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The Unstoppable Church

Triumphant Progress in the Midst of Persecution

Acts 8:1-40

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In the latter part of the second century A.D., a young man left his home in Carthage, North Africa and traveled to Rome. While there in Rome, he indulged all of his passions and lived a very immoral lifestyle. Part of the indulgence of his passions involved his attending of the Roman games. There he saw gladiators brutally kill one another, he saw criminals eaten alive by lions, and among the spectacle were Christians who were brutally murdered before cheering crowds. But it struck this young man that these Christians died with great courage. And it so struck him that he began to investigate the Christian faith, and in so doing he himself became a Christian.

This young man's name was Tertullian, and Tertullian became one of the most important early Church Fathers and theologians. And in one of Tertullian's most famous writings, *The Apology*, which was addressed to the provincial governors of the Roman Empire and was the defense of the Christian faith against some unreasonable attacks by the Roman Empire, he concluded that apology with these words:

But go on zealously, good presidents, you will stand higher with the people if you sacrifice the Christians at their wish, kill us, torture us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof we are innocent. Therefore God suffers, that we thus suffer; for but very lately, in condemning a Christian woman to the brothel keeper rather than to the lions you made confession that a taint on our purity is considered among us something more terrible than any punishment and any death. Nor does your cruelty, however exquisite, avail you; it is rather a temptation to us. The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed. Many of your writers exhort to the courageous bearing of pain and death . . .; and yet their words do not find so many disciples as Christians do, teachers not by words, but by their deeds.

The blood of Christians is seed. I can't help but think of Acts chapter 8 when I hear Tertullian's words, because we find a church in Acts 8 that undergoes great persecution, and we see that result in the rapid spread of the gospel.

Turn with me to Acts chapter 8. We come now to a transitional point in the Book of Acts and in the life of the unstoppable Church. Up until this point, the Church has been carrying out its mission by being witnesses of Jesus in Jerusalem. But we know that that's only stage one of the mission.

Stage two, if you think back to Acts 1: 8, Jesus said, "was to be My witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but then in Judea and Samaria, and then even to the remotest parts of the earth." And what we find in Acts 8 is the launching of stage two of the mission—taking the gospel, being Jesus' witnesses into Judea and Samaria. And in fact we get an initial launching of stage three—to the remotest parts of the earth, which we'll see toward the end of Acts, chapter 8.

Act 8 follows on the heels of Stephen's death. He's been brutally murdered by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, and we were introduced to an individual, Saul, who watched over the robes of those who killed Stephen. We pick it up here in chapter 8:

Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him [that means Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the

apostles. Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. (Acts 8: 1-4, *NASB)

Now what appears in just matter of fact language, this persecution of the Church, is really a violent, murderous persecution. Saul, this despicable person who has this deep hatred for the Church, now sets about to destroy it. Notice there's really some colorful language in here as to the exact nature of the persecution. In verse 3, you'll note that Saul began ravaging the church. And that's a picturesque term used to describe a beast ripping apart its prey.

Over Christmas we acquired a puppy, a yellow Labrador retriever, and as cute as she is, she goes over to her favorite toy, a stuffed monkey, and she grabs hold of that monkey with her teeth and violently throws and tosses her head around and growls. And the monkey is on its last leg, and that's the picture that this term gives.

This is what Saul was doing to the church—tearing it apart, at least attempting to do that. He was putting them in prison. And I think the idea there is he wasn't just throwing them in jail, but he was putting them in prison with the idea that then they would be put to death; they would be executed. I think many of these Christians were killed. In fact, in the beginning of chapter 9, it talks about Saul still breathing threats and murder against the church.

But notice what this persecution does. It scatters the believers into Judea and Samaria, of all places, this second stage of that mission to be Jesus' witnesses there. And it's interesting Luke uses the term here, "scattered." That was a reference to seed being scattered around. Again, I can't help but think of Tertullian's quote. And we can't help but think, *Well, the scattering of seed might lead to growth.*

Now one interesting thing to note at the end of verse 1 is that this persecution didn't seem to be directed against all of the church there in Jerusalem. The apostles weren't scattered. It didn't seem to affect them greatly. Most likely this persecution was directed against Stephen and his group—Hellenistic Jews who came to Christ. If you remember two weeks ago, Bryan made the distinction between traditional and Hellenistic Jews. Hellenistic Jews were those who, though by nationality and religion were Jewish, nonetheless they adopted much Greek thinking and language. Well, these individuals were despised by the traditional Jews, but now doubly so, because now they were Christians. And it seems as if Saul is directing the persecution against Stephen's group, and they are being scattered now throughout Judea and Samaria.

