

Acts 8:1–8

The God Who Overrules Persecution to Spread the Gospel with Power and Joy

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Why did a great persecution arise following Stephen's death? Pastor leads his family in today's "Hopewell @Home" passage. Acts 8:1–8 looks forward to the morning sermon on the coming Lord's Day. In these eight verses of Holy Scripture, the Holy Spirit teaches us that in this age God is overruling even (and especially) persecution to spread the gospel with saving power and divine joy.

Saturday, May 21, 2022 ▫ Read Acts 8:1–8

Questions from the Scripture text: Who was doing what in v1a? What now arose? Against which church? What happened to them (v1b)? Throughout which two regions? Except whom? Who carried whom (v2)? What did they do for him? What did Saul do (v3)? Entering where? Dragging off whom? Handing them over ("committing") where? What did the scattered ones do (v4)? Where? Who went where in v5? What did he preach to them? Who responded in what manner (v6)? What did they do, in addition to hearing? What two types of signs particularly attended him (v7)? How does v8 sum up the outcome?

How should Christians deal with persecution? At the time of this devotional's writing, this is a question on the minds of many believers. Ultimately, this passage answers that they should rejoice in the ongoing victory of the gospel.

Where Persecution Comes From: God's purpose to save

Thus far, great multitudes in Jerusalem have been converted—even from among the priests (6:7). But then the first martyr is murdered for his witness to Christ (7:58–60), and it's as if the sharks finally get the taste of the blood. Saul the clothes-keeper (7:58) and consenter (v1) is important. But he's by no means the only one. "A great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered." In one sense, persecution came from the fact that not everyone gets converted; and, once they figure out what the gospel really says about them, they hate it with murderous rage. But, in another and more important sense, persecution comes from the providence of God.

Where Persecution Sends the Gospel: wherever the Lord is saving next

When v1 says, "throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria," we remember 1:8, "you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Suddenly, we see this persecution not as phase 1 of Satan's counterattack but as phase 2 of Jesus's evangelism plan. His gospel is never stationary or dormant. Often, He humiliates His enemies by making them the driving force by which He takes it to the place of its next success.

What Persecution Sends There: apostolic message, power, and joy

The apostles didn't go along. We know that Philip the deacon is about to become quite the evangelist (v4–13, 26–40). But it seems likely that it is at this point that elders, too, were ordained. When this persecution brings the gospel to Antioch (11:19–20), there are already elders in Jerusalem to receive the gift in 11:30.

It seems likely that with the apostles staying with the believers in Jerusalem (end of v1), other elders were ordained for the ministry of the Word throughout Judea and Samaria. And what a ministry it was! "Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the Word" (v4). Persecution didn't silence the gospel. It multiplied where it was preached. And of course, what is preached in "the Word" (end of v4) is Christ Himself (end of v5).

The apostles didn't go, but the apostolic message did. And God attested to this by apostolic signs (v6–7, cf. 6:8), and especially by apostolic joy (v8).

When persecution arrives, it is not so much the end of one era of God's saving as it is the beginning of the next one!

Whom/how do you tell about Jesus wherever you go? Where might persecution force you/other believers to go? What will you be praying to happen there? How might you serve its happening?

Sample prayer: Lord, forgive us for when we lose heart at the prospect of persecution. Thank You for Your patience and wisdom in this age in which You are causing Your salvation to flourish to the ends of the earth! Grant unto us courage and zeal for the gospel, and attend new evangelism by the powerful working of Your Spirit, so that new cities would be filled with the joy of the salvation of Christ, AMEN!

Suggested songs: ARP46 "God Is Our Refuge and Our Strength" or TPH424 "All Authority and Power"

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(The following is a machine-generated transcription. Please be aware of—and patient with—transcribing errors. If there is something confusing or obviously erroneous, you are invited to listen to the audio recording referenced above)

Acts chapter 8 verses 1 through 8. These are God's words now, Saul was consenting to his death at that time, a great persecution arose against the church, which was at Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Except the apostles and development carried, Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him.

As for Saul, he made havoc of the church entering every house and dragging off men and women committing them to prison. Therefore those who are scattered. When everywhere preaching the Word Then Philip went down to the city of Samara and preached Christ to them and the multitudes. With one accord heated, the things spoken by Philip hearing and seeing the miracles, which he did for unclean spirts crying with a loud voice came out of many who were possessed and many who are paralyzed and blinded were healed.

And there was great joy, and that city so far, the reading of God's inspired and inherent worked.

Because we think to highly of ourselves, We often resist in our hearts, the truth about God's sovereign providence, the fact that he rules and overrules and everything that happens, according to a purpose of his will, which he is carrying out, even through the actions of free creatures, even through the actions of wicked creatures.

