

This morning we turn to Acts Chapter 8, and we're going to be looking at the first eight verses of chapter 8. Turn there, if you have your Bibles or you want to activate them, and they're also on the screens before you. We're looking at the direct impact of Stephen and his persecution and his martyrdom for the Lord and what the response was of the church of Christ at Jerusalem. And in it what we see is the paradox of persecution. Indeed, what we see is what actually would come later from the pen of who we now know to be Saul who would later be Paul, who would write the letter to the Romans. In it, as he talks about the gospel, he speaks of it as the power of God. It's a Greek word called *dunamis* from which we get the English word dynamite. It is the power of God. And when the power of God---that is, the gospel---goes off, it will change anything in its path. Nothing can stop it. We see that here in the case of the response of the Christian church to persecution.

So if you have your Bibles let's read together Acts 8:1-8.

And Saul approved of his execution [that is, Stephen's].

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. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 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 came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Lord, you told us that to follow in your way would mean there would be suffering and trial. Indeed, Lord our God, our Father, we know that the way of Jesus was not an easy way. Indeed, as the perfect Son of God, innocent on all accounts, he stood in our place on a cross and took our punishment upon himself. His way was hard, that we might know life. But on the third day, as he rose again victorious over sin and death and over the enemy that is Satan, Lord, we recognize that even as those who call on your name, we still have to walk in your way, and there will be much opposition. But Lord, as you demonstrated to your early church, and now that it has been written down in the Scriptures by Luke, we pray that you would instruct and encourage us to see that there is a paradox of persecution---that it does not stop the power of God, the gospel of Christ. Help us Lord, then, to see wondrous things in this part of your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Recently as I was back home in North Carolina I was reminded of the fact that as I grew up there, the first nine years of my life, I became well acquainted with red dirt. Red dirt is something that stains like no other. If I heard that once from my mother, I heard it a hundred times: Please be careful about playing in the red dirt. But it wasn't until we moved to South Carolina when I was nine years old---it was just ninety minutes to the south to a small town called Irmo, South Carolina, where I was greeted not just by red dirt, but I was greeted also by red clay. And though it was still an hour and a half to two hours from the coast, there was plenty of sand as well. It was an interesting place and I greeted something there that I never---at least to my memory---did not remember encountering in North Carolina. Perhaps it was the development of greater Charlotte that pushed them away. I doubt it, but at least I didn't meet them, but boy, did I meet them in South Carolina. They were fire ants.

Now as a young boy, full of energy and creativity, I would greet a mound of ants... Now I want to tell you I have physically seen with my own eyes after a lot of rain a floating mound of red ants. They are a vicious group. But being a little boy, I picked up a stick, and oh, what fun. You go about to an ant hill

just to see what will happen. I'd also try the other way---just straight line force. Go up with my foot, just with all the force that a ten- or twelve-year-old, 'really wise' young man will do, and just tickle it, and just----stamp it down.

Well I learned very quickly what happens with fire ants. When you stir them up it doesn't solve the problem. Because you see, there's something about ants that's really interesting. They know by the feel of the ground around them what kind of threat they're dealing with. Two or three or four or five ants, they get agitated, it's not a big deal, they know the threat is very low. But when they all start stirring up, they know they're dealing with a threat that is greater than they are. And to my eyes, what looked like complete confusion was actually a very well-honed matter of defense. They had their pheromones. And what they would do is they would leave trails, and they're constantly trying to seek out where the enemy is. And what they are very good at doing, what looks like chaos to me, is actually they're spreading out and trying to eliminate the threat. And boy, did they try to eliminate me. And it's a sting like I'll never forget.

But it taught me something. Sometimes going in full force doesn't solve the problem. Indeed, it can make it worse. That is precisely the paradox of persecution. The persecution and threat on the early church at Jerusalem was sought so that---in hopes that---they can close the mouths of the witnesses to Christ. And it seemed to be working. They took Stephen. He gave witness to what it was that he was defending, and they couldn't take it anymore. They took his life thinking that would be enough. Would it be? What would the response be?