But what's interesting isn't so much that they were scattered into the regions of Judea and Samaria. I find most interesting how the church responded to that. Notice in verse 4:

Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.

Notice they didn't run and hide. They didn't go underground. They didn't shut up. Rather, they responded to this persecution by continually proclaiming the very message that got them into this situation to begin with.

I think here we see in the initial verses of chapter 8 God's sovereignty written all over the place. Persecution would not stop the unstoppable Church. In fact, God used the persecution to expand and spread the Church. In fact, one thing I think you should keep in mind here, and especially in the weeks to come as we look at the transformation of this despicable individual Saul into a

servant of Jesus Christ, is that not only does God use persecution to advance the gospel, but He uses the persecutor.

Luke now focuses in on one of these scattered individuals. Beginning in verse 5:

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. So there was much rejoicing in that city.

Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, “This man is what is called the Great Power of God.” And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed. (vs. 5-13)

Philip, here in chapter 5, is undoubtedly the Philip from chapter 6—one of the seven along with Stephen who was to oversee the distribution of food among the church. Philip, now being one of the ones who was scattered, is one of the ones in verse 4 who is continually proclaiming the gospel, and Philip finds himself in Samaria. It’s interesting that he shows up in Samaria. His audience was a people very despised by the Jews. Now, the Samaritans were not Gentiles; they were of Jewish blood. They were considered half-breeds because they were descendants of mixed marriages from the Assyrian captivity. The Jews despised them and looked at them as racially impure. They were outcasts. And here Philip is proclaiming this good news to these individuals. And we want to keep that in mind because that will be important in just a little bit.

Philip is in Samaria proclaiming the gospel to these individuals, and notice particularly what he’s proclaiming. Verse 5, he’s proclaiming Christ to them. Verse 12, he’s preaching the good news about the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ. Now what is this good news, the kingdom of God? I don’t have time this morning to tease out all the significance and meaning of “the kingdom of God.” If you’re interested in that, we’re offering a class in the 11:00 hour on the kingdom of God. You might want to take advantage of that. (I hear the instructor’s a pretty neat guy as well.)

The message of the kingdom of God was just this: It was the same message that Jesus taught all through the Gospels. It was that God is now acting among people in the person of Jesus to deliver them from the bondage of Satan and the bondage of sin and of death. This is the message that Philip is proclaiming to these individuals.

It’s interesting what accompanies the message. Again, there are healings and there’s the casting out of demons. This should remind you of Jesus’ ministry—again, preaching the same message. And along with that, Jesus cast out demons. He healed. Why is that significant? I think it’s this: It’s one thing to go around proclaiming that God is now working among people to deliver them from the bondage of Satan and it’s quite another thing to show it. Through God’s power, Philip is demonstrating the truth of the message.

And notice the response. People were rejoicing in the city. They believed this good news and they were being baptized. Appropriate responses to the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom: belief and baptism. Notice again, the unstoppable Church is triumphantly marching along despite the persecution that came. Despite Saul's attempt to destroy the Church, it's flourishing; it's growing.

Luke now focuses in on one particular Samaritan. Here is Simon—Simon the magician, the sorcerer, a person who was an expert in occultic practices, so much so that people were terrified of him. Many translations say that people were “astonished,” which is actually a word meaning they were terrified of him. He held great power over them. He had a high status in the community. But even in the face of Philip's message, this person Simon couldn't help but notice that Philip was from God. And Philip had access to a power that Simon couldn't tap into. So he sees this, and he, again, believed. He was even baptized. He tagged along after Philip and was constantly amazed at the things that he was seeing. What looks like here a significant conversion, we'll see after a little bit, turns out quite tragically.

But as you can imagine, word of this is going to spread around. We see that in verse 14:

Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. (vs. 14-17)

This is a puzzling part of the text, I think, because now we find out that at their conversions, the Samaritans didn't receive the Holy Spirit, just the thing that we would expect to happen. What explains this? What explains the fact that Peter and John now seemingly had to show up praying for the Holy Spirit to come upon these people? Well, several explanations are offered, a couple of prominent ones that I think do not square with the text that maybe we should be aware of.

