

Scattered Witnesses

- Acts 8:1-8
- Acts 8:1 takes us back to Acts 1:8, doesn't it? Remember what Jesus said, and that would become the theme of the book of Acts? "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." Jerusalem? Check. We've got that covered. In fact the Sanhedrin accused the apostles of filling Jerusalem with the Gospel. Judea? Nope. Why go there when the action is in Jerusalem? Why go anywhere else when you can hear Peter preach on a weekly basis? Not to mention the people being healed, demons being cast out, and the church exploding with spiritual life? Who needs Judea? And *Samaria*? Are you kidding? Surely Jesus was just using that as an example, a metaphor. I think He meant that if we happen upon Samaritan, or some other difficult people in Jerusalem, we should try to love them. I mean, He didn't really expect us to GO to Samaria, did He? No self-respecting Jew would even walk through Samaria. That's what John wrote in his Gospel: "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." Samaria: I think not. And what about that last thing He said? *To the end of the earth*? Not sure He really meant that, either.
- We can understand this, can't we? For the Jews, Jerusalem was the center of the universe. What was the saying of the dispersed Jews at the end of the Passover meal every year? "Next year, in Jerusalem!" William Hendricksen put it like this: "In the Old Testament, Jerusalem exerts a centripetal force on the Jews; in the New Testament, it exercises a centrifugal force on the believers." Every Jew wanted to be in Jerusalem, at least in Israel. In the Old Testament, the prophets would testify over and over that dispersion and exile were part of God's punishment for earlier disobedience. But here we see the dispersion of the believers is simply a fulfillment of what Jesus promised the disciples before He ascended. Jerusalem was to be a beachhead for reaching the world, not a bunker to hide out in. That means that the church in Jerusalem was to be a launching pad for believers who would be sent out with the good news. Let me ask you something, then. If that was true for the FIRST church, isn't it to be true for EVERY church? Shouldn't there be a centrifugal force at work in every church today? Because we do not exist to see how many we can attract INTO the church. We exist to and for the glory of God and it is His glory to mature us and send us OUT from the church. Some to Jerusalem. Our Jerusalem is Alamance County. Others to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.
- Let's look at this text today and consider three people who represent three truths. We will look at the scattered believers, Saul the persecutor, and then Philip the evangelist.
- **The scattered believers**
- They were ALL scattered. Everybody except the apostles. There are a number of explanations of what Luke meant by "all" here, but we can probably agree if we think about it for a moment that all doesn't mean every single one of the believers who was not one of the twelve apostles left town. We know that at least John Mark, his mother, a servant girl named Rhoda and "many others were gathered" and praying just a few chapters later after James had been beheaded and it looked like Peter would be next. (12:12) We know the church in Jerusalem continues to thrive and in fact when they hear about the explosion of growth that is taking place among the Hellenists in Antioch, Luke says in chapter 11 that the **church in Jerusalem** sent Barnabas to Antioch to help with the work there. So, not every believer in Jerusalem left town. But it may have looked like it, compared to what was happening before Stephen was stoned.
- What is most important about this scattering is that God used persecution as His servant. We don't need to be afraid of the persecution that comes, because we can clearly see in Scripture and in the history of the church ever since that persecution is part of God's plan. "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Tim. 3:12) God used

persecution as a centrifugal force to send His people, and His Word, to the whole world. Right? We can thank Stephen for being the first stone laid down in the bridge that took the Gospel from Jerusalem to the United States.

- A great modern example of the way God uses persecution to send His people out happened in China in 1949 when the National Government was replaced by Communists. 637 China Inland Missionaries were forced to leave, and that looked like the end of all hope for China. Within 4 years, 286 of those missionaries were re-deployed in Southeast Asia and Japan. And now, 64 years later, the numbers of Christians in China is estimated to be at least 50 times what the number was when the persecution began!
- Verse 4: “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the Word.” That doesn’t mean that persecution makes everybody a preacher. John Stott writes, “The statement that they ‘preached the word’ is misleading; the Greek expression does not necessarily mean more than ‘shared the good news.’ Philip was soon to preach to the Samaritan crowds; it is better to think of the other refugees as lay witnesses.” Everybody a proclaimer. Everybody a witness. I think of Andrew who did not preach to his brother Peter but simply said, “We have found the Messiah.” And he brought his brother to Christ. I think of the woman at the well who didn’t preach to the Samaritans in the village but simply said, “Come see a man who told me all that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” At the men’s retreat last weekend we had a sharing time when every man and young man told the group two things that are on his bucket list: several said they would love the thrill of leading someone to faith in Jesus Christ. Amen! But don’t limit yourself to one. Be a witness. If you are committed to doing that, God will take care of the rest. And may I say this? **At the very least, we all should be saying to people, “Come to Antioch and hear about the One who has changed my life!”**