The good God does good things. Even as the wicked do wicked things, and then ultimately God will punish their wickedness. But like I said, we have a very high estimation of ourselves. And the lowest estimation of God, there are many even in the churches who will argue against the freedom of God in order to think to preserve.

So they think the freedom of man they end up with of God who cannot operate His goodness. Even through and by ordaining of the wicked intentions and actions of Wicked men. They don't have the faith of Joseph who said you intended it for evil, but God intended it for good.

They don't have the faith of the apostles who even pray to God. Rejoicing that when the whole world was gathered against and executed Christ, they were carrying out what God's purpose and hand or what God's plan and hand and purpose beforehand to do even through that. And of course the cross was not an accident that God used as a lemon to make lemonade.

The cross was always intended by God. Now, The Bible sometimes tells us about the purposing of God over over against man and the greatness of the liberty of God to do as he pleases in whatever way that he pleases and the power of God and says things to us.

Like you guys are just assembled dirt, a little pots. You don't get to tell the potter tell off the potter But most of the time, the Bible just tells you what happens so that you can see that God is sovereign that God is carrying out His purposes. And we see that here because while kings and people's plot and vain against the Lord and his Christ and against his church, God sits in heaven laughing carrying out That which he has purposed for the glory of Jesus and the extension of His kingdom.

So we see Saul consenting and conspiring in the death of Christ and he's not the only one at that time. A great persecution arose against the church was, which was at Jerusalem. The Lord has been saving those elect who are at Jerusalem and obviously the number of unsaved elect decreases as the number of saved elect increases.

And so the percentage of the population outside that outside of the church that are not going to be convinced by the gospel is actually increased by the number of conversions. And then God's providence, this execution of Stephen, Can we please get him a tissue? He should never start family worship without tissues.

The execution of Stephen leads to this great persecution in against the church, which is at Jerusalem. And then we read. So, we have this conspiring and we have this great persecution, and we have the grieving of the church that is injurism in verse 2 devout. Men carrying Steven to his burial and making great lamentation over him.

And we have Saul making havoc of the church entering every house of dragging off. Men and women committing them to prison. He who would later be an apostle and tell and tell the Ephesians, that the Ephesian elders that they remember how he declared to the whole Council of God to them and withheld.

Nothing that was profitable, both in public and from house to house now performs and anti-apostolic. Anti-ministry just as we read in chapter 5 and verse 42, that the Apostles were ministering, the word in every house. There's a satanic imitation here as Saul, the persecutor enters every house, first three to drag off men and women and commit them into prison.

So well, the whole city pretty much is conspiring against them. They are in the midst of grief and lamentation verse 2 and there's this in public and house-to-house ministry and time ministry of persecution, being spearheaded by the non-possible Saul. And what is God doing? God is completing the promise made in chapter 1 and verse 8.

Where Jesus tells the apostolic band. You shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem. And in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. And so we come in Acts chapter 8 and we see all of the upheaval and hostility in the world.

And we see the, the feeble-ness and oppressiveness of the church and their grief over the murdering of one of their most faithful and most encouraging and serving brothers. And then we read and they were scattered, they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. First one and then therefore, those who are scattered went everywhere preaching, the Word verse 4.

And so we're reminded this is an age of persecution. Everyone who desires to live a godly life in Christ. Jesus will be persecuted, says the Apostle Paul. And this happens not just because of the way the world is but because of the way, the church is The church is imperfect.

First Corinthians 11 says there needs to be factions among us so that we may see who the unconverted are by their removal from the church for John says, there are those in the church who go out from us because they're not actually of us. And when you have unbelievers in the church, especially in a time when the church is growing in faithfulness to Christ, those who gave lip service to the idea of Jesus but do not love.

Jesus, himself will grow more and more hostile to those who are actually being saved. So the when you have the overlap of the visible and invisible church, the

more overlap there is the more hostile those who are not in the overlap, but are just in the visible church without truly being converted will be and so there is persecution in this age but it is not the age of persecution in the sense that that's what you would title it, What is it?

It's the age of Christ's reign. It's the age of the Holy Spirit, It's the age of the spread of the gospel. It's the age of the gathering in of the elect and that's what we see in our passage, in Acts 8 because it is a time of great persecution.

That's true, but that's not the story of what happens. Is it the story of what happens is that Jesus, who said, gonna save a bunch of people, gonna apply by my spirit, my salvation, to a bunch of people in Jerusalem. And then I'm gonna do it in older day in Samaria, and then I'm going to do it in the ends of the earth.

