

May 2, 2021 by Steve Brandon



Persecution Spreads the Gospel

Acts 8:1-8

1. Persecution (verses 1-3)

2. Preaching (verses 4-8)

On February 21, 1952, two young men from America set out from the United States to Ecuador, with the purpose of evangelizing the unreached tribes that lived there in Ecuador. After a few years working with the Quechua Indians, they prepared to reach the Waodani people, a people who for centuries had killed all strangers that encountered their tribe. In Ecuador, these missionaries joined up with a few of their friends, to reach these people. Perhaps you have heard of these five friends: Roger Youderian Pete Fleming, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, and Ed McCully.

These five friends initially began contact with this tribe by flying deep into the Ecuadorian rainforest in the fall of 1955. They lowered down gifts in a bucket from the plane by hovering the plane in a circle. They did this every week for 13 weeks. They were trying to show love and peace to this tribe that was renowned for their violence toward outsiders. They seemed to get across their message of good will, as the tribe returned gifts of their own in the bucket.

On January 3, 1956, they landed the plane on Palm Beach, about 5 miles from the main Waodani territory. They set up camp, waiting for an encounter with the tribe. This encounter came three days later, when a young man and two women appeared on the opposite side of the river. The missionaries encouraged these people to come over and enjoy some food and lemonade together, which they did! The missionaries also gave them a model plane as a gift. Not much conversation took place because of the language barrier. But, the man showed interest in the aircraft. So, Nate Saint, the pilot, gave him a ride in the plane, that he thoroughly enjoyed. They flew over the main Waodani settlement, and the man leaned out of the plane and wildly waved and shouted to his people from the plane! The natives soon returned to the forest and to their homes. The next day, the five returned in their plane to their homes, thrilled that contact with the Waodani had finally been made.

Ed McCully wrote in his journal, "January 6. This is a great day for the advance of the gospel of Christ in Ecuador."

Two days later, on Sunday, January 8th, 1956, the missionaries, landed the plane on the same beach. They waited for another encounter. But this encounter wasn't so friendly. They missionaries were met by a crowd of men, who attacked them with spears. and killed all five of them, right there on the beach. They threw their bodies into the river. and returned home. [\[1\]](#)

It was a great tragedy. Five missionaries had come on a mission of love, only to be killed by a tribe filled with hatred toward them. But, as is so often the case in God's economy, that these tribal people meant for evil, God meant for good (Genesis 50:20). When the missionaries went missing, Christian radio stations back in the States began to tell of the story: "Christian missionaries reaching out to a violent tribe in Ecuador missing; feared dead." Churches gathered to pray for these missionaries. The following day, four of their bodies were found by the United States Air Force Air Rescue Service, who came in with a helicopter to the site of the murders. They recovered four of the bodies. The fifth had disappeared into the river. Churches across the nation mourned the death of these five missionaries.

When Life magazine heard about what happened, and just a few days after the tragedy, sent world renown photojournalist Cornell Capa to Ecuador document the story. Within a month of their death, they published a 10-page spread in Life Magazine. [\[2\]](#) The headline reads: "Go Ye and Preach the Gospel: Five Do and Die." The article quotes Jim Elliot as saying, "Our orders are: the Gospel to every creature." The article quotes Jim Elliot's journal from five years earlier: "When it comes time to die, make sure all you have to do is die."

This issue of Life magazine brought to national attention what happened in Ecuador. The result was a revived interest in missions. Untold numbers of young people rose up to give their lives for the sake of Christ in foreign lands. The tragedy of the events in Ecuador were the catalyst for many missionaries to go out into the world, giving their life for Christ.

Listen to what Elizabeth Elliot wrote in her book, "Through Gates of Splendor," "To the world at large this was a sad waste of five young lives. But God has His plan and purpose in all things. There were those whose lives were changed by what happened on Palm Beach." She then gives a sample list of those whose lives were changed because of the events. Here are a few:

"An Air Force Major stationed in England, with many hours of jet flying, immediately began making plans to join the Missionary Aviation Fellowship."

"In Des Moines, Iowa, an eighteen-year-old boy prayed for a week in his room, then announced to his parents: 'I'm turning my life over completely to the Lord. I want to try to take the place of one of those five.'" [\[3\]](#)

My guess is that the full number of those who went out as missionaries as a result of the sacrifice of these five men is in the thousands. And the number is not yet complete, for the writings of Jim and Elizabeth Elliot are still being read today. and young people are being prompted to give their lives to Christ.

