

PERSECUTION EQUALS EXPANSION | ACTS 8:1-8

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I have a strange question to start off with. How many of you cook with oil? How many of you have had the privilege of experiencing a grease fire? Maybe you know the answer to this next question, and all of us should know the answer to this next question: What is the last thing that you want to do if you have a grease fire happening in your kitchen? Throw water on it. Why? The water goes underneath the grease, boils instantly, it expands the steam 1,700 times carrying oil that's on fire encompassing everything around it. It's such an issue.

If you've looked on YouTube, sometimes they'll get a shipping container and in the back of the shipping container they'll put a stove, a pan and grease, and they'll start a grease fire. Then from outside the container they send a long pole in there and pour water on it so the public can see. Now imagine that's your kitchen. That's a mess. The truth is a lot of house fires begin in the kitchen in this kind of way.

I bring up this image for you because we're going back into the Book of Acts coming to the very end of a section of the Book of Acts, chapters 1 through 7. We're going to go through this transitional passage and a big thing that is happening in the first seven chapters of the Book of Acts is that there has been a fire that has started in the heart of the homeland of Israel in Jerusalem. Holy Spirit fire has come down at Pentecost. The resurrection of Jesus and Jesus' defeat of sin, death, and the devil is beginning to be proclaimed. His enthronement to the right hand of God the Father is being announced and heralded. And all of that is being accompanied by signs and wonders that authenticate the message.

Think of the kitchen as the heart of the home. Well, Jerusalem is the heart of the country, and this fire has started. There's a big transition that's also happening in the Book of Acts that becomes this major theme. Before, the people of God were organized around the temple and the sacrificial system in Jerusalem, the customs of Moses, and national identity markers such as circumcision and festivals in Jerusalem.

Now, there's this big transition happening. Now, the people of God are organized around King Jesus and the message that he has been enthroned at the right hand of God the Father having become the ultimate high priest, giving himself as the ultimate sacrifice, rendering the temple obsolete. Therefore, anybody of any nationality who comes to him by faith becomes part of what he is building in a new temple. This transition from the old temple in Jerusalem to the people of God themselves as the temple of God carrying the fire of God within them has come down in Pentecost as a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

The Jewish leaders are seeing this fire happening. How do they feel about it? Super happy? No, very upset. They say to themselves, "We gotta do whatever we can to put this fire out before the whole house burns down." Their identity is wrapped up in the temple and these national identity markers.

You see this effort to try to put this fire out throughout the first seven chapters of the Book of Acts. For example, if you go back to Acts chapter 4, Peter and John are brought in because they healed a lame beggar right outside of the temple. Peter, John, and the lame beggar (who himself is the sermon illustration) go into the temple and begin to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus. They are brought before the Sanhedrin, (the same body that sentenced Jesus and crucified him) and the Sanhedrin threatens them.

They say, “You cannot preach in the name of Jesus anymore.” But the result of the Sanhedrin’s first attempt to try to throw water on this fire that’s growing is a prayer gathering like we had last week. Unlike the prayer gathering we had the building shook, and the people were filled with the Holy Spirit. Then, it says, in the towns around Jerusalem people started being saved. The Sanhedrin tried to pour water on fire and the fire grew.

Likewise, if you go into Acts chapter five the Sanhedrin brings in more of the apostles because they keep preaching about Jesus. Instead of threatening them, now they beat them. Now they’re trying to douse out the fire with more water, but the result of this was that the apostles left that place rejoicing having been counted worthy of suffering in the name of Jesus and then they committed to preaching the gospel every day in the temple and from house to house. The fire grows in intensity so that by the time you get to Acts chapter six verse seven even priests are coming to faith! It’s getting worse!

Then by the time you get to Acts chapter seven you have Stephen (which Acts chapter six verse five says he was a man filled with Holy Spirit fire) performing signs and wonders, proclaiming the word of Jesus. The Sanhedrin brings him in but this time they don’t threaten him. They don’t beat him. They kill him. They stone him. The Sanhedrin is trying to douse out this fire so that the whole house doesn’t burn down. But again, in our passage, what we see is the whole thing explodes in their face and expands even more.

Therefore, in Acts chapters 1 through seven every time the Jewish leaders try to put out this fire it explodes, and it expands. What we find in the Book of Acts a cycle. There’s great persecution that results in powerful proclamation and expansion that keeps happening repeatedly. It seems like the greater the persecution, the more powerful the proclamation, the more widespread the expansion.