And the story in the eight verses before us is phase two of the application of redemption takes place. The gospel goes to all Judea and Samaria. And so the question of what is going on when the church is being persecuted is Jesus is carrying out, his plan of salvation, that's what's going on.

That's where persecution comes from. Yes. As far as the wicked are concerned. And by that, we mean, wicked devils and wicked humans persecution comes from their wickedness and for as far as human as humans are speaking. I guess it's true of all devils, They're unsavedness and their hostility to to the gospel.

But they're not ultimately running things. Are they? And so, ultimately, the answer to where persecution comes from, is the purpose of God, to save, just like you say, well, where did the cross come from? Well, it came from the wickedness of the Jews and the Romans who, who valued keeping unruly Jews in order more than justifying falsely accused profits who turned out to be God and terrified the, the proconsul, although he wasn't scared enough because he still did the handy washy thing, and authorized him to be crucified.

So in one sense, the cross came from the wickedness of men, right? But if I asked you, why did the cross happen? You wouldn't say because they are wicked. You might say because I was wicked, but you could be wicked in the cross, not happen. Why did the cross happen?

Because God was determined to say this. God had planned to adopt into his family into unite, to the Son, by the work of His Spirit. As children of the Father, those who are held deserving sinners and his hell had to be absorbed and who had been in a covenant that required that they die.

So not only their hell had to be absorbed for their sin against God, but the the stipulated penalty of their former covenant had to be completed, which we couldn't do in ourselves, but we might successfully survive in Christ because he rises from the dead and having the terms of the previous covenant been fulfilled.

Now, we can be in the new covenant, not New Covenant, in the Covenant of grace, which covers old covenant, and new covenant old covenant, covenant of grace, the Covenant under various other federal heads, new, covenant, covenant of grace, or just talking old, and new are ways of talking about the covenant.

People on earth, not the the invisible church throughout all time, New Covenant, the one in whom, the covenant of grace is secured Jesus, in whom it was secured for the old covenant people too. But now we have him as the head of his church on earth instead of you know Noah Abraham.

Moses, etc. So that's what was happening at the cross. God was fulfilling a purpose that went back all the way into himself outside of time. Even Before creation. And so what's happening in Acts chapter, 8 is not God making lemonade out of the lemons of persecution ordains the persecution because what is in control is not the wicked and their purposes.

But his purpose to say you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth and so persecution. Since the gospel wherever the Lord is saving. Next. This is one of the things where you can see transitions over the over the course of church history at one time.

The Egypt and the rest of North Africa, where the most professing Christian saturated place in the world. That doesn't necessarily mean that the quality of the Christianity was great or that their theology was great. Although it's a lot better than many academic historians. Give them credit for because academic historians are usually pushing an agenda instead of trying to investigate how things really were there.

So there was a time when Well I guess we can go before North Africa, even Asia, Minor those those churches that received the seven letters that are appended to the rest of the book of Revelation from John, and then persecution, arises and the gospel spreads up elsewhere. And then you have a time when the, the most converted area is in North Africa, not so much.

You have the the main line Roman Empire under constantine, although they have a state church but then persecution arises and the gospel goes elsewhere. And you and you have the Byzantine Empire and persecution arises in the gospel goes elsewhere. And you have Western Europe and America and Western Europe and America have a nice run, you know, from the Reformation up until about the middle of the 20th century and the the quality of the faith, the faithfulness of the churches, wanes and persecution, arises and the gospel goes elsewhere.

And right now, there's there's lots of

Mass conversion occurring in South America, and Africa, and Southeast Asia. And so, you can see this ebb and flow of the work of God. It's usually more recognizable. And hindsight where did it go? Well, we can observe the history and see where Christ and his gospel got preached. And people got saved and cultures, got transformed, but we can also come to a passage like Act 8 and say, oh when God raises up by wicked men, doing wicked, things persecution.

He who is good is doing the good thing of sending his gospel to the next place where he is gathering in the elect. So persecution comes from God's purpose to save persecution sins, people or makes the gospel go to wherever the Lord is planning on doing the next great work and sometimes it doesn't go somewhere else.

Sometimes it goes to a new generation of those whose parents were not faithful whose lives were not all about Christ. Who got accustomed to the idea of the gospel and just incorporated a little bit of it into into their lives, not too much, right? Not a whole Lord's day.

Just an hour, not not a midweek meeting too. Just on the Lord's Day. Not family worship, framing in the day, in private worship, framing in the day. But you know, read a read a chapter and close the book after one meal a day. And sometimes the gospel is lost because of the unfaithfulness of one generation and God raises up pressure against his church, even by means of their own.