Well, this morning, as we dig into the Bible, we have a tragic event that is the catalyst for the first missionary movement in the church. The event was the death of Stephen. Here's the title of my message this morning: "Persecution Spreads the Gospel." My text is Acts, chapter 8 and verses 1-8.

Before we read it, let me set the context. Stephen was a young, Spirit-filled, zealous believer, who was preaching the gospel to those in Jerusalem. But they didn't like the words that Stephen was saying. So they stoned him to death. Chapter 7 ends with his death: "he fell asleep" (Acts 7:60). Chapter 8 picks up on this death:

Acts 8:1-8

And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.

This passage breaks nicely in half. The first half deals the reality of the persecution that the first century church faced. The second half deals with the results of the persecution: the gospel was spreading. So, let's look at our first point:

1. Persecution (verses 1-3)

First off, we see Saul mentioned in verse 1.

Acts 8:1a

And Saul approved of his execution.

He "approved" of Stephen's execution. That is, he was "in agreement with" those who executed Stephen. Some translations seek to make this word a bit more intensive. The New American Standard translates this, "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death." That is, Saul was cheering them on.

For some reason, it looks as if Saul, himself, wasn't involved in throwing stones himself. We see him in chapter 7 and verse 58, keeping charge of the garments of those who were stoning Stephen. Though it seems as if he wasn't one of those doing the throwing. perhaps that's because he was a "young man" at the time. too young to be involved.

I remember when I was a senior in high school, I was on the varsity basketball team. and my younger brother was in the 8th grade. He was too young to play with us on the team. He wasn't even in high school yet. But he could cheer us on. In fact, he was our ball-boy that year. He would get the balls for us. He would pass them out to us for warmups. He would gather them together when we were done. He was a bit like an equipment manager. He even traveled on the team bus with us. No one cheered louder for our team than my brother did. But he couldn't play, because he was too young.

I think that's what Saul was. He was sort-of like the equipment manager. Who took care of the uniforms, and cheered everyone else on. I would not doubt that he let out loud cheers when one of the stones being thrown at Stephen scored a direct hit! Proverbs 10:23 says that "doing wickedness is like sport to a fool" (NASB). That was Saul. He loved persecuting the people of God. It was "sport" to him.

He didn't always sit on the bench and cheer. No, he got in the game. This is indicated in verse 3.

Acts 8:3

But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Saul wasn't simply a bystander when it came to persecuting the church. No. He was right there in the midst of it. He was going "house to house" knocking on doors. forcing his way in, breaking down doors if necessary, looking for believers to carry away and bring to prison. to face charges of heresy. So that they might be stoned as Stephen was.

You say, "Why was Saul doing this?" He was a zealous man. He hated the church of Jesus Christ and tried to do everything possible to eliminate it from the face of the earth. But, of course, it wasn't possible. Because the believers scattered. And Saul wasn't able to corral all of them in. Like marbles that are spilled upon the floor, you can't possibly gather all of them in.

But continuing on in verse 1 we see that ...

Acts 8:1b

There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem,

"That day" referred to the day when Stephen was stoned to death. It was a day that marked a turning point in the life of the church forever. Those in the early church never forgot that day. Stephen was one of the brightest, young, promising leaders of the early church. He was a bold and knowledgeable preacher. cut down in the prime of life. That's why verse 2 mentions the grief over his death.

Acts 8:2

Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.

This is always the response when young people of promise die. For those of you who are old enough, you might remember Keith Green, He was a passionate and gifted worship leader. He was stirring young people to serve the Lord with their lives. But he died in a plane crash in 1982 at the age of 28. It was a tragedy, because he was doing so much good for the kingdom. Likewise with Stephen. It only makes sense that there was "great lamentation over him." The day of his death was never forgotten.

There are various days in the life of our country that we can never forget. December 7, 1941 is forever remembered as the attack on Pearl Harbor. On that day, the United States was drawn into World War II. September 11, 2001 is forever remembered for the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. On that day, the United States was drawn into a war on terror. And the day when the stoning of Stephen took place, the church was drawn into a time of persecution. No, the church was drawn into a time of "great persecution."

It's not that the church was never persecuted before this. Do you remember when Peter and John were brought before the religious counsel, asking them why they were preaching? And then, told not to preach in the name of Jesus? And then, whipped and flogged for preaching the saving grace of Jesus Christ? Do you remember that? That was persecution, but when they start killing you, well, then, they are playing for keeps. And Luke calls it a "great persecution." And forever the church would remember that day, The day when they were scattered.