Part of the message or of the Book of Acts is the kingdom of God is an unstoppable fire. This made me think this past week, “What if we actually believed that?” We could all pass the test intellectually, but what if in our hearts we believed the kingdom of God is an unstoppable fire? How would that change our relationships and the way we approach life? I bring this question up at the beginning so that we are thinking about it as we go along. In this morning’s passage we have another iteration of this cycle: a great persecution that results in a powerful proclamation and then expansion. Let’s first talk about this great persecution.

Right after the stoning of Stephen, we read these words in verse one of chapter eight: “And Saul approved of his execution.” Who’s execution? Stephen’s execution. And then it goes on to say, “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.” The apostles stay back in Jerusalem. They minister to some Jewish Christians there, and in large part the Hellenistic Jews who were part of Stephen and Philip’s group. The apostles are expanded out into other regions.

We learn a couple of things from this verse. One thing that we learn is that Stephen’s stoning is like a catalyst that is the start of this great persecution led by Saul. Saul is going to become a major figure in the Book of Acts, but we first meet him in Acts chapter seven verse 58 giving oversight and holding the coats of those who are stoning Stephen. How nice of him; their arms need room, you know, to throw the stones! Then we learn that he’s going to be a major figure in leading this great persecution against the church in Jerusalem.

In verse three it says, “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house...” Where were the Christians meeting? In houses (Acts 2:5) “...house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” So this is an intense systematic

house to house effort on behalf of Saul and those who are helping him to put out this fire that is starting in Jerusalem.

The detail about also carrying the women to prison is a signal to us for us to understand the intensity of the persecution. They wouldn't normally include women in that kind of an effort. But, Saul understands that women are playing a major role in this movement, and the message that we're getting is that Saul will do anything, and he will stop at nothing, to try to put this fire out that is starting in Jerusalem. So one thing that we learn is that Stephen's stoning gives rise to this great persecution that is led by Saul.

The second thing that we learn is that great persecution then results in the scattering of the Christians who are part of the church in Jerusalem to the regions of Judea and Samaria. If we read the latter part of verse one again it says, "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..." Now, Judea is to the south of Jerusalem and Samaria is to the north of Jerusalem. If you think of the world as having Jerusalem at the center, which is definitely how the Jews would have conceived of the world, the next concentric circle out would include Samaria in the north, and Judea in the south.

This recalls what Jesus said earlier. In Acts chapter one verse eight, a verse that gives the structure to the rest of the Book of Acts, Jesus said, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." What Jesus is saying is, "the news of my kingdom is like a fire that begins in Jerusalem and will spread out from there."

Here is another case in the Bible, and there's many, where God uses something that is evil (this great persecution is even called evil in chapter nine verse 13) done by humanbeings to bring about his good plan, the spread of his good news, and of this new temple. If you keep

reading in Acts chapter nine verse 31 it says, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace.” I want you to remember that these regions now have shalom, they have peace, “and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.” Things are now spreading even more.

In the Bible we have this theme over and over again: humans do things that are evil, wrong, unjust, and God still uses it for good. Remember that Stephen talked about the example of Joseph, who was sold into slavery and put into a pit, and then he’s put into the pit (the sheol) of a prison. But then from that sheol he rises to the right hand of Pharaoh. Genesis 50:20 says God took what they meant for evil and used it for good and for the salvation of many people. Then Jesus goes down into the pit, (the sheol), and he rises to the right hand of God the Father offering salvation to many people.

In the death of Jesus, we see another example of something wicked. The cross, that was an unjust death. It was a wicked death. But it was part of the definite plan and foreknowledge of God that he used for good and the salvation of many people. This becomes the paradigm by which we understand all evil. All suffering that comes our way. It’s like we’re in Vegas, but the roulette wheel is rigged, and it always lands in our favor. Life gets bumpy along the way; we might get hurt and there are many things that happen to us. But in the end, it all works out for good.

Before we go farther down that road, we need to go back to verse two. Sometimes in that message the idea of lament can be lost. Verse two says, “Devout men,” not weak men “buried Stephen and made great lamentation...” Devout men are greatly grieving over Stephen. This is an important verse for us amid these big ideas that we’re talking about.

Sometimes Christians, in our effort to uphold the idea that God can take what is evil and unjust, turn it around, and use it for good and the expansion of His kingdom, can begin to sound dismissive of suffering, injustice, and evil. In an effort to uphold this true idea, we can sometimes be dismissive. I've heard people talk to Christians about their suffering over a loss, and the Christian says, "Well, that's good!" But hold on a minute. You skipped a step. The evil is not good, the injustice is not good, but God can use it for good. If you miss this step, it's not biblical, and it doesn't represent God's heart.