Unfaithfulness as is happening now but there have been times in his work where he didn't send it to a new geographical location, he sent it to a new generational location. He raised up persecution and he gave a few of the faithful and their children faith to stand in the face of the persecution and re-multiplied His work.

This of course happened in Covenanting Scotland. Where the the harder the crown pressed. The more Scotland was fertilized with Reformed Presbyterianism

and the crown was confounded by how they could slaughter and squeeze all of these Christians and all of these churches and they still keep up bearing everywhere. And so we may always pray under persecution that God would accomplish whatever the next phase is of his wonderful plan of bringing people in for whom Christ, died through the work of his spirit and the preaching of His Word and persecution ought to make Christian preachers.

Bolder not more timid because we should respond and not just preachers. But of course you and answering for your faith as well, We should respond primarily to what God is doing not to what man is doing. And if we see in the Bible and if we see in history that God raises up persecutions in coordination, with the spread of his word, we should start prayer meetings not for the end of the persecution but for the fostering of whatever evangelism and revival, the Lord is bringing asking him that it would be here.

And if not here, then wherever he is, sending it asking that he would forgive our generational and faithfulness that has brought the church so low. And that he would instead convert our children and raise them up in place of us, they're unfaithful parents one. So, first execution, sends the gospel wherever the Lord is saving next and what persecution sends is apostolic, message, and power and joy.

First apostolic message. You have a parallel in verse 4 and verse 5, what it is? That is being proclaimed. Therefore, those who are scattered. When everywhere, preaching the word and then in verse 5, then fill up went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. So, which was preached the word or Christ, Of course, preaching.

The word is to preach Christ, and if you're not preaching Christ from the whole Bible, then you're failing to preach the Word. We see that in Luke 24 where Jesus explains to the two men on the road to Emmaus, all the things concerning him beginning at Moses that the whole Old Testament was about him.

You see it when Jesus confronts the Pharisees, and he says, he searched the scriptures because you think that in them, you have eternal life. But it is they that speak of me. I mean, Jesus takes a hold old testament and if you wanted to before Christ comes before the New Testament.

If you're going to say, what is the Old Testament about or about whom is the Old Testament, the right answer is what Jehovah Yahweh, The Lord and Jesus as it were says. Yep, that's me. I'm here. I've come to save you. All the things that are written in. It are written about me.

The proper preaching of the Word is the preaching of Christ. And so, when Philip notice the apostles don't go, but their message does eventually the apostles will go different places even in next week's passage Peter and John are going to come down to some area. Even though it's north that's down because of altitude and Thomas goes as far as India and so forth, But it's really the apostolic message.

Most of all that goes into all the world then then the actual apostolic persons. And so, the apostolic message goes Christ is preached, he announces in the city of Samaritan and the Samaritans, really only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament. They were a mixed group, those who are left over from the northern kingdom after it, had been exiled and Assyria had tried to resettle the north and in such a way as to interbreed the northern Israelites, with other nations.

And this is why they were despised by Jews in the south and yet they held on to the the first five books and they really didn't like the temple, the temple, they viewed as a southern thing. This goes back to Jeroboam son of Niebact, of course to his entire invented religion, for which the northern kingdom was judged, was designed to keep people from going to the temple.

And you can see that that prejudice or that position that attitude is still among this Americans. When the woman talks with Jesus, in John 4, and she says Jews, say, and when she says Jews, she means those Judeans. The ones from the southern kingdom, the southerners, the Jews say that you should worship at the temple, but we say you should worship of the mountain why, as why does he think they have the upper hand Because the temple in her view, is a late development from all those extra books that got added.

After the first five books of Moses and it was made with human hands. Whereas the mountain was made by God and God doesn't dwell in a fixed house and so, she probably thinks she's got all of these wonderful arguments. Of course, the Lord Jesus doesn't give her a chance to get there.

Why because he says the time is coming and now is when those who worship God will worship him in spirit and in truth and she says, oh yes, We know that the Christ is coming and He will tell us all things. Why? Because Moses had said that God would raise up from among them another profit.

According another, another prophet, like him from among the brethren, and that they should listen to him. He would obsolete the ceremonial law. And so she doesn't accept the temple administration. Jesus says actually salvation was from the Jews so they were right. But temple administration is over, I who speak to you.

And he, So the whole Bible has always been about Jesus, who is the Lord, and in whom, we are able to come all the way to God and that's why preaching. The Word is preaching Christ. That's the Apostolic message. This Jesus whom you crucified, God has raised up and so let all Israel know that he's not just Christ.