One explanation is that somehow Philip's ministry was in some way defective, or that these conversions were somehow illegitimate and the apostles needed to show up and correct the problem. However, again, I don't see that in the text. In fact I see quite the opposite. It looks as if Peter and John show up in the scene and they find things as they should be: that the truth was being proclaimed and that these conversions were authentic. Notice that Peter and John don't call for more conversions, they don't call for the people to be rebaptized, but rather they pray that the Holy Spirit come upon them. So I don't think that there's anything defective in Philip's message or in the conversions.

Another explanation of this passage is that it somehow is evidence that there is a second baptism, or second filling of the Holy Spirit, subsequent to a person's conversion. Many of our Pentecostal or charismatic friends would point to this passage as evidence of that. But again, while there might be passages in Scripture that support that view, this is not one of them. In fact, it rules it out. If you look at verse 16, we find out that the Holy Spirit hadn't come upon these people to begin with. This was the first time the Holy Spirit came upon them; it wasn't a second filling, a second baptism. Again, unless my math is bad, being that this is the first time, it can't be the second.

Well then, what is up with this passage? Why are Peter and John showing up to do this? I think the significance is this: Again, notice that the conversions are taking place among the Samaritans, despised people by the Jews. And you can imagine that people in Jerusalem might

think, *Now, how can God be blessing a work among these despicable people?* And with Peter and John showing up, it authenticated what was going on here. In fact, this seems to be the pattern. We see this with the believers in Antioch, that when new advances of the unstoppable Church were made, the apostles showed up to check things out, make sure the truth was being told, make sure the conversions were authentic. And what it did was, it would assure the people in Jerusalem that God was indeed working among the Samaritans, that these conversions were legitimate and these people were every much a part of the Church as they were.

But secondly, think about the Samaritans—these despised individuals now who had accepted the Good News of the kingdom of God—and this to them would have been a welcoming into the Church. We have two traditional Jews: Peter, the top apostle (at least at this point) and John show up on the scene to pray for them, that the Holy Spirit comes upon them. What an encouragement that must have been—a welcoming into the body, a sign that they were legitimate members of the Church.

In fact, I find it interesting that John was one of the ones sent. John, back in Luke 9, along with his brother James had originally called for condemnation to come upon a Samaritan community because of their inhospitable attitude toward Jesus. And now this very one who called condemnation upon these people is now praying that the Holy Spirit come upon them. That must have impressed itself upon the Samaritans. So this was an unusual working of God. In His wisdom, He didn't send the Holy Spirit upon these people immediately, but rather waited for the apostles to come as authentication. We might consider this a Samaritan Pentecost. Just as there is a Jewish Pentecost in chapter 2, where the coming of the Holy Spirit was accompanied with many signs and wonders, so, too, a similar thing here happens in Samaria.

Continuing in verse 18, Simon obviously notices this:

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity." But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." (vs. 18-24)

Simon notices the coming of the Holy Spirit upon these people—that the apostles are laying their hands on people, praying for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is coming, part of these great signs and wonders and power, and Simon thinks, *Wow, if I had that ability, think what I could do! Think of the increasing power I could have over these people.* And perhaps he's thinking, *Hey I've lost a lot of following to Philip; maybe this is a way to regain that.*

Maybe he's just thinking about how he can promote himself, and so he offers to buy this gift of God in order to use it for his own advancement, his own gain. And Peter's response to Simon could not be more direct, it could not be more harsh, it could not be more condemning. In fact, the J.B. Philips translation of the Bible is really the only translation that is courageous enough to record these words as literally as you find them in the original language. What Peter actually says to Simon is: "To hell with you and your money."

Now your first reaction is probably, *I cannot believe he just said that in church, let alone during a message.* And your second reaction might be, *Good grief! What's up with Peter? Has he gone a little overboard here?* You know, if Peter were on staff at most churches in North America, we'd probably put him on paid leave, and we'd require he take some sensitivity training, perhaps some anger management classes. But let me suggest that Peter was right in doing this. What looks to be profanity was not. It was a serious curse he called down upon Simon because of a very serious, serious sin, and Peter saw the wickedness in Simon's heart. That sin was thinking that you could take the gospel or the blessings of the gospel and either purchase them and use them for one's own advancement, one's own personal gain, one's own power and authority. I think Peter rightly goes after Simon and deals with this very severely and very swiftly.