And that's what I want you to see this morning. And as we look, I want to say to you again what I said just a few minutes ago. That at its basis, if it is the Spirit of the living God who is working, there is absolutely nothing, there is nothing that can stop the power of God. There is no unscalable wall to the Spirit of God. There is nothing that can crush the will of God. Therefore it ought to give to every Christian---and if you are one, hear this---there is nothing that the world can throw at you or throw at the church that will silence the power of God.

But there is something for us to see. And in this passage I want you to see three things. There is a reality for us to look at, to observe. I want you observe something. Secondly, I want you to be able to, indeed, as well, decide. Something to observe, something to decide, but then, finally, there is an act, something to do. And you will see all of these in the story that we have before us from Luke. So let's observe, let's decide, and let's act.

Let's observe. We hear from the very early sentence: "And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem." And then it tells us what kind of persecution, how virulent it was. In verse three it says: "But Saul was ravaging the church." Now that idea is a participle. It was ongoing, day after day after day. If you can put on your imaginative thinking, after all the films you've probably watched or shows you've probably seen on television, you can imagine a tightly knit city full of people living close together. And here Saul was, going from house to house, yanking people by the arms and by the hands out into the streets and placing them under arrest and throwing them into prison. The first thing to observe is the reality of persecution.

Now I recognize that many of you as those who are living United States---there is a reality of persecution even in our own country, but it takes a very different cast to it, a very different shade. We still live in a very free and open country. But there are believers around the world who today are going through the worst kind of suffering for the name of Christ. And there are interesting kinds of persecution. It isn't just those that don't believe Christ persecuting those who do. There is also, Lord forbid---there are those who claim the name of Christ who are persecuting others who claim the name of Christ. It's going on all over the continent of Africa, Egypt, the Middle East, and Asia. There are plenty of people writing very good things---and when I say good things I mean good reports---about

what is happening and how we must be aware and not fall asleep, as we are wont to do, and push the rest of the world to the outside as Americans are so good at doing. That indeed, the reality of persecution is very much alive and it is as virulent as it was in the days when Saul would go from house to house persecuting Christians. Persecution is the acknowledged certainty for much of the body of Christ around the world.

With that in mind we look here and we see its reality. But what is the response? That's something else for us to observe. And that is this: to observe not only persecution's reality, but to observe God's power in the face of that reality. I've been doing some reading this week on different kinds of power and how it is used. As I was reading about the use of power, I began to see that actually it was giving me new eyes to see something that is not specifically stated here in this passage, but undergirds all of it. Indeed, God's power and his use of power is all over this passage. Let me explain it this way.

There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of power. The writer Robert Farah Capone, who passed away earlier this year or late last year I believe it was, writes about this. And he writes about it this way. Two kinds of power. One is what he calls straight-line power. The use of force. The other kind of power is paradoxical power. Now straight-line power, he says, and I want to quote him, "often times seems to make a lot of sense. Indeed, it is very effective. Straight-line power can look anything like---for example, you see dust building up on a piece of furniture, you take a dust cloth, you go over with your power and your cloth and you remove the dust. It is also quite effective and useful when dealing with enemies. You can use violence. And whether it's a dust cloth or a 45, oftentimes straight-line power is very effective, very efficient, and very fast. But there's a problem, he says, with straight-line power. He says unfortunately it has a whopping limitation. If you take, he says, if you take the view that one of the chief objects in life is to remain in loving relationships with other people, straight-line power becomes useless.

Here's an example. He says imagine that you take your young child and you pull him back from a cliff or a tall place from falling and you save them. It's very unlikely that you're going to suffer, as a result of the use of that power, a broken relationship with your child. But he says just try interfering with their plans for a season when they are twenty and see what happens, especially if their chosen plans play havoc on your own. Suppose your son makes unauthorized use of your car, and you use a little straight-line verbal power to scare him out of doing it again. Well and good. But suppose further that he does it again anyway---and again and again and again. What do you do next if you are committed to straight-line power. You raise your voice a little. A little more nasty the next time. But something you find is that you can't yell any louder. And then you decide oh, I'll use force---but not if they're bigger than you are. And if they are bigger than you are, and it's much harder than you thought to use straight-line power, then what you can at least do, he says, is maybe you can chain him to the radiator.