He is both Lord and Christ And so the apostolic message comes, but also the apostolic power, the apostles don't go, but as their message goes, God authenticates, he gives a sign that only He can do in order to show that this is a true message and the multitudes. With one accord hearing the things spoken by Philip hearing and seeing the miracles, which he did heated the mess things spoken by Philip hearing and seeing the miracles.

Which he did for unclean spirits crying out with crying with a loud voice came out of many who are possessed and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. Now until the apostolic writings which are the New Testament scriptures are collected in the church, you need these signs of authenticity.

Now the sign of authenticity of someone's preaching, is it taught by the New Testament In an avenue testament yet? So how do you know that he's being accurate in what he breaches? Well, God makes paralyzed. People get up and walk out of church at the end. God makes possessed people in their right minds again and no longer controlled by and in bondage to the demons that had possessed them.

And so the apostolic message goes with the apostolic power, but that's not the only demonstration of Apostolic power. Those are authenticating signs. But what was the real power of the apostolic message? To take people who earn who heard preached, what they had heard preached in Jerusalem and give them the response that Peter got on the day of Pentecost.

Instead of the responses, Stephen gotten his trial When someone was converted from opposition to God and slavery to their sin, to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. This also was a display of apostolic power, And so, the display of Apostolic power in verse 6, doesn't start with the miracles which he did.

And what's described in verse 7, the display of Apostolic power starts with and the multitudes. With one accord he did. The thing spoken by Philip, you see salvation was of the Jews. They had the better theology. But of late after a certain number of conversions in God's province. A persecution has arisen up.

The word is not being heated. And there's only isn't being heated with one accord by multitudes in Jerusalem right now, You know where it is. Those mixed breed poor theology, barely understanding anything of what they have, even of the five books, of Moses, Samaritans, and the multitudes with one, accord, our heating the word, that's apostolic power.

That's the spirit, convincing men of sin, convincing men of Christ and bringing them to repentance and faith. And so in persecution, comes It comes from God's purpose, to save, It comes in order to send the gospel, wherever the next place is going geographically or perhaps, generationally. And it comes with the apostolic message.

What it sends to the next place to the next geographical place or the next generation is the apostolic message. Preaching Christ. From all scripture, the apostolic power, the conversion of centers and the apostolic outcome. Great joy, verse 8, very, very succinct. And there was great, joy in that city.

And you see that in contrast with verse 2, the devout men carried Stephen, to his burial and made great lamentation over him. There are times of great grief in the lives of God's people. It wasn't wrong for them to grieve. Steven, there wasn't wrong for them to grieve. Over whomever else was being killed and depressed in the great persecution that had arisen but the great persecution in verse 1 and the great lamentation in verse 2 were in Providential service unto the great joy in verse 8 of those who discovered Christ or maybe better put who had been discovered by Christ.

Discovered to whom Christ had discovered himself and discovered unto them that they were ones for whom. He had died by bringing them to faith and now they knew God in Christ as their Father and they knew Christ as their Creator who had died for them. And they knew the spirit as God, who rules and overrules and works and all things and now was all mightily infallibly applying Christ to them.

Bringing them to faith in which they are counted righteousness and righteous in Christ, and conforming them to the image of Christ. And there was great joy. One of the things that we can always be praying for Of course, those who are living godly in Christ. Jesus, our lives end in great.

Joy. Our lives. Don't end The end of this life. Puts an end to sin. Praise God. But also sickness and sorrow. Then there is great joy at the end of it, but even within time even within history, God brings his church through seasons of great grief in one location because he's bringing great joy.

Through the spread of the gospel. It's not just Apostolic message and power that go out. That's apostolic joy as well. Rejoicing over the Lord. Jesus. Praise God. And let us ask him to bless us to us. Our Father in heavenly, thank you for this portion of your word, we thank you that living at a time of transition.

It seems your work in this world. You have given us better to understand how your rule and overrule all things. Now, this is the age of the reign of Christ, and the work of the Spirit, the spread of the church, the gathering in of those, for him Christ died.

And that you are not only spreading the gospel of Christ by your power, but you are also bringing great joy to those whom you are saving. We pray. O Lord for our land, for the church, in our land, have mercy O God. And grant that even as your gospel is going, other places that it would also go down to a new generation that you would raise up those who believe in Christ.

According to your word, we were able to rejoice because they have Jesus and who know him as their God and Savior. And you know, you as their God and Father and you know, the Spirit as their God and helper, grant that we would know Jesus as Savior and you His Father, and the Spirit is help her today and the rest of this week.

And then all of our lives, we ask it all in Christ's name. Amen.