

Acts 7:54> 8:25

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[0 : 00] Okay, I'm also preaching this morning, so if you have a Bible with you, please, you may want to turn to the book of Acts, but you're in our series in the book of Acts.

Just to say, devoted to God, to each other, to mission. If you want to remind us, that's where we felt God really capture our hearts into the book of Acts. And so it won't be surprising that we keep on coming back to this theme, devoted to God.

How can we grow in our love of God, our devotion to God, and allowing God to be God over our lives? How can we grow in our love and care for each other? But also, how can we grow in our mission?

That is, each and every one of us being called to mission to those that God's put around us. And the first seven chapters of the book of Acts really sort of outlines a great foundational theology of the early church, of how the church is.

It puts in lots of values and principles. And then really from the end of Acts chapter 7, beginning of Acts chapter 8, we start to see these being worked out in all sorts of different ways.

[1 : 11] Over the last couple of weeks, we've read the account of Stephen, and what happened to him, how he was pulled up before the Sanhedrin, and then he spoke to them.

Christine took us through that last week, his speech to the Sanhedrin. And she finished reading, going into the death of the masterdom of Stephen, the death of Stephen.

And this morning, while I've got a longer passage, I'm actually just going to focus on the first eight verses of Acts chapter 8.

So if you've got a Bible with you, we're going to read it together. And Saul was there giving approval to his death. Saul was there giving approval to Stephen's death.

On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. And all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

[2 : 14] Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

Those who had been scattered preached the word of God wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said.

For his shrieks in pure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

And wow, yes, you can imagine. Freedom comes to people and they come and experience the goodness of God, the grace of God, the mercy of God.

And there's great joy, we're told, in that city. Now the passage goes on then to talk about a man called Simon the Sorcerer and how he gets saved. And there's a passage which goes on to talk about baptism in the Holy Spirit.

[3 : 14] And we'll come on to that in a bit. But this passage starts with a time of persecution. The persecution starts to affect the church.

And I'd want to today just spend some time considering what that means and how we can apply it to our lives. So I've just got two points really.

The first one is this, they're scattered. We're told everyone was scattered except the apostles. In verse, yes, end of verse 1.

Everyone's scattered. And they're scattered because of this persecution. I just want us to think about this for a moment. I think in the West, we have developed a set of thought, let's put it that way, a mindset which says Christians shouldn't be persecuted.

Because we don't really get persecuted for our faith. But when we look across the world, we see Christians have been persecuted all over. And the reality is, of course, persecution exists.

[4 : 25] As a believer, you are likely to experience some form of hardship or persecution or suffering. It could be all sorts of different, expressed in all sorts of different ways.

It may be in the workplace. It may be in the home. It may be in the school. But I think we just need to get our heads around this for a moment. Persecution exists and happens with Christians.

Now, you may say, where did you get that from? Well, Jesus is recorded in John 16 saying this, in this world, you'll have trouble. But take heart. I love that.

In this world, you'll have trouble. Hey, but take heart. Why should we take heart? I have overcome the world. Jesus has overcome the world. And in the context of that passage, Jesus is talking about the suffering, the trouble, the persecution, the disciples will experience after his crucifixion or during and after his crucifixion.

Paul, describing the Christian life in 2 Corinthians 4, 7-8, says this, We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not in despair.

[5 : 32] Persecuted, but not abandoned. Struck down, but not destroyed. Why? To show this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. That is why he's saying this will happen so that, in verse 7, so that we can see this power.

It's not our power. It's the power of God at work in us. And so right at the start this morning, I just want to sort of break any illusions which we may be under. Friends, Christians get persecuted.

Christians will go through all sorts of trouble, hardship, despair, perplexing, all the different things which were in those quotes I just read. And the story of the book of Acts reflects just that too.

People are scattered. God is still in control. Can you just say that to somebody sitting there?

God's in control. Yeah. Do you think we can have another go at that? Perhaps you can do it the other way.

[6 : 44] Look in the other direction. If you're on the end of a road, don't know how that works. God's in control. God is in control.

In all our circumstances, in every circumstance, God is in control. And in this passage, we see how the people not only get hold of that, but how it affects them.

First of all, they will suffer trials and persecutions for our faith. Those are those passages I mentioned. We can choose, therefore, to park fear. Now, I use the word park fear because we will all be tempted to respond in fear.

We'll all be tempted to be fearful. And we will all experience anxiety. It's what we do with it when we experience it. And we can choose to park it. And we can choose to do what Paul writing to the Philippians in chapter 4, verse 6, basically says.

Hold on. Well, actually, verse 4 to 6. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything.

[8 : 01] But in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. You know, when there's trouble, friends, let's rejoice in God.

