

The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

***“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it –
but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”***

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Text

Acts 8:1-8

Topic

Saul observes that whether the Christians he persecutes live or die they do it as unto the Lord

Title

Live & Let's Die

Acts 8:1 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.

Acts 8:2 And devout men carried Stephen *to his burial*, and made great lamentation over him.

Acts 8:3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing *them* to prison.

Acts 8:4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

Acts 8:5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.

Acts 8:6 And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.

Acts 8:7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.

Acts 8:8 And there was great joy in that city.

Introduction

Compare Jerusalem and Samaria:

1. In Jerusalem believers were being persecuted and put into prison and there was **great lamentation**.
2. In Samaria Gospel preaching was making new believers who were being set free from the prison of disease and demons and **there was great joy in that city**.

The man responsible was Saul. He's mentioned in verse fifty-eight of chapter seven and then twice in the verses we read. He will be dramatically converted to Christianity in chapter nine. We know him better by his Greek name, Paul, and by his Christian office, an apostle.

While consenting to Stephen's death by stoning and spearheading the persecution against Christians, Saul got to observe firsthand believers at their best. No matter what he did to them they remained true to Jesus. Whether they lived or died they did it to the glory of the Lord.

These early observations may have influenced Paul when he wrote to the Church at Rome:

Romans 14:8 For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

These early observations may have influenced him, too, when he wrote to the Church at Philippi:

Philippians 1:21 For to me, to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain.

Paul had seen the power of these words before he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to put them on parchment.

We need to see them, too, in the dying and living of these first Christians. If they could live and die to Jesus Christ then we can (and should) as well.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Can Die Daily To The Lord, and #2 You Can Live Dynamically To The Lord.

#1 You Can Die Daily To The Lord (v1-3)

Acts 8:1 should be read with Acts 1:8 in mind:

Acts 1:8 But 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."

The apostles had been accused of having filled Jerusalem with their teaching (5:28). It was time for the good news about Jesus to spread to the next phase and go to **all Judea and Samaria**.

It's been said that the apostles were slow to obey the Lord. It's an armchair observation to say that Jesus had to send the persecution of Acts 8:1 in order to get them to obey Acts 1:8.

I don't feel that way; I don't like that way of thinking. These were bold, fearless men who followed the leading of the Lord. The fact that persecution was the inspiration to take the Gospel further is nothing to criticize. It simply reminds us that God will use anything and everything that touches your life to accomplish His purposes.

It's better to see the persecution that scattered the Church as an example of the wrath of man being used to praise God. The more Saul stomped on the fire of Christianity seeking to put it out, the farther its burning embers flew to ignite other fires.

Acts 8:1 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.

Saul was born in Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 22:3), a **Hebrew of the Hebrews** (see Second Corinthians 11:22; Philippians 3:5), the **son of a Pharisee** (Acts 23:6), and a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37; 22:25-28). He was educated in Jerusalem by Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and became a devoted Pharisee (Acts 26:4-5; Philippians 3:5). Measured by the Law, his life was blameless (Philippians 3:6). He was one of the most

promising young Pharisees in Jerusalem, well on his way to becoming a great leader for the Jewish faith (Galatians 1:14).

Saul's zeal for the Law was displayed most vividly in his persecution of the church (Galatians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:6).

From a human vantage point you'd say the believers had to flee Jerusalem. Luke describes them as being **scattered**. It can be translated *sown* or *distributed* and is used of a sower with seed. Jesus was sowing them as seed into the world He came to save.

You, too, should see yourself as having been sown by Jesus right where you are. It may not be on account of persecution; the Lord has many means to lead you. The important thing is to grow and bear fruit right where you are today.

We're also told in verse one that the **apostles** remained in Jerusalem. Why? It was God's leading for them to remain. It was God's will. We need no further speculation.

Acts 8:2 And devout men carried Stephen *to his burial*, and made great lamentation over him.

The **devout men** were probably Jews who felt that Stephen's stoning was a horrible injustice. I say that because his funeral follows the Jewish tradition of making **great lamentation** over the dead. Christians are to sorrow when a believer dies but not as those who are without hope.

Stephen set the tone when he peacefully committed his spirit to Jesus while being pelted with stones. Saul, looking on, saw firsthand the power of the words he would later write, **whether we live or die we are the Lord's and to live is Christ, but to die is gain**.

The Jews were lamenting Stephen's death. Really they ought to have been lamenting for themselves! Their leaders had rejected and killed their Messiah and the world's Savior. They had rejected and were killing the ambassadors of their Messiah and the world's Savior. It would not fare well with them as a nation in the long run. Soon it would be they who were being scattered throughout the entire world.

Not to evangelize it but to suffer God's discipline for nearly two thousand years until He would regather them to their promised land in the end times.

Acts 8:3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing *them* to prison.

The word **havoc** describes the activity of a wild beast tearing into its prey. This was a brutal and very physical persecution. Families were separated; lives were shattered.

How do you think the believers reacted? Every indication is that they modeled the same quiet grace in living that Stephen did in dying. For them to live was Christ and, so, they lived unto the Lord.

The treatment of these early believers is a reminder to us that we die daily to ourselves as we walk with the Lord. Our lives no longer belong to us. Jesus has bought us out from slavery to sin and death. He has set us free spiritually. We are strangers and pilgrims in a foreign land on our way home to Heaven. Along the way we die a little more each day in our discipleship. We bear our Cross as Jesus bore His.

