

Acts 8:2-8 “Devout men buried Stephen and **mourned deeply** over him. <sup>3</sup> Saul, however, was ravaging the church. He would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison. <sup>4</sup> So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word. <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. <sup>6</sup> The crowds were all paying attention to what Philip said, as they listened and saw the signs he was performing. <sup>7</sup> For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed, and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. <sup>8</sup> So there was **great joy** in that city.”

**How does one go from vs. 2 to vs 8?** From mourning deeply the loss of a beloved, well respect person to once again experiencing great joy. Because in those moments of loss, sometimes we can't imagine ever experiencing joy again—not like what we had anyway. From the first chapter to Stephen's death in chapter 7, the Church has largely Enjoyed the favor of those living in Jerusalem. They were praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people as the Lord added to their number ever day those who were being saved (Acts 2:47).

**We learned that due to a very zealous faction of Jews, the tide has turned against them.** The supreme court has ruled: They are not to be treated equally nor justly under the law. The Sanhedrin cannot refute the wisdom, the insight of Stephen nor the Apostles as they make their case that Jesus is the Messiah. Stephen, as we saw last week, gave his life by challenging these stiff-necked religious people who were rich in knowledge and poor in mercy; who had an embarrassment of riches in terms of laws and covenants with God (Abraham, Moses, David); and a scandalous poverty in obedience and conformity to its message.

**The tragedy of a beloved leader's death has rocked the church.** What's more, Saul of Tarsus has taken it upon himself to further the persecution started with Stephen. Zealously persecuting the church dragging Christians from houses and throwing them into prison.

**The situation looks grim for the church. The first Christian martyr is a harbinger of many more to come.**

**Transition:** Today we'll look at a passage that shows the church fulfilling its God-given mission; growing in a way that no one anticipated.

### The first thing we see here is that...

1. **Severe persecution** causes the church to **scatter** into their **ordained mission**. Make no mistake about this—*God has never taken his hand off the wheel*. Stephen's death and the intense Jewish persecution of the Church is no surprise to God. Look at these two verses together...

**Acts 1:8** "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in **Jerusalem**, in all **Judea** and **Samaria**, and to the **ends of the earth**." Here, we clearly have Jesus's decree that they "*will be his witnesses*" ...

**Acts 8:1** "On that day a severe persecution broke out against the church in **Jerusalem**, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of **Judea** and **Samaria**." Jesus had ordained that they would spread out from Jerusalem into the surrounding towns in Judea and Samaria and up until this point—they've been enjoying the favor of all the people in Jerusalem. **And before they even have an opportunity for complacency to set in, God allows the tragedy and this outbreak of persecution against the church—and they scatter into surrounding towns to flee the persecution—and in doing so they bring the gospel to those towns.**

**We first meet Saul of Tarsus at the trial of Stephen.** The outer coats of the stoners were placed at his feet. Giving "approval" usually meant that the person who was the chief leader signaled the ok to stone the accused. In any case, Paul emerges from this sham of a court as the chief persecutor of the church in Jerusalem.

**Saul was a fanatic**—a zealous Orthodox Jew; student of Gamaliel; an up and coming Pharisee in training. His zeal to persecute his Jewish brothers was based on his ignorance of who Jesus was.

#### Paul's pedigree

Phil 3:2-6 "Watch out for the dogs, watch out for the evil workers, watch out for those who mutilate the flesh. <sup>3</sup> For we are the circumcision (**Deut 10:16; 30:6 "the hearts of your descendents"**), the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, boast in Christ Jesus, and do not put confidence in the flesh— <sup>4</sup> although I have reasons for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> **circumcised** the eighth day; of the **nation** of Israel, of the **tribe** of Benjamin, a **Hebrew** born of Hebrews; regarding the law, a **Pharisee**; <sup>6</sup> regarding zeal, **persecuting** the church; regarding the righteousness that is in the law, **blameless**."

Acts 22:3-5 “He [Paul] continued, ‘I am a **Jew**, born in **Tarsus of Cilicia** but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of **Gamaliel** according to the strictness of our **ancestral law**. I was **zealous** for God, just as all of you are today. <sup>4</sup> I **persecuted** this Way to the death, arresting and putting both men and women in jail, <sup>5</sup> as both the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me. After I received letters from them to the brothers, I traveled to Damascus to **arrest those** who were there and bring them to Jerusalem to be punished.”