That makes it weird. Why am I rejoicing in God? Well, because he's on the throne. He's in control. He's Lord. So I can rejoice in knowing that he is the one who's in control.

He's the one in charge of my life. And in that, I can make the choice to park anxiety and fear. Now, it doesn't mean it goes away.

But it says, I'm not going to let it take control. Because God's in control. Why do I need to be fearful? God's in control. Why do I need to be anxious about anything? I'm praying about it. I'm bringing this to God.

God's in control. So in the face of persecution, trouble, hardship, where things aren't going well, sickness, bad health, the first thing we can do is choose to park fear and anxiety.

[9 : 04] The second one is let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. You see, if God's in control, we need to make sure we keep our eyes fixed on his son. We keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and we put our trust in, that is, we exercise our faith in him.

Because faith is trust. Faith is the outworking of trust. I trust God for who he is. I trust God that he's great. I trust God that he's almighty, all-powerful, that he's who he says he is.

And therefore, I put my faith in him that he will bring me through these situations and circumstances. That he will be with me and guide me in and through these circumstances. So how do I do that? Well, I start by fixing my eyes on him.

In the midst of turmoil, trouble, hardship, even sickness. We need to choose to fix our eyes on Jesus.

And as we do that, we go wherever he takes us. Now, for some of us, that may mean a scattering. [10:12] That may mean we have to go somewhere else. Maybe literally God is moving some people on. That's okay. God's in control. It's heartbreaking. We never want people to be going on.

But sometimes that happens. God's in control. Sometimes it may not be a physical moving on. It may be something else that has to happen as a result of what's going on.

Maybe it's just, yeah, okay, I'll go on this journey with God, whatever this journey looks like. It may be a journey of sickness and illness resulting in being in hospital a lot.

Having treatments and having to go through all sorts of, I know, chemo or whatever it may well be, the treatment might be. I will go that journey with God. I'm not going to run away from him.

He will come with me. I choose to go where he's taking me. I surrender myself to him. And I would suggest to us all that all of this, how we respond when there's persecution, trouble, hardship, goes back to can I see God for who he is?

[11:17] Can I trust him with the big picture? Can I trust him? Is he really God? Or is he just the one that I want to do various things but when it gets hard, no, no, that's not right.

Can I trust God? Can you trust God? In the circumstances you're in at this moment in time, can you trust God?

I trust you, Lord. I trust you, Lord. I trust you, Lord. Wherever you take me, I trust you.

I trust you, Lord. I trust you, Lord. Whatever's going on, I fix my eyes on you. I trust you, Lord.

I trust you, Lord. I trust you, Lord. I choose to put my trust in you and you alone. I trust you, Lord.

[12:42] I trust you, Lord. You are the great I am. Today, for some of us, we need to make that choice.

I trust you, God. Whatever you're going through, I'm just putting my trust in you. I look up to you, God. I see you. and I put my trust in you. We'll move on in the rest of the passage.

The other thing that seems to happen as the church persecuted and scattered is this. The kingdom of God advances. The kingdom of God advances.

Chapter 8, I only read 4 to verse 8, but you could read right the way through that passage. If you've got time later on today, you may want to do that.

What happens? Well, first of all, we told in chapter 8, verse 4, they preached the word wherever they went. How can I preach the word in my circumstances?

[14:05] What's the equivalence of that for us today? Well, it may just be we need to preach the word to ourselves, remind ourselves to feed on the word. But it may also be that we need to share the word with others wherever we go.

Wherever you take me, Lord, wherever you're going in my journey, in my life, I'm going to trust you, and I am going to share about the fact that you're good. You're a loving God. Tell you what, if we're not feeding on it ourselves, we're unlikely to share the word with anyone else.

That's why feeding on it is so important. They did signs and wonders. Lots and lots of signs and wonders happen. People get healed. People get set free from demonic spirits, we're told.

Ooh. Many paralytics and cripples are healed. That's why there's great joy in the city. Disciples are made.

If you read on it from verse 9 onwards, you see that people get baptized, baptized immortal. That's a sign of discipleship. They go on in their journey with God. They press on in the purposes of God.

[15:10] We've got the story there of Simon the sorcerer. I didn't read it at the time. You can go away and read it later on. The sorcerer or a magician, probably a Gnostic, that's somebody who thought they could find God in diverse spiritual experiences.

It was all a bit airy-fairy and up there, rather than a real relationship with God, and he ends up getting saved, and then gets baptized. And they do it all in the power of God's Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is essential. As we look to reach out, to step out in faith, just because he reminds us who God is.

He draws us to him. He draws us to knowing that we've got a loving, heavenly Father. He fills us with power. Thank you, Steve, for that encouragement. Take the gifts of the Spirit with me.

Yes. Please, amen. Please pray for that again and again for my trip. But actually, that's for all of us. It's not just for me. We all need to be filled with the Spirit. We all need to go on being filled with the Spirit.