But you see point, he says. At some very early crux in that difficult personal relationship the whole thing will be destroyed unless you, who on any reasonable view should be allowed to use straight-line power, simply refuse to use it. In other words, you decide that instead of dishing out justifiable pain and punishment, you are willing, quite foolishly, to take a beating yourself. Instead of straight-line power, you look at your child who is now twenty, and you say, take your best shot. Go ahead. You give up on the straight-line power and you turn to this power. And I want to tell you, if you're a parent this morning, you can envision just how foolish that might seem. Let me go a step further. Let's be honest. That that kind of power---looking at someone who's done you harm and saying go ahead, take the best shot---is not only foolish, quite honestly it's offensive to our pride, is it not. It's offensive to our control. It's offensive to our authority.

My friends, thanks be to God, that in Christ Jesus God was not committed to straight-line power. He was committed to paradoxical power. For did he not look at the world in his Son and say take your

best shot. And Christ died for the ungodly. Paul, who here in this passage is Saul, would later write: While we were yet his enemies, Christ died for us. That is a kind of power, if we're honest, that is precisely what the Bible means when it says that God will use the weak things of this world to confound the strong. He will use the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. Because God is committed---by his grace and through the gospel---to paradoxical use of power.

And here in this passage what do we hear? Consider Stephen, in preparation of being stoned he says: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of the young man named Saul. And as they were stoning he called out: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Do you hear? Stephen died forgiving. God's power announces to the world, forgiveness precedes repentance. Christ has paid it all. And Stephen was simply following the way of his Savior, who died saying Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

The early church must have wondered what would our response be. Do we stomp back? The power of God would not have it. The power of God at work in Stephen and at work in the early church responds very differently, because they had been formed by God's self-offering in Christ. And so here we see, that like ants stirred up---pardon the parallel---they would go about with the pheromone, the power of God that is the gospel, and they would spread it.

And notice what the passage says. Not only do we observe the reality of persecution, the power of God at work, we also see something else. We see the fulfillment. It says it right here; it's so easy to pass over. Here's what it says, verse 1. It says that "There arose a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria." Where have we heard that before? We heard it when Jesus said: "And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the world. Do you see the pattern? God is using the straight line power of the world against Stephen to demonstrate his grace to reach the fulfillment of the promise that he gave to his disciples. Do you see it? It is a beautiful thing. It is a powerful thing. And I believe an encouraging thing to the church and to the believer.

But there's something we must decide. How, then, did they do it? Okay, I see that they went and preached. I see that they continued to go. In fact, it tells us in verse 4: "Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip and" it says, "when they heard him and saw the signs that he did." And those signs erupted in unclean spirits coming out, people being healed. And notice verse 8: "There was much joy in that city." How did that happen? We want a little piece of that. I know I do. I know Pastor Tim does. When I read through the Book of Acts and I come upon Peter and I come upon Stephen and I see what they're doing and I see the power of their preaching, I want some of that. I want to see things like that happen. It's very easy to read in these early pages and go wow, look at the wisdom, look at the tenacity, look at the unstoppable nature, the force of their wills. They were not going to be put down. Yes! Go! You know it's very easy to be in the cheerleader position.

But do you know the advancement of the gospel has absolutely zero to do with our innate gifts, the innate force of our own wills. It has something to do, and only to do, with God through his Holy Spirit. The only way that Peter, Philip, Stephen and the other apostles with them---the only way they could stand before those who were seeking to kill them, those who were seeking to persecute them, to stop them out---the only way they could continue to preach the gospel wasn't because of themselves. It was because of the Holy Spirit at work in and through them. If you don't believe me, consider just two verses that proceeded this entire segment. Speaking of Stephen in Acts 6:10. Speaking of Stephen,

himself, it says this: But they could not---meaning those who were seeking to persecute and come against Stephen---but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. Then in verse 55 of chapter 7: But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God. You see, that passage, being filled with the Spirit, precedes Stephen's ability to even pronounce: Father, do not hold these their sins against them.

