saul's eyes. And I think you can look around the country and see, but religion without Jesus can create the most cruel people of all. What folks will do in the name of their God can be horrendous. It is almost as bad as it can get. It drives you to the furthest depths of wickedness until Jesus comes into your life. Saul was a man that was born as a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, who were the toughest fighting group in Israel's history. Thirty years after his conversion, Paul, when he wrote to the Philippians, said that he was "born of the circumcision, he worshipped God in the Spirit, he rejoices in Jesus, he has no more confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3). But he goes on to say, "I was and did live my life very confident in my pedigree. Circumcised on the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless" (Philippians 3:4-6). "I really thought I had arrived as a religious man." And in all that, he's out murdering people in the name of the Lord. So, he'd come to Jerusalem as a Roman citizen. He sat at the feet of a man named Gamaliel, the best known, most revered teacher in Judaism of his day. He was, according to Gamaliel's own words, the best student he ever had. He was a Pharisee, which meant that he believed in life after death. He was much more spiritually-minded than most of the people on this council who were humanists - they were called Sadducees. He believed in the religious laws of the Bible. He sought to excel in them by himself, in his own efforts. All the while, he would willingly join in the persecution of the church, and he was absolutely sure, standing before a group of men that had lost their minds - who, in great anger, murdered a young man in cold blood, that he was doing absolutely the right thing. Years from now, he will write to Timothy, a young man that he was training (in his late 30's or so by the time he

got the letter). And Paul said to Timothy, "Before I got saved, I was a blasphemer, and I was a persecutor, and I was an insolent man. But I obtained the mercy of God because I did these things ignorantly in my unbelief" (1 Timothy 1:13). But that's the guy that waits in the wings here as the church begins to go forward, a man that is sworn to annihilating the church. As a Sanhedrin member, Paul would have had to be, by law, 40 years old. He is called a "young man" in chapter 7:58. But he would have had to be 40. And, by law, he would have had to be married because that was the qualifications in the 1st century of being a Sanhedrin member. Now, we know from 1 Corinthians 7 that Paul was single. We don't know what happened to his wife. We don't know if she packed up and left when he got saved, or she packed up and left when he started killing people. There would've been a whole lot of good reasons for her to pack up and leave, I guess. But Paul was single by the time he came to the Lord, and he served the Lord with his heart. In fact, he says to the Corinthians, "I know that everybody's called to something different, but if I were you, I'd stay single" (1 Corinthians 7:7-8). I mean, he was so convinced that this was going to give him more ability to move around.

We meet Paul for the first time, like I said, in verse 58 of the last chapter, standing by an execution, signing off on the execution papers, holding the clothes of those who would march to the forefront to slaughter this man who had testified against him. Paul would be the leading spear of the persecution against the church for the next little while. But in the back of his mind, without fail, churned this understanding of what he had heard Stephen talking about. Paul was no dummy. He was a theological guy. He thought things through. And God used that, I think, to speak to him. But he had to suffer with these convicting words of this young man, Stephen, that no one could argue against, this angelic face (according to chapter 6:15) that just looked like the Lord lived in this man, his bold message. On the surface, it looked like Saul wasn't touched. He went berserk. He lost his mind. He did the most horrific things. But inside there was this dying to get out from under who he was.

"Saul was consenting to his death. At that time, a great persecution arose against the church there at Jerusalem," enough to drive the church out of town into the rest of Judea and north into the area of Samaria. So, the Holy Spirit uses the word "great" to describe what follows - a persecution that was unexpected. It came with the kind of ferocity of a great storm. The saints did their best to escape, themselves. No one was safe. It was dangerous, for the first time in the church's history, to be a believer. I should tell you, at least from a historical