[16:12] Paul encourages us to do just that in Ephesians 5. The Holy Spirit is a free gift for all of us to receive. For what purpose? For why? Well, one, so we know our Father in heaven, and two, so we have his power to express that hope which he's put in us, to reach out to those he's put around us.

And then finally, darkness. Darkness is exposed and dealt with. In the story of Simon, we find that he thinks he can buy the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And something of the darkness of his heart and his background is exposed and challenged to the core. As we said before, the result is this.

Great joy in the city. God's kingdom comes. In the midst of trouble or hardship, of persecution, God's kingdom can come.

How does it happen when we start by giving ourselves to him, fixing our eyes on him, by trusting him, not giving way to fear? Those things I mentioned in the first point. And so, friends, this is the life we're called to.

[17:21] And I would like to suggest to us we all need a mindset shift. And when I say we all need a mindset shift, I include myself in this. Three things.

Whatever our circumstances, let's rejoice. Let's find our delight in God. Let him be all that we need. Wherever I go or I'm sent, God's in control.

Therefore, I can trust him. And whenever, at every opportunity, let's seek to bring God's kingdom. Let's seek to bring the good news of the kingdom of God. The good news of salvation. The good news of reconciliation with almighty God. The good news of sins forgiven. The good news of people being healed.

Of people being set free. Of darkness being exposed and got rid of. And people coming to know and enjoy the goodness of God. And we do this in the power of God's spirit.

[18:24] And so I want to invite you now, if you'd like to do that, if you'd like to say, yes, I'm up for this, Lord. I don't know what it looks like quite. And help me to work it out. But if you're up for this, can I invite you to stand at this point?

Because I want to pray for a fresh filling of God's Holy Spirit for each and every one of us who want to respond. Amen. Chris Paris came forward earlier in our worship, saying his power is here.

God's power is here. He had that word about the power pack. Now, why don't you open up your arms? Hold out your hands. We're going to say, come Holy Spirit.

Come Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit and fill me afresh. More of you in my life, Lord. More of your Holy Spirit in my life, please, Lord.

You repeat these things. Come receive more of the Spirit of God. He's here and he loves to fill us. We don't need to worry whether he will fill us. He loves to come and fill his people.

[19:41] Now receive the Spirit of God. God's Holy Spirit is just coming on different people, just as we're standing here. He wants to come. For some, he's going to bring peace, and he's going to still fear, and he's going to still anxiety.

Just as you let go of them now, if you're in that place where you've been struggling with fear and anxiety, as you let go of them, God's Spirit is going to come and deposit his peace in your heart.

The peace of God which passes all understanding.

It's inexpressible. Receive the peace of God. Receive the peace of God. Let him come and calm your heart.

God's in control. God's in control. It's okay. I can trust him.

Receive more of the Spirit. You can have more, Lord. I'd like more, please.

[20:44] He loves to give more. Don't hold back. More of your Spirit, please, God. For each and every one of my friends standing here now. Come, Spirit of God, fill us afresh.

Now you may think, what's that look like? Well, it may be just peace. It may, though, be that you're finding him speaking to you about who he is. He's wanting to put, to stir truth in our hearts, to remind us that he's trustworthy.

Just allow him to do that. For others, he's stirring compassion in our heart. In fact, he's stirring compassion in our heart for those who don't yet know him.

For the lost. People who we see in our regular lives. Who are lost and needy and hurting. Needy and hurting. And he's giving us faith to step out.

To express the love of God to them. For some of us, he's stirring afresh those gifts of his Spirit.

[22 : 10] Gifts which we've not used for a long time. Words of knowledge, prophecy. Words of wisdom. Gifts of faith. Gifts of healing. Tongues.

Tongues. Interpretation of tongues. He's stirring faith in our hearts to step out. So, Lord, we ask, continue to fill us with your Spirit. And as you fill us with your Spirit, help us to see what you're doing.

In and through the world which you've put us in. Which is around us. In and through our circumstances. Give us courage and faith to walk by your Spirit. That you would be glorified. That your kingdom would come. Your will would be done. In and through each of us. We give ourselves to you. In Jesus' most precious name.

Amen. Now, let's keep receiving. But if we have the band back, we're going to head back into a time of worship. And further response to God. And just keep receiving. You don't need to rush on at this point.

[23 : 17] Just keep enjoying God. He's here. By His Spirit. Touching hearts. For some, just sensing this. Some are feeling quite tearful. And you think, oh, why am I feeling tearful? That can often happen when God's Spirit comes.

It's like, oh, wow. It's just overwhelming. He loves me. My Father in Heaven loves me. And He's given me this gift. So keep receiving. Even as we head back into worship.

Please, Ben. Thank you.