The Lord may choose to bless us or He may determine that some sort of buffetings would best serve us. Our part is to learn in whatever situation we are in to be content – whether we are abounding or being abased.

You have been sown right where you are. Live there by dying to yourself and living for Jesus.

Which brings us to our second point,

#2 You Can Live Dynamically To The Lord (v4-8)

Seeds appear dead but they are not. Back in 2002 botanists were excited when five-hundred year old lotus seeds from a Chinese lakebed sprouted.

The believers appeared dead from the world's perspective. All the things we normally associate with a good life had been taken from them – family, friends, career, possessions, and even their sense of belonging. But they contained life that would sprout.

Acts 8:4 Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

Preaching the word is an accurate description but too formal. What they did was simply talk about Jesus and introduce Him to the people they encountered. Yes they were preaching the word but it was a natural consequence of their own intimacy with the risen Lord.

Acts 8:5 Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.

Some of you contacted me this week to let me know that archaeologists had found King Herod's tomb. *Thank you!* It was good timing because Herod was responsible for rebuilding **Samaria**.

Second Kings seventeen gives the account of the Assyrian invasion of Israel in 721BC when the ten northern tribes of Israel were carried into captivity before the Assyrians claimed the northern part of Israel. As they moved into the area the Assyrians married the impoverished Jews who were left behind and a half-breed race was produced known as the Samaritans. The Jews in the south looked down on the Samaritans calling them half-breeds and dogs and went out of their way to avoid any contact with them. For their part the Samaritans built a rival temple at Mount Gerizim and had their own rituals and rites for worshipping God.

It was no small thing that Philip preached Christ to Samaritans. It speaks volumes about the radical changes the Gospel brings to a person's life at the most fundamental levels. If you are still holding on to prejudices and biases then you'd better repent of them!

Acts 8:6 And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.

Acts 8:7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.

Stephen was described as performing wonders and signs among the people (6:8). Now you see Philip doing the same. Stephen and Philip were not apostles. They were ordinary every day believers whom God chose to empower with these abilities. Instead of arguing that God does not want to do these things today, let's just go forth preaching the word and see what follows.

Philip preached the word. I wonder if, as an introduction, he discussed the Lord's visit to the well and the conversation Jesus had with the woman there. Or maybe Philip talked about the two apostles who once wanted to call fire down from Heaven upon the Samaritans but for Jesus. Or maybe he related to them the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

He met them where they were at.

Jesus set the Samaritans free from disease and demons. He did it then; He can do it now; He is doing it now in some parts of the world. Our part is to bring the Word to people. Signs and wonders follow as the Lord sees fit.

Acts 8:8 And there was great joy in that city.

Of course there was! You might be happy in this life, and even be able to sustain happiness for life. But you cannot have **joy** without being born-again. Joy is, by definition, a fruit of the Holy Spirit indwelling you.

Sometimes, as Christians, we act as if nonbelievers are unhappy. *They are not!* But they are ultimately unfulfilled. Human beings were created to have fellowship with God. Without it they are incomplete and fall short of the satisfaction possible to them.

Tragically their falling short in this life is nothing compared to what is coming. It is appointed to men once to die and then comes judgment.

Philip represents an average, every day, ordinary Christian. He got saved. He walked with the Lord and it qualified him to be chosen to serve tables. He continued to walk with Jesus and found himself scattered by persecution to a region he previously would have

avoided at all costs. Realizing it was the Lord Himself who had sown him there, Philip served them with the Word. Jesus chose to accompany it with signs and wonders and multiple conversions.

You get the idea that Philip would have learned to be content even if the harvest was small. Or even if instead of a harvest there was a havoc!

Philip and Stephen were essentially the same. It could have been Philip who had been the first martyr and Stephen the first missionary. For both of them to live was Christ; therefore to die would be gain. Both of them died daily to sin and self as pilgrims and strangers journeying homeward to Heaven.

They lived dynamically. They were baptized with and went on being filled with God the Holy Spirit.

So should we live dynamically. We need first to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and then to go on being filled with Him.

Jesus said you would **receive** the baptism with the Holy Spirit. It's an unconditional promise. The apostle Paul commands you to go on being filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). If it can be commanded, it must be conditional. It is thus a different experience, or relationship, with the Holy Spirit than the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Here is what I believe is taught in Scripture. There is a one-time baptism with the Holy Spirit that is available to every believer. All believers are also commanded to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and to go on being filled, as they yield to His influence and cooperate with His work in their lives.

You are baptized with the Holy Spirit when, sometime in your Christian walk, you realize and then receive, by faith, that God the Holy Spirit has empowered you to **be witnesses.**

It may not sound like much to simply *realize* and *receive* this understanding but it makes all the difference in how you approach life. For example: Do you really believe that you have been sown by

the Lord right where you are at? Perhaps you do. But it's been my experience that many believers do not have that assessment. They are in a marriage or a job or a suffering that they try everything to escape. In the case of a marriage they go so far as to sin by procuring nonbiblical divorces.

A person baptized with the Holy Spirit realizes and receives that Jesus has empowered them to be His witnesses right there where He has sown them. **He** is their concern, *not themselves!*

Is Jesus your main concern at home? At work? In your life generally? If not then ask to be baptized with the Holy Spirit so you will realize you are empowered to serve Him right where you are.

Then spend time with Jesus, and especially with His Word, and go on being filled with the Holy Spirit to produce fruit.