**Saul was a fanatic—an ultra-orthodox Jew** who believed that the Jesus movement was an existential threat to his entire way of life.

**Illus. I gave you a bit of bad news last week.** The church in certain middle eastern countries has dwindled to near non-existence. The report shows that a century ago Christians comprised 20% of the population in the Middle East and north Africa, but since then the proportion has fallen to less than 3%, or roughly 15 million people. In Palestine the percentage has dropped from 15% to 2%. **In fact, 340 million Christians worldwide live in areas where harassment and threats of imprisonment and death is just a way of life.** The upside, because of the extremism of Muslims and Orthodox Jewish groups persecuting Christians, many Muslims and Jews have been turned off by that and OpenDoorsUSA reports that people are coming to faith in Jesus as an alternative to the extremism in their native religions. **Christianity is the only faith where mercy, grace, and justice—where forgiveness is the central, practiced ethic.** And people are drawn to forgiveness. They’re drawn to the hope that the Christian faith offers.

While the church was favored in Jerusalem by all the people—it flourished and grew greatly in numbers. When the crackdown happened and afterwards, the church will struggle mightily in Jerusalem. Where one door is shut, God opens another.

**Luke takes the space to connect us to the humanity of this story. And we learn that...**

**2. Part of our Christian witness to the world is how we mourn the deaths of beloved saints.**

In fact, we don't just teach the world how to live for Christ, we teach them **how to die well—to die with hope.**

**8:2 Devout men buried Stephen and mourned deeply over him.** When men die no one ever calls the village atheist. What does the local atheist philosopher have to say, "This matter in motion, who was under the impression that his conscious life was real—but was only ever an illusion of chemicals firing in his brain—is now gone." Wow! What hope.

**When people die they look for a devout man.** Someone who can give that life that is now gone eternal perspective—who can offer the living *real hope*.

**Heart Issue:** What do we do when we hear the worst news? At an intersection of tragedy or crisis, will that day cause us abandon our faith or drive us to our knees to discover a new depth in God? Will it end you? Or will it be the beginning of new possibilities—allowing tragedy, loss, and heartache to grow us in ways that we never thought possible.

**Mourning the death of our loved ones is normal, but it's not natural.**

**The disciples mourned the death of Jesus.** You get a sense that with the Disciples (the 12), after Jesus's death that there was this heaviness and depression. They expected him to wield that power to subdue Rome and all nations and for the Kingdom of God to come breaking into the world in dramatic fashion. But that didn't happen. Instead God's Son was tried, sentenced, and killed on a Roman cross. And now, this beloved Master—their rabbi and their LORD—he's gone. What do you even do with that kind of loss?

**The Church mourns the death of the saints—so, it's normal.**

**Illus. I have a beloved professor of Theology and Greek in college who was a masterful teacher.** His name was Dr. Dan Pecota. I was mesmerized by his depth and breadth of knowledge. His obvious love for the Lord and for students. And he challenged me to take Greek one day in his office. I said to him, "I'll think about it. I don't think I'm really cut out for the scholarly stuff ya know." He disagreed with me. Before I graduated he found me on campus and challenged me to level up. To apply myself.

**I heard that he had passed away from complications of a cycling accident in his mid 60's,** I was crushed. He's a major reason I was even in the ministry and studying and on the trajectory that I was on. **I got in my car, tears streaming out of my eyes and**

turning to ice (I lived in Minneapolis), “What a loss to the Kingdom.” Then a sense of heavenly glory came over me. And the rest of that drive all I could think about was the fact that Dr. Dan was in the presence of Jesus right now. Experiencing the full beam of his glory. Because that is the hope of the believer. We were never supposed to expire—we were made to live forever.

Death is our enemy. Death is a reminder that the world has not yet been set right.

1 Thess 4:13 “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not **grieve** like the rest, who have no hope.” Yes, we grieve—but not as those who do not have the **hope of heaven**; the promise of new creation; the anticipation of resurrection life!