standpoint, that nearly all of the persecution against the church (in the book of Acts) came from these religious zealots. It doesn't come from Rome, although Rome will certainly be an opposing force in the years that followed, especially after 65-70 A.D., when they come and invade Jerusalem. But until then, in the first thirty years of the church, it all came from these religious folks in town whose lives were driven by this plan to just wipe out the church. In 70 A.D., when Titus and the Tenth Legion of the Roman army came in, the nation themselves were dispersed. Diaspora. That's what the word is. "Scattered." It's used here in verse 1 as well. Diaspora. The Jews were sent into all of the world. And after Jerusalem was overthrown, there was no Israel until 1948. So from 70 A.D. to 1948, there is no homeland, if you will, and we certainly require a homeland for the Lord's return and all those things that you read. But God miraculously brought them back in 1948, and it is my personal conviction they're not leaving anymore now until Jesus comes because the Bible doesn't really give us any other scenario than that. A great persecution came against the church, and they were scattered. Like I said, diaspora. Remember back in chapter 1:8, the Lord had said to the people, "When the Holy Spirit comes, I'm going to make you My witnesses starting here in Jerusalem," and then He mentions Samaria, and He finally says, "and to the uttermost parts of the world. My plan is to use you to take My message to everyone in every direction." But understand that the church, until Stephen's death, was very comfortable in Jerusalem. Nobody wanted to go anywhere. They just seemed to have settled in. They were content. They were happy. And God uses Stephen to drive the church into making bigger plans, as persecution moved the people of God by the hand of God, if you will.

When Paul and Barnabas (down the road here a few weeks of study) run into disagreement with them about staffing or personnel, and they couldn't resolve it (and they kind of go in different directions, and you hate to see the duo break up because God had used them so well), it also produces a growth that, I don't think, either one would have chosen. That's the way persecution is working here. I'm sure that no one viewed it as a good thing at the time, but God would use it to move His people around. What He doesn't want is for us, as Christians, to settle in. Right? "Oh, I'm comfortable here in the back row or in the third row. I sit in row six on the left. And this is my spot." I watch people sometimes - they have a spot. That's really dangerous - to be settled in - when you can only sit in that spot. I watched somebody come in and go, "There's someone in our spot," (Laughing) and they said to the usher, "Could you move them?" "No. It's pretty much free. You sit wherever you want." "No. That's our spot." "You're in a rut, man. Just move

over ten feet." "Oh, I don't know if I can really listen from right there. If I could just be over a little bit, that would be a lot helpful." We all love "Camp Comfortable." But the early church, in loving the spiritual climate and ministering in Jerusalem, was not anxious to leave the fellowship and the goodness and the ease. Even though there was some difficulty, there wasn't much difficulty. It's kind of like we had almost forty families move this summer, in retirement, to places that they can afford to retire. And there're a lot of places that you can get away from taxes on your 401K, and you can't blame them. But they will move for a financial reason and then will call and say, "Can you help us find a good church?" It's hard to find good churches. I always say to people, "If you're going to move, find a good church first, and then worry about where you're going to live. Find a place that you can begin to grow." So, it's hard to go to the mission field when you have such a comfortable lifestyle. It's challenging, and it's difficult, but that doesn't mean it's not God's will. God's will for these folks was to go into all the world, and they weren't movin'. And we literally read six chapters, and no one's gone anywhere, and you can't get to the end of chapter 7, and then chapter 8:1, ah, they're going! They're finally moving. It was persecution that drove them into the center of God's will. And I think that you should learn that lesson. Sometimes the biggest changes you face in life you think are the most overcoming, or they're the most damaging, or the most challenging. But it could very well be the very way God gets you where He wants you to be. You lose your job unexpectedly, you lose a relationship that you thought was permanent, you feel unsure, you feel unsettled. Something forces you in life to do something that you would never do otherwise. It draws you out of your comfort zone. It might very well be the thing God wants you to do, but if it was not for pressure, you'd never do it. You're too logical for that, you're too sensible for that. "That doesn't make any sense. I can't do that!" And so you don't. And then the Lord goes (Pastor Jack hits his hand on the pulpit), and you go, "I guess I can do that because I can't do anything else now." So even if you don't normally rock the boat or upset the apple cart, or you're not a risk taker, you don't really step out in faith much, God might push you around. Some of you that are in these high-paying jobs, and you think, "Well, I'm secure, man, this is where the Lord wants me," probably it would be impossible to move you unless the Lord took away some of the stuff you depend upon. And then you find out you owe Him everything. But oftentimes your hand gets forced.

