

Witnesses Sent to Samaria
Acts 8:1-25
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Babylon invaded Jerusalem and Judah three times: 607BC, 597BC, and 587BC. Each time the king of Babylon invaded, he would carry off many of the inhabitants to Babylon. Daniel was carried off in the first invasion. Ezekiel and Mordechai (Esther's cousin) were carried off in the second invasion. When Babylon invaded the third time, they razed the walls of Jerusalem and the temple to the ground. This ended the existence of the kingdom of Judah.

Jeremiah, the prophet, warned Judah that this day was coming, and he tried to prepare the king and his people. It was devastating for Jerusalem to be razed to the ground and the people be carried off into captivity. Yet, even after the devastation of being taken captive, Yahweh commanded His people to seek the welfare of the city because in doing so, they would be His light of truth to the Babylonians and eventually the Medes and the Persians. In Jeremiah 29:5-7, Jeremiah wrote to the captives in Babylon and told them that Yahweh commanded them:

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Yahweh used war and exile to *plant* His people in Babylon. While in captivity, they were to seek the welfare of Babylon by being witnesses of the one true God to the Babylonians, Medes, and the Persians. And they were witnesses to the people. Just read the books of Daniel, Esther, Ezekiel, and Nehemiah.

War, famine, tribulation, captivity, persecution, and suffering have never been cataclysmic events that stopped the spread of the gospel. Even now, with the horrible events that have happened and are continuing to happen in Afghanistan, we do not know all of the good that God will bring about through the suffering of His church. War and persecution will not stop the gospel. God simply uses it to scatter the seeds of the gospel.

In Acts 8:1-25, we see the scattering and planting of the gospel. Persecution scattered the early church. If you have read Acts 8:1-25, you know that as the believers were arrested and

imprisoned, many Christians fled Jerusalem. They were scattered and wherever they went they proclaimed Christ as the risen Lord.

God used the horror of Stephen's execution and Saul's persecution to push people into missions. When we think about the Lord calling us to be witnesses and believers to the mission field, we think of going to an evangelism rally where we commit to being a witness, or at a mission's conference, we commission those who are called. Then we lay hands on them, pray for them, helping them pack up, board a flight to some distant part of the world, and then we keep in touch with them through an app called Signal.

What we don't think about is persecution and execution as the means that God uses to push the church out of its comfort zone and into dark, difficult places to be a witness. However, if you read church history, this is actually one of the means God uses.

In Acts 8:1, it says the church was "*scattered*." There are lots of Greek words for *scattered*, but this particular Greek word does not mean scattered like dust in the wind where it disappears. This particular Greek word for *scattered* means *scattered* like seeds that are sown, and then they take root. *In other words, this kind of scattering results in being planted.*¹ The stoning of Stephen and persecution of the early church illustrates the principle that God scatters us and plants us where He wants us so that we will be witnesses for Jesus Christ.

Where do you find yourself painfully scattered today? Perhaps God has used work or family or education or some other situation to scatter you to a place you never thought you would be? Don't be angry or discouraged; God has a plan and a purpose for the scattering of your life. Let's consider what he did to the early church in Acts 8:1-25.

I. God Scatters and Plants (Acts 8:1-25)

There are lots of things going on in these twenty-five verses. In v. 1, Luke brings Saul back into the story. If you look back a few verses, you will see we met Saul in Acts 7:58. He was the one who held the coats of those who stoned Stephen. Now Luke tells us that Saul approved of Stephen's execution.

Then at the end of v. 1, we see that because of Stephen's execution, a *great persecution began against the church*. Because of the persecution, the church was scattered from Jerusalem into Judea and eventually to the city and region of Samaria.

Then in v. 2, Stephen is buried, but then Luke in v. 3, Luke comes back to Saul as the one leading the charge to persecute the church. He was going door-to-door arresting and imprisoning the disciples.

Luke's twofold purpose in vv. 1-3 was to help us understand Saul's hatred of Christianity because, in Acts 9, Jesus will save Saul, change his name to Paul and send him out as an apostle.

