



Church Growth by Persecution

by Pastor Jeffrey Miskus

Preached on the Sixth Sunday of Easter

Text: Acts 8:1-8

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IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, OUR CRUCIFIED, RISEN AND ASCENDED LORD, WHO IS NOT DEAD BUT ALIVE, WHO IS NOT IN THE TOMB, BUT IS WITH US HERE, NOW WITH HIS LOVE AND HIS POWER AS HE LIVES AND REIGNS AT THE GLORIOUS RIGHT HAND OF GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. DEARLY BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD...

We are traveling through the book of Acts – the book of the Bible that records what happened to the Church after Jesus rose from the dead.

We have seen how the Risen Lord Jesus continues to direct his church, meeting with his disciples and teaching them after he rose from the dead. Jesus then sends the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter preaches about Jesus' death and resurrection, and 3000 people are baptized and become followers of Jesus. The church meets together, studies the apostle's teachings, prays, celebrates Holy Communion and cares for each other in a very generous manner. God does great miracles through Peter and John in the name of Jesus and the church continues to grow.

Persecution then begins by the Jewish religious authorities. Peter and John are put in prison and commanded not to speak or preach in Jesus' name any longer. The persecution continues and the church responds by praying for boldness and praising God for the honour of suffering for Jesus. But the persecution of Jesus' followers continued to intensify... two weeks ago we heard about Stephen the first Christian martyr. He was stoned for preaching about Jesus, and while he died he prayed for his murderers and saw a vision of Jesus.

Acts 8:1-3 continues to tell us about the growing persecution ... *"And Saul was there, giving approval to his (Stephen's) death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."*

The persecution of the Christian Church became violent and very serious. A Pharisee named Saul who had given his approval for Stephen's execution was now going from house to house dragging off believers in Jesus and putting them in prison. The Christian Church of about 20 000 members is fully under attack.

We are told that all 20 000 of them, except for the 12 apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. They simply fled the city. At first glance we might think, "What a shame! That vibrant growing mega-church in Jerusalem is all but destroyed." Why would God let that happen? Things were going so well? I'm going to say something now that you might not understand but I'll explain... persecution is hard, at times it is personally devastating, but it is not necessarily bad for the church. While he was being stoned we don't hear Stephen crying out "All is lost!!!" He was dying but this was no defeat for Stephen or for God.

The mega-church in Jerusalem was destroyed – true. But the followers of Jesus still believed in Jesus. The physical church had been scattered but the spiritual church remained fully intact.

Listen to a promise of Jesus from *Matthew 16:13-18*, *"When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.'*"

Jesus promises, *"...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."* Peter is given a revelation by God the Father and confesses that Jesus was the Christ – the Son of the Living God. That revelation and confession is the rock upon which the church is built. And not even the gates of Hades – all the devils and demons from the pit of hell – can overcome that confession.

The world and its armies and authorities can knock down church buildings and tear apart church fellowships and outlaw the teachings and preaching of the church. But they cannot touch the hearts of people who in their hearts believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. No, not even demons can touch that!!!

Now I want you to think back to the first chapter of Acts when Jesus rises from the dead and gives instructions to his apostles... *Acts 1:8*, *Jesus says "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* They did receive power – the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost. But, thus far, they had only been witnesses in Jerusalem, not in all Judea, certainly not in Samaria, and well – no where near the ends of the earth.

All that is about to change by the Hand of God... allow me to reread verse 2 once again, *"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."* Jesus said, *"...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

It's happening now... In this case persecution isn't destroying the faith of the believers – it's just scattering them where God can use them.

We are often so quick to judge our circumstances as 'bad' when God might be using them for 'good' or for his purposes. What are you dealing with right now that you feel is a difficult circumstance? Is God using that trial? Could He be using it for His purpose and plan? Clearly God was using the persecution of the church in Acts 8 to spread his church into the rest of the world.

Many people in our country lament that the church isn't what it used to be and that people in North America no longer believe in the teachings of Jesus found in the Bible. They see the church dying in some quarters and think that this is a great tragedy for God. I believe that God would have us see this as one of the greatest opportunities for God's church in all history. An opportunity to stand steadfast on the teachings of Jesus no matter what. An opportunity to speak his light and life into a culture that is dark and dead. An opportunity to love and follow Jesus no matter how unpopular the world around us things he is.

OK – let's admit this... persecution wasn't easy on the church – but when you follow Jesus you don't sign up for easy. In *Matthew 16:24* Jesus says to his disciples *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* That is not an easy call. It is a call to suffer for the sake of Jesus and his Kingdom. Each one of us is called in this way. While we are not to go looking for ways to suffer – it is clear that they will come just as they did to the first church in Jerusalem.

But this suffering has a purpose in God's plan. Always. It is never meaningless suffering. Listen to what happened as a result... Acts 8:4, *"Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."* Jesus' disciples – that is all his followers – preached the word where they were scattered. The apostles were back in Jerusalem, but that didn't stop all the disciples of Jesus from witnessing. Remember – every follower of Jesus is a disciple of Jesus. They were not even called 'Christians' yet.

God's plans are coming to pass. The message about Jesus has now left Jerusalem and is going out into Judea and Samaria. Soon it will begin to reach the world.

At this point the entire focus of the Book of Acts changes. We had been focusing on the church in Jerusalem, but now there is only the Apostles and perhaps a few others. The rest of the 20 000 or so followers of Jesus are now scattered, and so Luke begins to record what they did.

Acts 8:5-8 reads, *"Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city."*

The Church of Jesus is growing. A follower of Jesus by the name of Philip finds himself in Samaria and begins telling people about Jesus. God gives Philip gifts of performing miracles like Jesus. He casts out evil spirits or demons like Jesus – and he heals paralytics like Jesus.

The Kingdom of God – God's Powerful Rule of Grace – His Spirit's reign in the hearts of men has come. Thus the evil spirits cannot remain – they must retreat with shrieks of defeat. Conditions of nature that men cannot heal are supernaturally restored by God – paralytics are walking and jumping and praising God. Philip is proclaiming Jesus as God's Christ – God's King – the Promised Messiah. This Messiah has defeated all the enemies of mankind – sin, death, and the devil. He did this by suffering and dying for our sins on the cross, and rising from the dead three days later.

And just to demonstrate that this is true – God backs up the preaching of this message with some miracles just like Jesus did. Because of this, crowds of people begin to listen to Philip. Jesus had spent some time in Samaria and perhaps there will people listening to Philip who had believed in Jesus and now their hopes were strengthened as they heard from Philip that Jesus had risen from the dead. We are told that there was great joy in that city because of the message and the miracles done by Philip.