Now, it is true that we do not grieve as those who have no hope, but sometimes we as Christians have turned that to mean, don't grieve. That's not what it says. It says, do not grieve as those who have no hope. So, maybe we've overcorrected; we saw people who were operating as if they had no hope and have said, "Don't cry," but that's short-circuiting things and not giving room for lament.

In our text these devout men were had a great lamentation. Here's the thing about their lamentation (I think this would hit us hard if we were part of this culture): their lamentation was not only an expression of grief, but it was actually a protest against injustice. The Mishnah, which was the later codification of the oral tradition of the rabbis that reached all the way back to Jesus' time and even before, said if somebody is stoned, you can bury them, but do not mourn their death because they died justly for breaking the law.

These devout men who bury Stephen are putting a target on their back when they lament. They're saying Stephen didn't die for breaking the law; this was an unjust death. So, part of their lamentation is not just grieving, it's a protest against injustice. Stephen's stoning and the great persecution that follows is a wicked and unjust thing, and it's worth lamenting. So we've

got to hold that in one hand, but then in the other hand, we don't grieve as those who have no hope.

There's hope because God can take wicked, unjust things and use them to advance his kingdom. In this case, the waters of persecution that the Sanhedrin were trying to throw on this fire in Jerusalem explodes in their face and spreads to the regions of Samaria and Judea. It reminds me of when Tim Brenda talks about what goes on in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has gotten slightly better in 2023. Afghanistan is no longer number two. Nevertheless, it used to be the second hardest place to live in the world as a Christian. It was also second place in terms of church growth.

So, it's the second fastest growing church and the second most persecuted church at the same time. So, maybe I should write a church growth book. What do you need for church growth? You want to see your church grow? Are you tired of empty seats? Ingredient number one: intense persecution. But that's how things work, and that's how it works in Afghanistan now. Let's look at this explosion in Samaria.

First, there was this great persecution, then that gave way to this powerful proclamation and expansion. Picking it back up in verse four, "Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria..." The phrase "the city" is a little bit tricky because that probably means the main city in the region of Samaria. It would be like if I said, "the city of California." What would I be talking about? San Francisco, even though Los Angeles is the biggest city. So, "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.

Then in starting in verse six, "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. 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.” This great persecution happens, Christians are scattered, and Christians carry with them the message of Jesus. One of the major figures who was like a co-deacon with Stephen was Philip, and Philip was carrying this message to the area or the region of Samaria.

In the second point, I want to talk about two things: first is the content of Philip’s message, and then I want to talk about the region of Samaria that he went to in order to see the significance of what is really happening here.

There are several words and phrases that describe the content of Philip’s message. In verse five it says that he, “he proclaimed to them the Christ.” The person of Jesus and his title as the anointed king seems to be central to the message. Later in verse 12 it says Philip, “preached the good news about the kingdom of God.” There’s good news about a king, and a kingdom, and the name of Jesus Christ. Verse 25 summarizes all of this in one word: Gospel. This is the gospel: It’s summarized as “the word” in verse one, and “the word of God” in verse 14.

Now, what you need to understand about the Book of Acts is that all of these words and phrases are referring to the same thing: the good news that God in Jesus, through his death and his resurrection, has defeated all entities and powers that were vying for authority over people; Sin, death, and the devil. God has conquered those entities. Who’s king? God’s king. He conquered those enemies for the benefit of his people. Who are his people? Those who unite themselves by faith to Jesus, who is now enthroned at the right hand of God the Father as the Christ. This is called the gospel.

This is precisely how the Old Testament uses the word, Gospel. In Nahum 1:15, Isaiah 40:9, Isaiah 52:7: the ones who bring the beautiful news are saying, “Hey, you know how all these people have said that they are king? Sin said it was your king. Death said it was your king.

The devil said it was your king. God reigns, and if you join him, you can enter this victory.” So You could summarize the message that Philip is bringing into Samaria by saying, “the future messianic reign of Jesus, who is now enthroned at the right hand of God the Father, is breaking into the present, and you can come join in the victory.”

The people might say, “Well, we don’t see a throne, and we don’t see some of the things that go along with a reign.” What happens is in the Book of Acts this message is accompanied by authenticating signs and wonders. Philip proclaims this message, and then illness and the forces of darkness flee before the presence of the king and his emissaries. That still happens today! In this country, it happens. I’ve seen it happen. These things happen quite a bit, especially on the fringes of where the gospel is taking new ground.