Secondly, Luke wants to help us see how persecution scattered believers into Samaria, thus fulfilling Jesus' Great Commission given in Acts 1:8:

¹ James Montgomery Boice, [Acts: An Expository Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 133.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Then vv. 4-8 tell us about Philip preaching the gospel in Samaria. As he preached, he performed powerful signs like casting out demons, healing the sick and paralyzed. These signs authenticated the message of the gospel to the Samaritans so that many believed.

Then in vv. 9-13, we meet Simon, the magician who, according to the people of Samaria, was a man who seemed to possess some kind of divine power. The Samaritans thought God was with him.

Yet, when Simon saw the acts of power Philip performed, and he heard the gospel, he professed faith in Christ and was baptized. Now, this is key. Do not forget that Simon made a profession of faith and was baptized.

Next, in vv. 14-17, Luke's story cuts away from Samaria. The next scene is in Jerusalem, where the apostles have heard of the work Philip was doing in Samaria. They heard many had put their faith in Jesus and were baptized. The apostles heard what was going on in Samaria, and so they sent Peter and John to investigate.

What Peter and John learn is that while the Samaritans had believed the gospel of Jesus Christ, they had not received the Holy Spirit. So, they laid hands on the believers, and they received the Holy Spirit. I will come back to this in just a few minutes but let's keep going to get the flow to the narrative.

In vv. 18-24, Peter discovers Simon; the magician was a false convert. When Simon saw that the HOLY SPIRIT was given by the laying on of hands, he offered Peter and John money to purchase this power. Peter confronted Simon's wickedness and called him to repent because he thought he could buy the power of the Holy Spirit.

Peter's interaction with Simon ends with him asking Peter to pray for him. Luke does not tell us anything more about Simon. We do not know whether he repented and made a genuine profession of faith or not.

The account of the scattering of the believers into Samaria concludes in Acts 8:25 with Peter and John preaching in Samaritan villages as they traveled back to Jerusalem.

II. I want you to notice three principles in Acts 8:1-25:

1. God plants His people in difficult places.

Look in vv. 1-5:

And Saul approved of his execution. 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. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and

entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. ⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.

If we were able to interview the believers that were scattered they would not have said they welcomed the persecution and imprisonment. I am sure Philip did not want Stephen to die, and he would have preferred to stay in Jerusalem with Stephen and safely serve the widows their daily allotment of food.

However, that was not God's plan. God's plan was to send the gospel into Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. What God used was the sin of those who persecuted the church to push the early church out of its comfort zone and kick the great commission in overdrive.

However, God's plan was not to scatter in a way that dissolved the gospel. God wanted His people to plant their lives in a way that spread the gospel.

Brothers and sisters, sometimes God calls us from where we are by the means of hearing the gospel and sensing a call to go to hard places. However, most of the time, God uses hard circumstances in our lives, like the *loss of a job* or *the death of a loved one*, or *persecution*, to send us into difficult places to be the light of Christ.

We should not think that Philip going to Samaria was an easy call. The Jews and the Samaritans hated one another with a passion. Yet, Philip went there to preach the good news that the Jewish Messiah had come, died on the cross for their sin, and rose from the dead. This leads us to our second principle.

2. God plants His people in difficult places to scatter the gospel.

It is not enough to be sent into difficult places. We must also be committed to sharing the gospel. Philip was not sent to Samaria to simply live out his life. He was sent to a dark, difficult place as a witness.

Samaria was not an easy place to be a witness. The Samaritans were half-breeds. They were the outcasts, and the Jews considered them unclean. They had intermarried with the surrounding pagan people, and as a result, they had mixed their Judaism with those pagan religions. The Jews hated them, and they hated the Jews. For hundreds of years, they had often been at war with one another.

Samaria was considered such a dark place that the Jews would not even travel through it. The shortest route from Judea to Galilee was through Samaria, but since the people and the land were considered polluted, the Jews would travel far out of their way in order to avoid Samaria.

Think of it this way, if you wanted to go to Arkansas but hated people in Missouri so much that you would not travel through it. So, instead of getting on I35 and going to Kansas

City and then picking up I49 down to Arkansas, you drive over to Nebraska, down through Kansas, then to Oklahoma, and then cut over to Arkansas.