Well that happened to the church here. The church runs for its life, and it ends up exactly in the will of God's center. It's exactly where God wanted them to be. I don't doubt, just reading through this, that I would expect to hear the church

meeting together, praying, "God, where are You? Lord, what are You doing, and why haven't You answered our prayer, and why haven't we heard from You?" But Isaiah (55:8-9) says, "My thoughts are beyond your finding out. My ways are higher than your ways." And it's good sometimes to just have the Lord put you in the position where you just have to trust Him. Paul picked up that whole idea in Romans 11:33 when he said to the Romans, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" And I think that had the early church been able to step back and read it like we're reading it now, they would see God's hand at work. It's a waste of time to figure out why God lets something happen. We need to just walk by faith, not try to figure it out. God has plans. You've just got to rest in Him. And so God has His reasons. And one of the reasons here is that He wanted to get them moving. You know, sometimes the valuable lesson out of the Bible is, to us, that when we're doing everything right, and yet everything seems to go wrong, we're probably right where the Lord wants us to be. It's kind of like the eaglets getting kicked out of the nest by the eagle. Yaaaaaa! Time to learn how to fly.

Notice in verse 1 that everyone ran for their lives "except the apostles." And I would say to you here're some bold guys. Right? When Jesus was crucified, they had gone running. This time they stay with the work that God had given them in Jerusalem. Now they're all going to be leaving pretty soon. Well, all but James. Some of the others as well. Some of them are going to go to early deaths for their faith. Others are going to long lives of service. But all of them are going to honor the Lord. But for now, as the church is undermined, headquarters in Jerusalem and its leadership stay open for business. God gave them some pretty bold, tough guys to stand in the gap.

Verse 2 tells us, "And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison." Not everyone in Israel was fanatical. The words "devout men," by the way, when you read them in the New Testament, are translated God-fearing men, and it usually means people weren't saved; the religious people like Cornelius. They were seeking God, but they weren't saved people. They were just "devout." And so it does make the implication here that Stephen got a proper burial but probably not from the church. I think everybody was running for their lives. They brought great lamentation over him, as the custom was, but these were probably sincere religious people who opposed the hatred and longed for the truth, and they stood up for

what was right; but probably not saved yet. So there were some sensible people in town. But notice there was also a crazy guy - Saul. The word "havoc," "*lymaino*" in Greek, means to be filthy - as an animal trapped and unable to escape, who will do anything because he's trapped. But in most contexts, it just uses the word for filth. It means, here, he goes on a rampage. What happened to Saul? He's so convicted that he loses his sense of sanity, he turns to brutal, sadistic cruelty, his religious zeal turns him against the church, and this religious scholar smells blood in the water, and, like a shark, he goes looking for Christians. Not in church, not in the gathering of the saints. Just house to house. He hears about a Christian, kicks in the door, drags the guy out, drags him off to prison. Dads taken from homes, mothers removed from their children - without concern. The prisons began to overflow. The morgue people worked overtime. This was a bad dude who, I suspect, everyone in the church prayed might die. He was deadly, he was feared. And yet all along, he was thinking he was doing the will of God. There're a lot of religious nuts like that today.

Now, all of these actions, mind you, that Paul carries out during this time will haunt him the rest of his life. He'll mention this time in his life over and over again. When he wrote to the Galatians (the rest of the times were in the book of Acts, chapter 9 and chapters 22 and 26 as well), Paul mentions how hard it has been to live with his past. He wrote in chapter 1:13-14 of Galatians these words, "And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it." That was his testimony of his old life. In Acts 9:1-2, we will read, "Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." In Acts 22:4-5, he spoke to the nation. You remember, he was arrested, and he said this, "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished." He spoke to Agrippa in Acts 26:9-12, years later, "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to

blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority," and then he gives his testimony about he was saved.

So, what we're reading about Saul here - his life prior to chapter 9 - Paul did some horrible things. And you should keep that in mind as you read through the New Testament, as God uses him, because Paul will find forgiveness at the cross of Jesus the moment he confesses his sin. He'll be changed, but he will be left with sorrow the rest of his life. There really was no way to repair what he had broken. There was no way to undo what he had done. Sins marked his life. He was forgiven but extremely remorseful. And I think that that's true. God forgives, but wouldn't you like to go back and fix some stupid things that, maybe, you have done? After he came to Jesus, whenever he went anywhere (and you can read at the end of Romans, chapter 15, for example), Paul would go everywhere he could - over the next twenty years - and collect money for the poor, and he was constantly donating to people that were hurting. And I don't doubt that he made some homes tremendously poor - dad died, moms no longer with us - that the destruction he brought to many homes he sought to repair for years to come. He wrote to the Romans in chapter 15:25-27, "Could you make a contribution for the poor saints in Jerusalem. If it pleases you, we are their debtors, and we'd like to share with them. I want to be a good steward, that I can be found faithful." And many houses were made poor by Paul. I'm sure that, when he closed his eyes at night, these faces tormented him; that he went to these cities, and some of the people didn't think much of him because that's what he had done. He couldn't get rid of his legacy. My wife and I, and some other folks, did a bunch of services many years ago at California Men's Colony with Tex Watson, the Manson murderer, who is a Christian - loves the Lord, been walking with the Lord for years; doesn't believe he should ever get out of jail. He understands that he's not going anywhere. I said, "How about your forgiveness?" He said, "I know God's forgiven me, but I could never forgive myself." I think that's where Paul was. He called himself the least of the disciples (1 Corinthians 15:9). Grace is great. It brings you through. But you can't shake what sin destroys. God can restore. But Paul will find himself, I think, very merciful towards those that are suffering because he made so many people suffer. If there was one man in the New Testament that you would say is beyond the grace of God, you'd point to this guy. Right? Paul argues you should never cross anyone off your prayer list. I guess that's his argument. "Look at me. Look who He saved." So, you know, your dad, your mom, your wife, your husband, your brother, the guy that will never listen - that's the guy I'd be