What about his audience? We’re talking about Samaria, but who were the Samaritans? This question comes into play in John chapter four. You’ve probably heard about it in a sermon on John chapter four. We know that maybe there was some animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, but why? Who are they? Well, the Samaritans are descendants of the Northern Kingdom that separated from the southern kingdom of Judea in the 10th century B.C., after the death of Solomon. Then about 200 years later, they intermarry with idolatrous Mesopotamian nations who are being forced into the area by the Empire of Assyria after the Assyrian captivity in 722 B.C.

It’s also interesting to note some of their unique beliefs. The Samaritans struggled with idolatry, but they worshipped Yahweh. They accepted Moses as Yahweh’s prophet. They accepted the first five books of Moses, the Torah, as Yahweh’s word. They did not accept any of the other canonical books of the Old Testament, which is kind of unique. They didn’t think that Jerusalem was God’s holy place, they thought Mount Gerizim was God’s holy place, so they

built a temple there in 400 B.C. That's different from the rest of the Jews, but they anticipated this prophetic messianic figure called the Taib, who would fulfill Deuteronomy 18:15 and Deuteronomy 18:18, who was a prophet like Moses to come, who on the last day would restore all things.

In some ways the Samaritans were like the Jews, and in some ways different. With that history, you could see how that would lead the Jews of the Southern Kingdom to think of the Samaritans as half breeds that have abandoned the Hebrew traditions; there was this long animosity between these two people groups that went all the way back to the beginning. 10th century B.C., the Northern Kingdom leaves the Southern Kingdom. Then in the 6th century B.C., after the Judeans are coming back from Babylonian exile and they're going to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, who gives them a hard time? The Samaritans.

Then, in the 2nd century B.C., the Judeans from the southern kingdom led by the Hasmoneans decide to destroy the Samaritan's temple at Mount Gerizim. Then around the time of Jesus, a band of Samaritans sneak into the Jerusalem temple, and they scatter bones everywhere making the temple unclean. A little bit later in the 1st century, the Samaritans cut off some Galilean pilgrims who were trying to make their way to Jerusalem and they kill them, then the Galileans fight back and the Romans have to get involved. We're not going to take a test after this, but the point is there's 900 years of animosity!

I tell you all of this give weight to the significance of this ministry of Philip. He's coming into this region with the good news of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ which is beginning to heal the rift between two people groups that stood for 900 years. In Jesus, the Northern Kingdom was being reunited with the Southern Kingdom through the Samaritan Taib, and through the Jewish Messiah. That's crazy, and it goes beyond that because King Jesus, through his

emissaries and the invisible kingdom that's spreading, is recapturing the vision that God had for the first Adam: to make him a king and a priest, along with Eve, who would be a king and a priest that would extend the temple that is patterned after the garden. Did you know that?

The way the temple faces, the tapestry, everything involved is patterned after the garden. God says, "Yeah, I had that assembled there and I'm going to recapture it." God is okay with telling a very, very, very long story, and he's going to have that garden spread just like the original vision back in Genesis. The temple is going to spread and encompass the world through King Jesus and his emissaries. This is our story. This is what our life is about.

You think it's about your mortgage, I think it's about my mortgage. You think you work at Burger King. They think you work at Burger King. We are undercover emissaries of the King, expanding the garden temple throughout the world, and we need to rethink about how we think about our lives because what the what the Book of Acts is telling us is that the kingdom of God is an unstoppable fire, its flames can burn through any wall or barrier. Persecution cannot withstand its flames. Persecution makes the flames more intense. It can burn through the walls of racism, of tribalism, of political affiliation.

So, the question is, what would happen if we believed that the kingdom of God was an unstoppable fire? Would that change the way that you think about your political enemies? How small is that? How small is our little discussion about whether we should have a little more taxes or little less taxes? The kingdom of God is unstoppable fire. Would you be more optimistic about the power of the gospel?

The gospel mended a 900-year rift (chapter nine, verse 31). The church throughout all Judea and Galilee, the people who were killed, and Samaria had peace, and was being built up

and walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. In the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. Let's pray together.

Father, please do a work in this room and in our hearts by your spirit. We come to you with open hands. We have nothing to give you, but we ask Lord that you would fill us with yourself, change us from the inside out, change our perspectives. Give us a vision of what you want to do and accomplish through us. Help us to know our identity as your sons and daughters, your emissaries, kings, priests, a room full of kings and priests. God, please convince us in our hearts of these things in Jesus' name, amen.