I want to be able to say if I were ever persecuted at the thread inch of my life, that I would stand strong for Christ. But I want to tell you that without the Spirit, I am a filthy coward. I want to save my own skin. I want to protect myself. And oh, how easy it would have been, would it not, for the Christians simply to build for themselves private Christian enclaves to hold a defensive position against the world that was persecuting them. But the Holy Spirit, bringing forth the power of God, changed these men from the inside out. And it brings about the church. And it brings in the church when the Holy Spirit comes with the Word, and it breaks out from inside and works its way out. Which leads me to ask you a question. How in the world does the Church of Jesus Christ change one human heart? There is no way. No perfect sermon, no wonderful building, no great ministry, no great wisdom, no great logic, no great illustration, no great music. Absolutely none of it is of any worth at all unless the Holy Spirit is at work in and through it.

John Piper wrote about this very passage. I'll quote these words to you. He says: The lesson of this passage is not just that God is sovereign and turns setbacks into triumphs. The lesson is that comfort, ease, and affluence and prosperity and safety and freedom---and let me add giftedness and talents---do not cause what we often think they will cause. They cause inertia in the church. Inertia is the tendency of something that is standing still to stay standing still. The very things we think would produce energy and creative investment of time and money in the cause of Christ and his kingdom instead produce again and again the exact opposite: weakness, apathy, lethargy, self-centeredness, preoccupation with security. What is he saying to the church of Jesus Christ in United States of America. May we not think that what we have in affluence, prosperity, giftedness, freedom, and all of the trappings of Western culture is what will enable the gospel to go forth. The gospel does not need a constitution and protected freedoms to go forth. The gospel does not need people in Annapolis or in Washington or in the statehouse court or whatever it might be to approve so that the gospel can go forth. Does it mean that the gospel doesn't enter in to those places or we shouldn't pray for that? That's not my point. The point is, if the Spirit of God is in it, the gospel of Jesus Christ will go forth, because the Spirit is unstoppable, unquenchable, irresistible. Because he is God at work in and through the church.

But not only do we observe and decide how---it's by the Spirit---we also are called to act. They were called to act. And what were their actions? First, we see in Philip what we saw in Stephen: a courageous communication. You see, as I said, they weren't hiding, as I'm sure some of them were tempted to do---hiding after the persecution began to try to build little safe enclaves, to hold a defensive posture against a persecuting world. Rather, they went out. And this is what we learn. "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ." It's so interesting that he goes to Samaria.

Who were the Samaritans? On the best reading, the best ideas that were held about the Samaritans, I. Howard Marshall (a Bible commentor) writes this: The Samaritans were at best the lost sheep of Israel. Indeed, the evangelization of Philip to them continues the work of Jesus in reaching out to the marginal, to the outcast among the people, inviting them to the full participation of the restored people of God forming around the prophet whom God raised up. At the best reading Jews considered Samaritans to be, oh, they're just lost sheep. But at worse, and was most often the case, they were a despised group of people by Jews, even hated. Why? Because they did not worship in the same way that the Jews did. In fact, the Samaritans only recognized the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch, as being the authoritative Word of God. And when Jesus first met the Samaritan

woman in John, what we learn there is that, indeed, they were expecting the Messiah to come back. They had a name for him, called Taheb. Taheb literally means, translated, the Returning One. But they worshipped and looked for him to return to Mount Gerizim, not Mount Zion. So at best they were lost sheep, but most of the time they were seen as despised.

And so---watch this---Philip, a Jew who was converted to Christianity... Follow: Jesus reached Philip. He came under the power of God, changed by the gospel, filled with the Holy Spirit. Now he goes to a people who are the enemies of Israel, enemies of God, and he preaches the Christ, not Taheb. The real Returning One is Jesus. And we don't know exactly what he said, but because they recognized the first five books of the Bible, maybe what he did was preach about Moses and how Jesus is the greater Moses. We don't know. But he preached the Christ. He preached to the enemies. Back to that paradoxical power. They gave courageous communication, even to their enemies.