Acts 8:1c

They were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

This was only the natural response to persecution. When Jesus sent out his first apostles to preach the good news of the kingdom, he said, "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next" (Matthew 10:23). And that's exactly what these people in Jerusalem did. They persecuted them in that town, and so, they fled to the next.

This is the wise thing to do. Proverbs 27:12 says, "The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it." Those who were in Jerusalem were facing the danger of being stoned. And they were simply being wise. They were hiding themselves. They were fleeing.

Now, notice who fled. It says in verse 1 that "they were all scattered except the apostles." This is a bit of a surprise. Typically, when persecution takes place, it is the leaders of the organization who are in most danger. Because, they are the most visible. And the efforts of the persecutors is best focused upon them.

You get the leader of the organization, and the people will disperse. and the threat will calm down. This is how it always is. During days of persecution, it's the pastors who are captured and thrown in jail. It was Peter and John, the preachers in the early church, who were arrested and brought in for questioning. We will see later in the book of Acts, that Saul will flee the persecution that comes upon him. "When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to [him]. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket" (Acts 9:23-25) so that Saul could flee. But that's not the case here. The apostles didn't flee. They remained. The people scattered.

Now, Luke mentions that "they were all scattered except the apostles" (verse 1). Some take this to mean that every believer in Jerusalem fled the city that day. And there were only 12 believers left in the city, the apostles. That would mean ten thousand (or more) migrating out of the city in a day, a sizable portion of the city. And that may be the case. But I doubt it. The logistics of that is very difficult to understand. And, verse 3 doesn't make much sense at all. How could Saul enter "house after house" and drag off believers to prison, if all the believers were out of the city. So, I don't think here that "all" means every last believer. But I do think that "all" carries some weight. But it certainly means that a large chunk of them left. But not the apostles.

The apostles remained in Jerusalem. Certainly, they remained to continue their ministry to strengthen those in Jerusalem. Perhaps they had flashbacks to when Jesus ascended into heaven. The believers in those days were small in number. It was the apostles, and about a hundred others, who gathered there in the upper room in chapter 1, when they chose Matthias to replace Judas. They were small, but they were a tight group. I'm sure that those who remained in Jerusalem were a tight-knit group as well. Their lives were in danger. and they turned to one another for support. I'm sure that they were a strong group of people as well.

Now, notice where the people scattered. They scattered "throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles" (Acts 8:1). It only makes sense. If you are in Jerusalem, where are you going to go? You are going to spread out to wherever is closest. And these regions were the closest. Judea was just to the south of Jerusalem. Samaria was just to the north of Jerusalem.

Do these names(Judea and Samaria) ring a bell? They should. Because, they are mentioned in the key verse of the book of Acts, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Indeed, that's exactly what happened. These believers went out as witnesses of Jesus.

Acts 8:4

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

This brings us to our second point, We have seen the "Persecution (verses 1-3)." And now, we see what it produces. It produces ...

2. Preaching (verses 4-8)

Acts 8:4

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

This is where you see the title of my message come to light. "Persecution Spreads the Gospel." In this case in the book of Acts, we see the believers scattered. And as they are scattering, they are spreading the gospel to new places.

You can only imagine the conversations that were going on with those who fled. They would flee to a town and be recognized as a stranger. And they might have someone say, "What brings you to this part of the woods?" And the easy response is this: "I'm fleeing for my life!" "How so?" might come the response. And then, the gospel would flow freely.

"I'm from Jerusalem. I was content in my religion. I loved the temple and the sacrifices. I love the law. But there was a day when a man named Jesus came into town. He was a religious leader. He claimed to be the Messiah, but the religious leaders were not having it. They put him to death. They crucified him! Can you believe it?

But here's the thing: he rose from the dead. Everyone else who I have seen crucified has died, and stayed dead. But not this Jesus. He rose from the dead. He appeared to his disciples. And they have filled Jerusalem with their teaching about Jesus.

They said that Jesus is the fulfillment of Psalm 16, that the Messiah would raise from the dead. They said that Jesus is the stone that was rejected by the builders, but has become the corner stone. They said there is salvation in no one else, but the name of Jesus. And I have come to believe it! I have come believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of my sins. He is the one that all the prophets spoke of.

There are thousands who have come to faith in Jesus in Jerusalem. The community has been incredible to experience. I have never experienced such love before. All was going well. But just recently, one of our own, Stephen, a godly, spirit-filled man, was just stoned to death by the counsel. And Stephen was just the first. They were going door-to-door, looking for other believers. My life was in danger, lest I should be found.