- **Saul the persecutor**

- We know why the believers were scattered. The primary cause was God. The tool He used was a vicious sinner named Saul. The language Luke uses here is telling in verse 3. While devout men were burying Stephen, Saul was starting his rampage. Ravaging the church. House to house. Dragging men and women to prison. The word for ravaging there expresses “a cruel and sadistic cruelty.” Saul did not care if his victims were women; they got equal treatment. And we know from Paul’s later testimony that he did not just **arrest** Christians. He saw it through to execution. “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women.” (Acts 22:4) “I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.” (Acts 26:10)
- What can we take away from this? That God is not limited by what we think limits God. Who in that day would have said, “That young man, Saul, who is dragging those people to prison right there, and voting for their execution, that man is going to be a mighty warrior for Jesus Christ one day!” Nobody! Well, One. God would. And God did. He still does. How many of us, if we look back to the prime of our rebellion against God, would say we had **anybody** besides a praying grandmother believing in our eventual salvation and usefulness to God? What can we take away from this? Don’t count anybody out. That’s not our job, anyway. Our job is to witness and to pray. God does all the heavy lifting. And if He can do it with Saul, He can do it with anybody. Paul said it himself in his first letter to Timothy: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.” You hear that? God saved ME to prove He could save anybody!

- **Philip the evangelist**

- The church was scattered from place to place. But you get the impression that Philip made a beeline for Samaria. Remember, Samaria was the capital at one time of the ten tribes that broke away from Jerusalem. 1000 years earlier than this. Then 400 years later the Jews in Jerusalem refused the help of the Samaritans, who were cross-bred with foreigners now, in rebuilding the temple. So the Samaritans 200 years later built their own temple at Mt. Gerizim. And they rejected all of the Old Testament except the Pentateuch. So they were despised by the Jews as heretics and half-breeds, and who in his right mind would go down there? Jesus would. And did. And here goes Philip. You have to love the reconciling heart of God. But notice what Philip does. He doesn't hold a reconciliation conference. He preaches Jesus to them. Jesus is the reconciler. He is the One who brings the races together.
- I love verse 6. It is every preacher's dream. Some of you will say, "Hey, we would listen with one accord, too, if you were performing signs like Philip was." Look at verse 7. Unclean spirits were coming out and making lots of racket doing it. I imagined this week that maybe Philip said before he started preaching, "You know we all want to hear what is being preached. So, if the person beside you starts yelling, take him out, make sure the demon is gone, and then bring him back in."
- So, Philip was preaching, people were locked in to God's every word through His servant,, men and women were being healed, many were being saved, and...then we see the distinguishing mark of the Gospel-penetrated heart: joy. "So there was much joy in that city."

I read an e-newsletter this week from a missionary who serves in the Amazon jungles of Brazil: "Three mornings a week, I hold a Bible study for youth ranging from ages 12 to 15. The clothing of the children here is of very poor quality, ragged and worn down, as it has literally been passed down through 5 to 10 siblings. As a "prize" for completing a full Bible study course workbook with me (2 chapters and 2 tests, which takes a student, on average, about 2-3 weeks to complete), the youth get to pick a shirt or pair of shorts from the clothing prize box. For the first time, last week, 3 youth completed a full book (course) and got to go to the prize box and claim their choice of clothing. Their faces lit up and you would have thought, from the way they treasured their prizes, I had just given them a new wardrobe of royalty. A little after dark, I heard a faint knock at my door. It was Jose, one of the young men, 12 years old, who had acquired a pair of shorts from the box that day. Though proud of all my youth, I was especially proud of Jose because he comes from one of the poorest families in the community, and his education and reading levels are well below where they should be. Yet with the most persistence and courage, he read aloud during our lessons and stuck it out to complete his first Bible study course. With his shorts under his arm, he shyly said, "Miss "Jen"... I, I, ummm..." (his head dropped), "I was wondering if maybe you would let me trade my shorts?" "Absolutely, Jose. Would you like a shirt instead? I have red and black," I said.

"Umm... No, no thank you," he said. And then, as he humbly held out his shorts, the most prized possession that he has probably ever owned in his life, he said, "I'd like to trade my shorts for a Bible. May I please trade these so that I can have a Bible of my own?"

Talk about trying to hold back the tears and pull it together to even get a word out! My eyes swelled with tears, and I said, "

Jose, you may keep your shorts and the next time I am in the city, I will get you a Bible of your own."