Something else they did: They cried out. Now I know you don't see it here in this passage, but you need to know that this passage, the work of Philip among the Samaritans, and the gospel going forth out of Jerusalem despite persecution, is the fruit of prayer. That speaking out has been the praying church from the earliest parts of this book. We've seen together as we've walked through, how the church cried out in prayer to God. Just two verses I would bring to your mind. When he says in Acts 4:24 when the people of God responded. Speaking of the believers responding to persecution: "And when they heard---and when they heard of the persecution---when they heard, they lifted their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage?'" They rage in vain against his Anointed One. They were praying.

And then one other verse, it's Acts 5:41, where we hear again their response. In Acts 5:41 we read these words. He says: "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." The people acted, not by doing what would have been so easy for them to do. As Pastor Tim pointed out to us a couple of weeks ago, everything about Stephen's trial was against Roman law and against Jewish law. He was a Jew. He was not given the rights of a Jew. He was not given the right kind of trial for someone who lived within the Roman boundaries. It would've been very easy for the people of God to rise up in protest. But what do they do? They praise God and they pray. And full of the Spirit, the gospel moves forward.

I recognize that in our day it is fully right and we are free to protest, and maybe that's the right thing to do. But I will tell you, I don't believe it's the first thing we should do. The scandal of Jesus is that maybe, what the power of God at work through his Spirit is calling the church to do, is to pray for her enemies and to praise God for persecution. And that is the last thing I want [to tell] you to do. God calls the early church to courageous communication. He calls us to courageously communicate. The early church cried out and prayed. We are called to cry out and to pray and to praise God, even for such a thing as persecution.

But the only way we can do this is to remember, and to remember one thing. And it's this: the grace of the living God. What do I mean? The grace of the living God, when we've come into contact with it, is offensive. Because what the grace of God does is, by God's paradoxical power it confronts us in our pride in our ability and our gifts, and begins to show us for who we are. We are a needy people full of sin, given to being our own gods, choosing our own path and choosing our own means of straight-line power to accomplish what we want to do. But it's the grace of God that comes in and says that we cannot do, but we can only turn to the one who is and does and will forever.

And that grace teaches us one thing in this passage, and it's summed up in one short sentence. It begins the entire chapter, and it begins, by the way, to tell us the rest of the book. "And Saul

approved of his execution.” Now how does that prove anything? How does that prove the grace of God? Saul, who was ravaging the church, will become, as we will see in the coming months, the largest and most prolific writer of the entire New Testament. The scandal of Jesus is that he makes his enemies his children. The greater scandal for us is that he's made us, while we were yet his enemies, objects of his mercy. And further, could it be---and get ready to take a big gulp---that maybe, just maybe, the scandal of Jesus is he means to make your worst enemy his child, too. The fact that we were his enemies and the fact that God had mercy on us and has drawn us to himself is a strong---and may I say it in the most proper, divine, sense---it is a fearful, scary thing, because it will change us.

And when it changes us, it changes the view not only of ourselves in need of grace, it changes our views of the holy God and how he uses his power. God, can't you just come down and put some heads together and make it all happen?!? No, he does something else. Instead of taking the blood from our heads, he puts the blood on his own Son's head and makes us his own---not so that we can hold the gospel in private Christian enclaves and say, oh, isn't that great! No, it's to pray Lord, if the gospel can change a man like me, are you not also after my worse enemies. And indeed, in Christ, who are our enemies? They are the objects of our prayer and of our love. That is the scandal of Jesus, who on the cross made a body of his people out of his enemies. And so it is for us.

There's that old hymn, is it not? *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*. Consider these words. See from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down. Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown? Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. That is the paradox of the power of God. It is indeed the glory of God, who can turn persecution into victory. Let's pray.

Father, we're a people who need that grace, for we're very quick to want to make enemies of those who stand against us. But Lord, you want to do something very powerful, because while we were yet your enemies, you died for the ungodly. You came not to heal the healthy, but to heal the sick. Lord, you've called many of us to trust in you. So Lord, what would you do for your church? Only by your Spirit, only through the paradoxical power of God, because it is the gospel at work. Lord, we pray, do this, and my you turn many hearts to yourself. We thank you and praise you. In Jesus' name. Amen.