**And the devout brothers take the time to mourn Stephen—an incalculable loss to the kingdom.**

This is part of our Christian witness. It's to show mankind how to live devoutly following Jesus the master—but then to die well in the Lord. Reminding the world of the hope we have in Jesus.

You better believe that this was a witness to Saul.

**Luke doesn't take his eye off the ball here. He shows us that...**

**3. Against all odds, the church grows when the pressure is on.**

8:4 “So those who were **scattered** went on their way **preaching the word**. Remarkably, this had been **Jesus's plan all along**. Jesus knew that the believers in Jerusalem would get comfortable, tempted to become complacent. He knew that they would **enjoy a season of prosperity, growth, and the favor of the culture (and a lot for the Kingdom of God happened in that season)**. He also knew how quickly sentiments can turn against you. He experienced this personally. Hailing him as God's King with Palm branches one day—and crying out for his blood another day.

**Scattered Christians make new disciples in new places.**

**5Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them**. Now, Samaria is north of Jerusalem and Judea, but it says he “went down”—it's because Jerusalem is higher than Samaria. To go “north” you have to go “down” in sea level.

**6The crowds were all paying attention to what Philip said, as they listened and saw the signs he was performing**. Now, as far as we can tell this is not **the apostle Philip, this is the deacon Philip**. As **Stephen the deacon** ministered in great power, so now **Deacon Philip** has taken that role and is ministering in great power among the Samaritans. Think for a second how daunting this must be for Philip. His predecessor was just killed in a town where “favor” rested on all the people. He is now scattered into hostile territory “Samaria.” We tend to think of Jesus's warm reception by **Samaritans in John 4** (the woman at the well)—but forget that his last interaction with the Samaritans was hostile (**Luke 9:51-56**). Sentiments had turned against Christ there.

**7 For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed, and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city. Their grief over the loss of such a beloved leader transforms into the joy** of new and glorious work among the Samaritans. Satan's hold on people's lives is broken by the power of God. Philip and the church enter a new horizon of fruitfulness in ministry. And this is just the beginning. They have no idea just how global and international this Gospel is going to be.

When people are delivered by the **power** of the Lord they experience the **joy** of the Lord.

**Illus. Addiction is a self-made hell.** When we invite idols into our lives and worship at the altars of these false gods—we become slaves to that thing—that thing that *we must have; we cannot give up; we desire above all else*. Jesus said, “He who sins is a

slave to sin.” **But in the moment we smash and burn those idols, turn to Jesus and worship God alone**—His Spirit sets us free from a life of self-worship and self-gratification at all costs. And joy floods your soul.

The arc of this story actually is completed in Acts 11. Acts 8:1 and 11:19 are the bookends to this tragedy with Stephen...

**Acts 11:19-21** “Now **those who had been scattered** as a **result** of the persecution that **started because of Stephen** made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. <sup>20</sup> But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> **The Lord’s hand was with them, and a large number** who believed turned to the Lord.”

It’s hard for us to appreciate just how unbelievable this was at the time. Greeks coming into the faith. All stemming from this heartbreaking death of Stephen the first Christian martyr for Jesus.

### Application

1. Consider supporting brothers and sisters around the world.

1 Corinthians 12:26: “If one part [of the Body of Christ] suffers, every part suffers with it.”

Open Doors USA ([opendoorsusa.org](http://opendoorsusa.org))



- They publish an annual “watch list” of countries to pray for where Christians are experiencing intense opposition and hardship.
- You can support Bibles and Bible study and discipleship training materials.
- Safe houses for abused and trafficked women and children.
- Help with microloans for the rebuilding of churches, homes, emergency shelters.

2. **Don’t rush the grieving process.** God wired us to heal. God made you to heal, to be strong in the very place where you were broken. Our grief will heal in time. But don’t be in hurry. **We must take the time to acknowledge our losses, to bury our dead, and to proclaim the victory of Christ’s death over it. Grieve with hope in the resurrection glory of Jesus.**

**3. Don't be intimidated by cultural bullies.** If God is for us, who can be against us? If God has called us who can forbid us? If God enables us who can disable us?

And if God sovereignly closes a door—we will scatter and look for other opportunities to preach the Gospel.

**Pressure is always an opportunity for refinement—greater purity in the church.** It's always an opportunity to prune back, so that new growth in new areas can take place.