Notice Peter says in verse 21:

“You have no part or portion in this matter...”

What's the “matter” being talked about here? Well, this word “matter” actually comes from a term that could be translated “word”—or maybe *should* be translated “word.” It's really the same idea that you see in verse 4, where the people who had scattered went about preaching the word. What were they preaching? The gospel. I think what Peter is saying here is: “You have no part or portion in the gospel or the blessings of the gospel because of the wickedness of your heart, and you need to repent of that.”

Notice what Simon does. He doesn't repent. In fact, he asks Peter and John to pray for him instead, that none of these things might happen to him. It's clear to me that Simon isn't desirous of a relationship with God. He just wants to be out from under God's judgment. For those reasons, I don't think that Simon and his so-called conversion earlier in the passage was an authentic one. I don't think Simon's heart was ever right with God. I think that Peter's very stern condemnation of Simon and the fact that he didn't repent demonstrates that.

And furthermore, Simon here is identified with an individual in the history of the Church, Simon Magus, who was a Gnostic heretic that plagued the Church for many years. Again, if that indeed is the case, it's hard to square that with the fact that Simon's conversion was at all legitimate. I don't think his heart was ever right with God. He sought after the gospel and its blessings, but for selfish reasons. Peter saw that as serious sin and he dealt with it, again for fear of what that might do to this new and growing church.

We hardly get a breath of air, and Philip is off again on a new ministry in a much different direction. Verse 25:

So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.) So he got up and went. (vs. 25-27a)

Apparently Philip is accompanying Peter and John on the way back to Jerusalem and they're continuing proclaiming the gospel in Samaria. Now Philip gets this very unusual command, or instruction. He's told to go to this desert road that leads to Gaza, and he's also told (and again, I don't think that our translations make this command very clear), “Get up and go south.” I think there are some technical, terminological things that this should actually be translated: “Get up and go at noon to the desert road that leads to Gaza.”

Notice what Philip is being commanded to do: “You go to a desert place, a desert road” [*and again, not many people are going to be there in the desert*] and secondly, “You go at noon” [*the hottest part of the day, when for sure nobody is going to be*].

Now put yourself in Philip’s shoes for a minute. You’ve just been ministering in Samaria. Throngs of people are responding to the gospel message and being baptized. And now you’re told to go someplace where there’s nobody, and at a time of day when no sane person is going to be out there. If it were me, I’d probably complain or protest and ask God, “What are Your reasons for doing this?” Maybe pout and whine a little bit.

But Philip doesn’t do that. He obeys and he goes. And there he has another very important encounter with, again, another very high profile, prominent individual, an Ethiopian court official. Verse 27:

So he [Philip] got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.” Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

**“HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER;
AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT,
SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.
IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY;
WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION?
FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH.”**

The eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea. (vs. 27-40)

So Philip encounters this Ethiopian court official who probably had a very high standing in his society, probably a very powerful person. And on this occasion he has the opportunity to explain Jesus to him through the Old Testament. I can’t help but believe that the message that Philip preached to this Ethiopian was the very same thing that Jesus taught His disciples after His resurrection. If you recall, after the resurrection Jesus went through the Old Testament and explained the Old Testament and all the things that it said about Himself to His disciples. And I’m sure the disciples passed that down on to those to whom they taught and ministered, Philip being one of those. I think Philip is probably passing that along to the Ethiopian. And the Ethiopian believes the gospel and wants to be baptized and is baptized.

Now we might not blame Philip if he would have been a bit hesitant to baptize this Ethiopian. After all, just think of his experience just a short while back. Another prominent individual who believed, who was baptized and yet turned out to be a fraud, was Simon. If I were Philip, I might say, “Well you know, let’s wait a few months or years and see how things go with you, Mr. Ethiopian, and then maybe we’ll baptize you.” But no, that’s not what Philip does. He believes that this Ethiopian’s heart is right with God and he baptizes him. The Ethiopian goes on rejoicing. Again, it’s clear that the Ethiopian is not receptive of the gospel and its blessings for his own personal gain, but it’s because he needs it. He needs to be out from under the bondage of Satan and sin and death. And he goes on rejoicing on his way.