So, I left Jerusalem for my own safety. But it's all worth it! Jesus gave himself for me. I have given all to Jesus. I will never deny him. I will press on until my final day."

That's the sort of witnessing opportunities that must have taken place throughout all Judea and Samaria. Did you notice, who exactly it was who was doing this preaching? It wasn't the apostles. They remained in Jerusalem. It was your average, typical believer.

Acts 8:4

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

This is really a call to all of us to be doing the same. The book of Acts is calling not just pastors to preach the word, but all believers are called to preach the word., including you, if you are, indeed, a believer in Jesus Christ. You say, "But I'm not trained!" Well, Jesus simply calls us to "Be My Witness." Just speak whatever you know, Just speak whatever you have experienced. Simply tell others of what you know. This is what a witness on the witness stand is called to do, to share what he has seen and heard.

So, speak to others of your experiences with Jesus. Tell others how you have trusted in Christ for forgiveness of sins. Tell others of what you read in the Bible this morning. Tell others of the thoughts of Jesus that fill your mind. You don't need to be the expert. You don't need to have all the answers. You just need to be willing.

You don't have to be a philosophy major to be able to know and refute every argument that comes your way. Just because you don't know the answer to the objections of others, doesn't mean that Jesus isn't real, and that your faith isn't true. In John, chapter 9, the blind man refuted all the learning of the Pharisees, not with sophisticated arguments, but with his own testimony. They accused Jesus of being a sinner. The man replied, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (John 9:24).

That argument was too much for them. They could not argue against him. Not because he had all the answers. But because he had faith, and was willing to open his mouth. And God will use you, if you are but willing to open your mouth. Acts 8:4 Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

Now, in verse 5, we are introduced to Philip. And throughout the rest of chapter 8, we will hear much about Philip and his evangelistic ministry. Like Stephen, he was one of the seven chosen to serve the widows (Acts 6:5). He too, was "full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:4). We see this in his preaching ministry.

Acts 8:5

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.

You say, "What did Philip preach to the people of Samaria?" He preached to them "The Christ." That is, Jesus, the Messiah, the anointed one." He certainly said similar things that the apostles said, "What God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled [in Jesus]" (Acts 3:18). "To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believe in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43). The people were captivated with his preaching!

Acts 8:6-7

And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

Now, remember, Philip was preaching this in Samaria. They were primed. Do you remember the story of Jesus in Samaria? It's told in John, chapter 4. Jesus and his disciples were traveling north, from Judea to Galilee. Along the way, they passed through Samaria. When they reached Jacob's well in Sychar, Jesus was tired. So, he sat by the well (John 4:5-6). His disciples went into the city to buy food (verse 8). And Jesus encountered a woman, who had come alone to draw water. It was obvious to Jesus what sort of woman this was. In the course of

conversation, Jesus exposed her sin. And Jesus revealed himself to be the Messiah for the first time! This woman was astonished, and returned to the city, bearing witness of Jesus, "He told me all that I ever did!" (John 4:39). And the Samaritans went out to see Jesus. And they came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. They professed their faith in him to the woman, "We know that this is indeed the Savior of the world" (John 4:42).

Here comes Philip into that setting in Samaria. And he proclaims to them the Christ! Like Stephen, (Acts 6:8) he too had the gift of healing. He was casting out demons. He was healing the lame. The people of Samaria were ready to receive the message. And the people believed. In verse 12, it says that they believed Philip. And then, we see in verse 8, the fruit of belief: joy.

Acts 8:8

So there was much joy in that city.

Joy and the gospel always go together. Believing in Jesus, and receiving forgiveness of sin. Brings joy to the heart! In this case, joy came to the entire city. Because there were many in Samaria who had believed in the gospel. Think about the joy that we could bring to Rockford! Do you know this joy?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 2, 2021 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Here are some sources I used to gather the details of this story: <https://www.maf-uk.org/story/how-five-martyrs-transformed-the-waodani-people-of-ecuador> and <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/they-were-no-fools-60-years-ago-today-the-martyrdom-of-jim-elliott-and-four-other-missionaries/>.

[2] The magazine is archived here: https://issuu.com/mafuk/docs/life_mag_-_jan_1956_-_five_do_and_d/1.

[3] Elizabeth Elliot, Through Gates of Splendor, pp. 248, 253.