praying for. God's really big at moving really stubborn hearts. The most unlikely of us gets saved. Just look at you! Some of you.....really? Paul was the most violent, hateful, active opponent of Jesus. When the disciples listened to Jesus talk about riches and all, and the camel going through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:23-26), they said, "Who in the world can be saved, then, if that's what's required?" And Jesus said "That's impossible with man, but with God everything's possible." So, we only rub up against Paul for a couple of verses before he is set aside until the next chapter, and we follow God's work with Philip. But Paul is a guy that, I think, when I thought about my dad getting saved, I used to think about Paul. He wasn't wicked like Paul, but he was stubborn like Paul. And I prayed for my dad for twelve years, and I think there must have been at least three or four years when I argued with God, "This is just a waste of time. You don't listen anyway. He'll never get saved. He's as tough as nails. He thinks he knows everything. He'll never listen to his son." And he never did, but he did get saved. So I think that sometimes we look at people on a spectrum, don't we? We look at people and go, "I've been sharing with so and so. They're really close." I don't even know what that means. "They're really close." That means they're not slammin' the door in your face, I guess, and they used to? Look, salvation is a miracle of God. And whether it is like verse 2 here, these devout men that come to bury Stephen who aren't saved, or verse 3, the men causing havoc and wanting to actively kill everyone who stands for the Lord, they both need the grace of God. So the next time you give up praying for someone, be encouraged. Think about Saul. Here's a guy that should never have gotten saved, but he did, and God was doing something in his heart that He only shows us later - that it just was killing Paul inside, trying to cover it up with his violence.

Verse 4, "Therefore those who were scattered" (diaspora) "went everywhere preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them." The devil's attempt to stomp out the fire of the Holy Spirit just sent embers in every direction to start new fires. If you read ahead a couple of chapters, in chapter 11 you can read (there in verse 19), "Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. Then the news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch." And you know the story there - that

Antioch was not only saved, but Barnabas began to pastor and couldn't do it, didn't feel comfortable, went and got Paul who became, for a while, their pastor. So this persecution did a lot, but more than anything else, it sent the gospel running in every direction. I like verse 4 because though the church ran for cover, they didn't go silent about Jesus. Every one of them was saved. They were smart enough not to stay where they were probably going to get killed, but they were willing to tell anyone who would listen about the Lord. It's no longer just the apostles. It isn't even just a select few. Now the whole church is busy doing the work of the Lord - wisely hiding from persecution but no compromise in their message. The best way for the church to reach the world is for every Christian to share with somebody that they know. Wherever God sends you, wherever He puts you, begin to share with those that are near to you. Be a faithful steward. Like Stephen and, here soon, Philip, faithful in the little, God will give you much more to do. But here, literally, with this persecution, is the start in the Bible of world missions. It is one church center (at this point) being driven from Jerusalem by the hatred of wicked men. And instead of just running away and being quiet, they run everywhere preaching to whoever will listen.

Well, verse 5 tells us that Philip's ministry was then begun in Samaria. And Luke might very well have gotten all of this information from Philip because, if you've read ahead to chapter 21, Luke will go and stay at Philip's house in Caesarea twenty years down the road from this chapter, and they'll get to spend some time together, and he very well could have heard firsthand from Philip how these things went. But remember Philip was one of the seven chosen along with Stephen - same qualifications - and here God, by His Spirit, is doing what He told them that they should do - go out from Jerusalem to Samaria to preach the gospel.