Now, I think that this conversion is significant for two reasons. I think secondarily, it’s significant because it provides a good contrast to the quote-unquote conversion of Simon. Again, they were two prominent people responding to the gospel but for very different reasons. One, I think out of selfish ambition; the other because he saw his need for the gospel. He was not acceptant of it just to promote himself.

But I think the primary significance of this conversion is the fact that now we see an initial launching of stage three of Jesus’ marching orders to the Church: to be witnesses even to the remotest parts of the earth.

The Ethiopian undoubtedly went back to his own country, Ethiopia, which actually isn’t the Ethiopia today, but would be what we would consider Northern Sudan. But the Greeks thought of the Ethiopians of that time as living at the edge of the world. Now I have a sister-in-law who comes from a very small town in southeastern Montana: Ekalaka, Montana, which is out in the middle of nowhere. And my dad often would say of Ekalaka, “Well, Ekalaka is not the end of the world, but you can see it from there.” Perhaps Ethiopia was not quite the end of the world, but maybe you could see it from there.

But this is interesting. So soon after Jesus gives his marching orders to not just be his witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, but to the remotest parts of the world, the gospel is reaching there. In fact, another early Church Father, Irenaeus, claimed that this Ethiopian here was the first missionary to Ethiopia. And so because of this persecution and the scattered believers going out and being willing to keep proclaiming the gospel (and one here in particular: Philip), the gospel is now beginning to reach the remotest parts of the earth. The unstoppable Church continues to move ahead. And Philip is again prompted by the Spirit to continue his ministry. He preaches up the Mediterranean Coast until he comes to Caesarea, where apparently he settles down, has a family, four daughters who become prophetesses. What a legacy.

Again the unstoppable Church triumphantly marches along, despite persecution and despite suffering. And as interesting as we find the historical account of this church, there are some lessons for us here. I’d just like to highlight a couple of them, and certainly not all of them.

One thing I think we learn from this passage is that persecution is a time for proclamation. *Persecution is a time for proclamation.* I don’t know what persecutions and sufferings that you have faced for the cause of Christ. I haven’t faced anything significant. I think the worst thing that has maybe ever happened to me is I’ve been ridiculed in a graduate seminar. The professor told me I had a cognitive problem for my commitments to Jesus’ teaching. That’s not that bad. You’ve probably undergone a lot more persecution than that. But nonetheless, it’s not a time for retreat. It’s not a time to back away. It’s not a time to shut up. It’s a time for proclamation, just like these early Christians. I don’t know in school what persecutions you face, at work, or with

your family and friends, but again the model here is proclamation—to continue proclaiming the gospel. It’s an opportunity that we need to take hold of and, like seed, it can produce growth. And God uses that to expand His Church, to grow His Church.

I think the second thing we need to keep in mind, as we see in this passage, is that the Church is not exempt from suffering and persecution. Christians have never been promised that; they never have and they never will until eternity. Jesus said, “You’re going to suffer. You’re going to be persecuted. The world hated Me; they’re going to hate those who follow Me.” And we can expect that. I think one of the duties of the church today is to teach the followers of Jesus, teach the body of believers that make up that church, not to hide and avoid persecution and suffering. You can’t do that if you’re out proclaiming the gospel. But rather, we need to train people how to respond to persecution. And we see the model here: That response is to continue proclaiming the gospel. Again, it’s easy to back away. It’s easy to be quiet—you know, the path of least resistance. But that’s not our calling. Our mission is to be Jesus’ witnesses all throughout the world.

One last thing I think that we see here is we should be reminded that the gospel and the blessings of the gospel were not for purchase and they’re not to be used for our own advancement, our own promotion. How often we seek certain gifts from God, we seek certain positions of authority within the church, and we do so for our own gain. We’re not all that unlike Simon when we do that. In fact, we have a word in our English language, “simony,” which comes from Simon, that’s defined as the purchasing of religious office or privilege. We don’t want to be accused of that. The gospel is serious business, and the blessings of the gospel are for God’s glory and for the benefit of His Church, and when we try to use those things for our own self-promotion, we’re involved in what Simon was involved in.