This was how the Jews felt about the Samaritans. They would go hours out of their way just to avoid Samaria. Yet, God sent Philip into the dark, corrupt land of Samaria to preach the gospel.

God often does this with us, doesn't He? He scatters us to places we do not want to go or would rather avoid.

I always remember the illustration about the young lady who got her dream job only to realize that she hated the people with whom she worked. Her coworkers cursed, did drugs, cheated the company, talked about sex all the time, and slept around. She went to her pastor and began to complain about her job. She told him that her co-workers treated her horribly because she was a Christian. Her pastor said, "*Where do you place lights?*"

She looked confused but launched back into her complaint. She told him about how they would party on the weekends and come to work hungover. He looked at her and said, "*Where do you place lights?*"

This time his comment annoyed her, but she started over. She said her co-workers make fun of her for not joining them in their sin. Her pastor looked at her and said, "*Where do you place lights?*"

Now she was frustrated and said to him, "*You are not listening to me. Every time I tell you what is going on, your only reply is: 'Where do you place lights?'"* She said, "*Of course I know where you place lights. You place lights in dark places!"* When she said that, she finally got it. God had placed her in a difficult place to share the Light of Christ with those who live in darkness.

Brothers and sisters, it is not enough to simply be placed in a difficult situation like a miserable job or a bad neighborhood or a school that is hostile to Christians or in a nation in the Middle East with people who hate Christians. *Lots of people live in dark, difficult places, but only Christians take the seed of the gospel in those places.* We must be people planted in difficult places scattering the seeds of the gospel.

3. God plants His people in difficult places to verify the gospel.

There are two situations in this story where professions of faith are investigated. One is authenticated, and the other is shown to be a false profession of faith.

First, in vv. 4-8, we see Peter and John authenticating the Samaritans' profession of faith. The Samaritans had heard the gospel and professed faith in Christ.

Verse 14 says the Samaritans "*received the word of God.*" The apostles sent Peter and John to investigate. In essence, they were sent to verify the report and to make sure the Samaritans had truly trusted Christ.

In vv. 14-17, we see that when Peter and John investigated the Samaritans' profession of faith, and what they learned was that while the Samaritans had received water baptism, they

had not received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. When they learned that their profession of faith was *genuine*, then they laid hands on them and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Here is what is going on in this text. This is what we call *covenant transition*. The Old Covenant has ended, and the New Covenant has come. The question is: *Who all is included in the New Covenant?* By investigating the Samaritans' profession of faith, the apostles were learning who was included in the New Covenant.

Peter and John were sent to authenticate the Samaritans' profession of faith. But God waited until Peter and John arrived in order for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit so Peter and John would understand that the promises of the New Covenant had come to the Samaritans too.

Here is the misconception with the delayed baptism of the Holy Spirit and with it coming through the laying on of hands by Peter and John. There are some churches and denominations that want to make a case for a person becoming a Christian, and then baptism of the Holy Spirit comes at a later time. This is not what this text is teaching.

God wanted the early church and the apostles to understand that the New Covenant promise of salvation was moving out of Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. The apostles needed to learn this and see it. So, God delayed giving the Samaritans the Holy Spirit until Peter and John could witness them receiving the Holy Spirit by their own hands. When they saw this, they realized their salvation was genuine.

We need to understand how the order of the components of salvation is presented in the book of Acts. In the New Testament, the general pattern of the components of salvation is: *1) born again by the Holy Spirit; 2) professes faith in Jesus 3) then they are immersed in water for baptism*. However, the book of Acts will sometimes have this in a different order. There is one account in Acts where believers professed faith and did not receive the Holy Spirit until they were baptized with water. This account and the account we see in Acts 8 are the exceptions in the New Testament, not the norm.

When we read Acts, what we need to know is that the order of salvation is not as important as it is that all of the components are all there. The early church had to go through this period of transition and learning and verifying what genuine faith in Christ was. The apostles needed to learn that the New Covenant promises of the gospel were for all people, not just the Jews.