It would have taken a lot of boldness for anyone to go to Samaria because the Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. As a Hellenist, Philip would have been probably more tolerant than most against the prejudice that existed. But Samaria was not on everyone's top list of missionary destinations. They hated, and were bitter against, the Jews. In fact, the relationship between Israel and Samaria had centuries of bitterness attached to them. In the 10th century B.C. (931 B.C.), a split took place in the tribes of Israel in Jerusalem, and ten of them moved north; and Judah and Benjamin stayed where the LORD put His name in Jerusalem. The ten that went north made Samaria their capital. They were known as the northern kingdom. They would last 209 years. They would never have a good king. Nothing good ever came out, and eventually the LORD sent in the Assyrians (in 722 B.C.),

who took over and literally dispersed all of the Jews. They would never be able to reconstitute in the north again as the northern kingdom. They would all have to go to Jerusalem to be accepted back into Judaism, if you will. But when Assyria, as a world power, conquered nations, they didn't kill everyone; they moved them. So if you were Jewish, maybe you got moved to a place that never spoke your language, didn't eat your food, and they would take other people that they conquered, and they'd move them into the northern kingdom. And so what happened was there was this mixture of people - religious, not religious. In fact, in the Old Testament, you can read of that time when the people moving in there said, "Could somebody tell us what this God of this land requires as far as our worship because we don't know what to do here?" They were all superstitious. They believed in lots of different gods. And so they mixed a lot of foreigners, if you will, intermarrying with the religious beliefs of the Jews who lived in the north. As a result, Samaria began to develop this quasi-religious kind of country. They built a rival temple at Mount Gerizim (John 4:19), you remember, that that lady might have asked Jesus about (the woman at the well). They refused to believe anything except the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. When the southern kingdom of Judah returned after the Babylonian captivity, they refused to allow the Samaritans to come and help rebuild Jerusalem. They hated each other even then. One of the last Hasmonian kings, a fellow named John Hyrcanus, destroyed the temple in Samaria about 100 years before Jesus showed up. So there was a lot of hatred, and the Jews in Jerusalem - who thought they were very spiritual - always considered the Samaritans kind of half-breeds. They didn't associate with them. They didn't believe they'd ever get to heaven. God could have cared less about them. That's what they taught. And so, if you were to travel to Jerusalem, you weren't allowed to stay in a Samaritan town. They would say, "Where are you going?" "Jerusalem." "Yeah, we're all full at the hotel here. You can't stay." If you were leaving Jerusalem, they would let you go through their land in the north. But you remember the disciples coming with Jesus? And He sent them ahead, and they said, "Well, there's no room at the inn," and John said (Luke 9:54), "Can we call fire down from heaven like Elijah did, on these Samaritans?" They hated them. And Jesus said, "Really? Is that what we're going to do?" And that was where Jesus went to share when he went to the northern area. So, the hatred was long, and it had been well taught. John writes, in chapter 4:4, "They needed to go through Samaria," and the reason they did, Jesus wanted to go minister there. So, if you've read John 4, you know that the Lord stayed there, and He ministered, and this lady got saved, and she went to witness to her whole town, and the whole town begged Jesus to stay around for a few days. And all of that work - in seeing most of the

city come to the Lord - is now the benefit to Philip, who shows up there to minister. There's certainly no place in the body for prejudice. Know that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free (Galatians 3:28). God just sees us the same. And that was Philip's goal. He comes to preach. He doesn't come to preach religion. He just comes to preach Jesus, the One that they need. And he doesn't preach against anything. He doesn't go after their weird religious beliefs. He just begins to preach Jesus. I think that's good advice for us. You want to be fruitful, just preach Jesus. "I want to witness against these guys." "Why? Why don't you just preach Jesus? Everyone knows what they don't have. Let's tell them what the Lord has for them."