Well, we have the unstoppable Church triumphantly marching ahead despite the persecution. You know, the unstoppable Church isn’t just the church in Acts. The church in 2006 is the unstoppable Church. Our mission hasn’t changed. The marching orders are the same. We’re to be Christ’s witnesses to the remotest parts of the earth. Sometimes that will involve persecution and suffering, but nonetheless, the marching orders are clear. If we’re going to be faithful, we’re going to carry those out and we’re going to keep proclaiming that gospel.

So as in the days of Acts chapter 8, as in the days of Tertullian, so may it be that in our day whatever suffering and persecution that we go through, may it be seed that will generate an expanse of the gospel and the growth of the unstoppable Church. Lets pray:

Lord, this is a somber passage. It’s not pleasant to talk about persecution and not pleasant to think about that, but yet You told us in a world that hates Your Son Jesus, that those who follow Him will experience persecution. May we be faithful like these early Christians were to take advantage of that and continue proclaiming the gospel, knowing that You’re sovereign and that You will cause the growth that will come from that--that the seed that is scattered will be fruitful. That is our commitment. We want to be faithful to that mission, but we need Your help; we can’t do it alone. So we ask for the power of Your Spirit to be upon us, and we ask this all in the name of Jesus, Amen.

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Study Questions
The Unstoppable Church
Triumphant Progress in the Midst of Persecution
Acts 8:1-40
Dr. Mark Mathewson

Opening Discussion

1. In his defense of Christianity against the attacks and criticisms of the Roman Empire, second century Church Father Tertullian wrote: “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.” What did Tertullian mean by saying the blood of Christians is seed?
2. How do Tertullian’s comments reflect what happens to the church in Acts 8?
3. What should be the appropriate response of Christians to persecution?

Bible Study

1. Due to the intense persecution at the hands of Saul, the church is scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Why is that significant?
2. How do the Christians respond to persecution and to being scattered away from their home in Jerusalem?

How do you think you would have responded? (Be honest!)

3. Where do you see God’s sovereignty in the opening verses of Acts 8?
4. One of these scattered Christians was Philip (see Acts 6:1-6). What did Philip proclaim to the Samaritans?

What was the response of his audience?
5. We should not overlook the parallels between Jesus’ ministry and Philip’s. Both proclaimed the same message and both of their messages were accompanied by miraculous healings and casting out of demons. What is the significance of their message being accompanied by these signs?
6. Why did the apostles dispatch Peter and James to Samaria?

Why did God wait until their arrival to send the Holy Spirit upon the believers?

7. Who was Simon, and what was his status among the people of Samaria?

What evidence is there in the text that Simon’s belief and baptism were inauthentic?

What do you think was Simon’s motivation to believe and be baptized?

8. Why did Peter so harshly condemn Simon?

What implications does this have for how seriously we should take false belief in the church?

9. In the midst of a thriving ministry where crowds were responding to the gospel, Philip is told to go to a desolate place where almost no one would be. How would you feel if you were Philip? What was Philip's response?
10. Through Philip's faithful proclamation of the gospel, the Ethiopian official believes and is baptized. According to Irenaeus, another early Church Father, the Ethiopian was the first missionary to Ethiopia—a place the Greeks considered as being on the edge of the world. Why is the Ethiopian's conversion so significant? (Hint: Think back again to the Church's marching orders in Acts 1:8.)

Application

1. Have you ever been persecuted or suffered for your commitment to Jesus? How did you respond? Did it provide an opportunity to proclaim the gospel?

Do you agree that the proper response to persecution is the proclamation of the gospel? Why or why not? Read I Peter 3:13-17. Does this passage confirm or deny your answer?

2. We live in a culture bent on the pursuit of pleasure. What struggles does this create for you when faced with the prospect of persecution and suffering for your commitment to Jesus?

Do you tend to be quiet about your commitment so as not to face the difficulties, pain, and suffering of persecution, or do you tend to continue boldly proclaiming the gospel despite what suffering may come? (Again, be honest!)

What are some things you can do to ensure you will respond to persecution with boldness rather than fearfulness?

3. In what ways are you like Simon? Do you ever seek spiritual blessings, gifts, status, or authority for your own gain?

Why is such an attitude dangerous? What specific dangers could it pose to your church?

How can you avoid being like Simon? State three specific things you can do this week to combat an attitude like Simon's.