Now that we have the complete New Testament, we understand more than they did. Now we know that the general pattern of salvation in the New Testament is: *a person is born again, professes faith in Jesus, and then receives water baptism*. The Apostle Paul teaches us that we are spiritually dead until the Spirit raises us from spiritual death and breathes life in us, and then we confess faith in Jesus. After that, we pursue baptism by immersion.

One of our responsibilities as Christians is to help one another understand our faith in Christ. We help new believers, and we help older believers. I am helping you this morning as I explain this text in Acts.

Parents will disciple their children and help them understand their profession of faith in Christ. Our elders here at GABC meet with new believers and new members to help them understand their faith in Jesus.

It is important to help one another understand our faith in Jesus. When we are planted in a place for a long period of time, we can disciple one another in ways that help each other clarify and understand our faith in Jesus.

The second type of clarification is of a profession of faith. This is seen in Simon, the magician. Look what Simon said to the Apostle Peter in vv. 18-19:

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Simon thought he could purchase the Holy Spirit with silver. The Apostle Peter saw through Simon's false profession of faith. Look at his reply to Simon in vv. 20-23:

But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."

Peter's response to Simon was to reveal that Simon's profession of faith was false. When Peter said: "*You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.*" The phrase "*Part nor lot*" is an Old Testament phrase used to describe *inheritance or share*. In other words, Simon had no place among the believers nor any future in the kingdom of God.

The phrase: "*gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity*" is also Old Testament language referring to idolatry.² Peter then called him to repent and seek forgiveness from God.

Simon then asked Peter to pray for him. This was a good response. Unfortunately, we do not know what happened to Simon.

What we do know is that Peter confronted Simon's false faith. This is never an easy conversation with someone, but it is necessary for us to have with people. Sometimes they

² Deut. 29:18; 32:32; Prov. 5:22; Lam. 3:19.

respond like Simon and ask for prayer, and other times they get angry or are hurt by what you say.

When we are planted in a difficult place, we will have to have gospel conversations with people that are sometimes difficult. We must remember that we are called to spread the seeds of the gospel, and in doing that, we are also called to authenticate what genuine faith in Christ looks like. Calling does not imply ease.

III. Why is it difficult for us to be planted where God has scattered us?

Our Plan vs. God's Plan: *The fact is, often, we want our lives to follow our own scripted plan instead of God's plan. Our plan usually is to seek comfort more than a cross. But, God's plan is to push His people and His church out of their comfort zones so we will be on mission with Him.*

How do you respond when God scatters your life? Anger? Many of us simply get angry with God. We want to blame Him for the discomfort of the cross we bear. I am not saying you cannot get angry with God, but if you do, you better be quick to repent and begin to trust God. To get angry with God for His work of scattering and planting in your life is to be more concerned with building your kingdom instead of God's Kingdom.

Depressed/Discouraged? Some of us, instead of getting angry, get depressed or discouraged. We may begin to think that God's work of the scattering of our lives is simply too painful. Then we will begin to believe that God does not love us and that He has actually abandoned us. When we think this, we take our eyes off of Jesus and put them on our problems. Instead of fixing our eyes on Jesus, we fix our eyes on our navels. God's Kingdom does not advance when we are navel-gazing.

When our plans and God's plans are in conflict, we will struggle to bear fruit where God has planted us. We will question God's wisdom and love. We will begin to bear the thorns of the flesh instead of the fruit of the Spirit.

IV. Application:

Brothers and sisters, when God does the work of scattering your life, it can be painful. Yet, we must remember that we walk in the footsteps of our Savior, whose life was painfully scattered. God called His Son to leave the comfort of Heaven and become fully human. He sent Him to earth to live a sinless life and then die on the cross for the sins of those He created. His body was sown like a seed when He was put in the tomb, but on the third day, He rose from the dead, bringing a harvest of salvation for people living in darkness.

Brothers and sisters, we are never more like Jesus than when He scatters us and plants us in dark, difficult places. My question is: *Where do you find yourself painfully scattered today by work or family or education or some other situation? Do you consider yourself planted in that place? To be planted where God has placed you is to be invested where He has placed you. So, have you put down roots and borne fruit of the Spirit where God has placed you?*

Jesus said in John 12:24-26:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

Brothers and sisters, may we learn to be content with where the Lord scatters and plants our lives.