Well, we read in verse 6 (as the people began to be hearing the preaching of Christ), "The multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city." So Philip, like Stephen, another non-apostle, began to experience the power of God in his ministry. And we would like that as well, wouldn't we? The people were hearing (that's preaching), but they were also seeing God's power at work through the healing and through the deliverance of these demon-possessed lives that God had drawn together. Miracles do draw a crowd. You should know that. And these guys that take their shows on the road, they're counting on that. On the other hand, you will find miracles in the Scriptures almost always directly attached to verifying what God says. In other words, the miracles have a purpose. It isn't to gather a crowd, it is to verify the facts. So, with miracles come the pitfalls, of course, of people trying to make a name and wealth for themselves and claiming they have power that they don't have. Philip was a man that could be used by the Lord because his eyes didn't get off of the Lord onto what the Lord was doing with him. He could handle it without stumbling. And here's what we read in verse 6 - there were many who came, and God began to work, and, verse 7, they were healed; healings, deliverances and all. I think Dr. John Phillips (really good Bible commentator) wrote on this verse, "In the gospels and in Acts we can't help but recognize the prevalence of both sickness and demon possession. We, today, will readily admit disease, but we almost always discount demon possession. We intellectually agree to the existence of demons, but we will not agree to their activity. Instead, we look for more reasonable explanation - for insane behaviors, action, violence." And then he writes, "I'm sure that devils and demons are as active in the 21st century as they were in the 1st." And I think that's right. I mean,

we can't find a devil behind every tree, but we're in warfare here, right? And Satan loves to destroy lives.

Having said that, I don't believe any Christian can ever be demon-possessed. I know there are whole branches of the church that teach, "Well you're just possessed by the devil." I just think that's the easy way out. If I'm a Christian and have a gluttony problem, I eat too much.....well, wait, I do have that.....it'd be great to just blame it on a demon. "Yeah, it's not me. It's the demon, man. It's gluttony. It's in my blood. If you could just cast it out, I could be thin. That'd be great." No. The Lord moves in, and when the Lord moves in, greater is He who is in you. God does not sublease. "All right. I'll live in the top, you live in the bottom." He doesn't do that. "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. You have overcome them, little children" (1 John 4:4). "Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you" (1 Corinthians 6:19). So, you're fine. Satan would like to harass and stand against you, but there is this rise of preoccupation with Christians being demon-possessed, which is not biblical and certainly not even reasonable scripturally.

But understand that in Samaria, and especially with this guy that was running the show (that we read about next week), there was a tremendous amount of the occult going on, and he apparently had a lot of people under his spell, and so the deliverances began to come.

I love verse 8. There's always joy when God begins to work, isn't there? It's the fruit of the Spirit. I think that the church should be a bunch of joyful people. I always think that to leave church depressed means you haven't met with God. "Happy are the people whose God is the LORD!" Isn't that what it says? Psalm 144:15. And you can look that up because I remember that one. (Laughing) I don't have any idea.

So, great persecution. Everyone runs for their lives. God's will gets accomplished. And our hero of chapter 8, Philip, shows up at a town that is very much prejudiced against, that very few people want to go to, that the Jews have no relationship with at all, though the Lord had gone there. And, as a result, he begins to minister, and the Word of God and the power of God works the same way in Samaria as it did in Jerusalem. It's still the power of God. And I would say this to you - it'll work the same way in Whittier, and it'll work the same way at Starbucks, and it'll

work the same way at Ralphs market. Wherever God sends you, His Word brings life - if you just believe that and begin to share it.

So, what do we take away tonight? Look, think about this. Your life as a Christian has tremendous impact. And you won't always see that, but rest assured people are watching. Realize that the blindness of self-righteousness that Paul was driven by will destroy you if you aren't willing to look at what God has to say. Maybe tonight you are in church, and God is scattering you. Maybe your life is about to go upside down. None of it was planned by you, but you have no choice but to now face up to it. And I would say to you then, just in great faith, go and embrace what God is doing. It's going to be awesome. It's going to be awesome. Thirdly, fifthly, eleventhly, I don't know where we're at now, salvation is a miracle. Don't stop praying for the impossible ones because God saves. God saves. If you're faithful in the little (like Philip), you'll be given much. Don't let prejudice ever keep you from taking the Word of God to the lost. Reach out to the unloved and the minimized and the set-aside. Preach Jesus. Forget about arguing against religion. He has water that if you drink of it, you'll never thirst again (John 4:14). And then step out. The Lord can use you in a mighty way to do great miracles. He did it with Stephen, He did it with Philip, and I have to believe Philip just went, "My goodness! Look what the Lord is doing!" He ran for his life and ended up right where God was working. I just love the picture.

So next week, read ahead. Go to verse 9-25. That's a lot of verses. Read ahead. And here's what we're going to talk about next week. Next week, we'd like to talk about how we hear God's voice when He tells us to do something that's obviously wrong.....or is it?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
February 18, 2018