

“God Has an Eternally Satisfying Plan for Your Life”

Acts 8:1-8

If someone had come along 18 months ago and said to you that within a year and a half a world wide pandemic would occur, that we may have to have a special vaccinated passport to travel to around the world, that we wouldn't be able to meet in person to worship and that churches in our own country would be burned, you would have told them to have their head examined! Yet here we are.

There has been an increased hostility towards God and those who identify as the people of God in the last year. While Covid #'s come down and vaccines increase, we long for a return to 'normal'. But that might be gone. And we think this is all bad because our idea of a normal life means a peaceful and comfortable life – if we're honest. That's what we want. That's our plan for our life. We want a life of ease and comfort and security (and maybe a little prosperity). I'm talking about us, believers.

But our life is God's life. He saved us to serve Him and others, especially with the gospel. Paul said in 2 Cor. 5:14-15

¹⁴For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

And a few verses earlier he reminded us that we will have to give an account of our life to Jesus as to how we used it. *⁹So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

But as we'll see from these 8 verses in Acts 8, living out God's purposes will bring us an eternally more satisfying life than the comfort and ease we yearn for. We'll have all eternity for that.

Last week we heard Stephen defend the false charges against him, confronting the religious leaders themselves with idolizing the temple and Moses instead of actually worshipping God and believing what Moses said about Jesus. Unrepentant people react with anger towards those who point out their sins and here we see them stone Stephen to death. And the result?

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

And our initial reaction to this is usually negative. Why are we being attacked for trying to help people know Jesus? No one enjoys persecution, however, sometimes there's a need for it because

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God Uses Persecution to Grab our Attention **(8:1-8)**

Back in Ch. 1:7, when the disciples asked Jesus if He was going to restore the kingdom to Israel Jesus said

It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The disciples were thinking of power, as in overpowering the Romans now that Jesus has the power over death! What’s stopping them now! That was the plan they were thinking. Jesus said ‘I will give you power, but power from the Spirit to make you my witnesses. To share my love, forgiveness and resurrection power, in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and ends of the earth. So far the gospel had done very well in Jerusalem and had spread a little outside that area because Jewish people had travelled to Jerusalem for holy days and went back home sharing the gospel. But the church itself had not really ventured beyond Jerusalem. So, God uses persecution to grab theirs and our attention,

When we become complacent (1:8; 6:10; 11:19)

Why does a church not get involved in outreach the way God wants us to? Common reasons are lack of resources, lack of people to serve, not teaching the truth of God’s Word – those are common excuses why churches don’t reach out. Was there a lack of resources in the Jerusalem church? No, we saw in Ch. 4 that whenever a need arose someone sold land or property and they met the needs, including Greek speaking widows in Ch. 6. And there were lots of people. At least 5000 men were saved and they didn’t have a hard time finding 7 godly new leaders. Were they preaching the truth? Absolutely. So this was a good church. But even good churches with healthy resources and faithfulness to the Word can become complacent in not reaching beyond their walls with the gospel. They were reaching people because they came to them but God wanted them to go out from Jerusalem and reach people they didn’t know or didn’t want to know. So God uses persecution to shake us out of our complacency so we accomplish the task that He’s already equipped us for to reach the lost beyond our community.

And we know God is ultimately behind this because Stephen clearly spoke Spirit-led words. Someone might have been tempted to suggest at the annual meeting that had Stephen toned down his speech perhaps the church would not have been in so much trouble. But God led this. We see this in Acts 11:19 too:

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

When the gospel spread out from Jerusalem people got saved! Isn’t that what Jesus said would happen? Absolutely. When we are faithful to Jesus’ command to share Him with others, His Spirit will empower us and some will be saved.

There’s another way God uses persecution to grab our attention. Persecution separates the wheat from the chaff and in persecution God invites us

To stand up for Christ (v.2)

V.2, which says ² *Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him*, may not seem to be important but it is very important when you understand the Jewish culture. First, Jewish laws and traditions forbade anyone from grieving over a criminal. These Jewish godly men disobeyed their rabbis traditions and “*mourned deeply*” for Stephen. In doing so they also publicly showed their

disapproval and rejection of the Sanhedrin's decision to stone Stephen. Also, sometimes criminals did not receive a proper burial and were tossed in a common grave with other criminals. Again, these godly men honoured Stephen with a proper burial. As well, if Saul would go from house to house hunting down believers in Jesus, these men just made it easy for Saul to identify them.

Persecution is a call for the believer to stand up and identify his or herself. Am I truly a disciple of Jesus? Will I identify myself with Jesus knowing I may be hurt physically, or verbally?

But ultimately, God uses persecution to

Accomplish His plan for our life (8:1, 4)

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria ...⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

The gospel wasn't really going further into Judea nor was it going to Samaria, as Jesus said it should. The church wasn't doing it before. Now due to persecution it was. And let's commend the church for sharing the gospel as they scattered to other places. And even then it may have been indirectly. They move to a new place, people ask where did you come from? Jerusalem. Why did you move here? Well ... and then they risked telling their story because (as we'll see in Ch.9) persecution was following them.

All this is part of God's plan for us too. The command to make disciples in Matt. 28:19-20 and the promise of Holy Spirit empowering disciples for witnessing wasn't just for them. This is God's plan for you and me. We read earlier in 2 Cor. 5

¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

If our plan for our life is to find ease and comfort and 'retire' from serving God, think again. If we're saved and are making no effort to live our life for others and are only interested in our own plan of comfort for our life, then God will not let that happen. He has a greater and far-more satisfying plan for you and me.

God allows persecution and oppression of gospel-believers to advance the gospel. Persecution makes us count the cost, stand up and identify with Jesus and continue His plan to reach the world. Persecution also has other God-sized purposes; it helps us to

Pray that God's Adversaries become God's Advocates (8:1, 3)

Only one individual is mentioned by name as being obsessed with destroying believers; Saul. We read in v.1

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. ...³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Who was Saul? We know from Acts and his own writings, Saul was part of the Sanhedrin. A Pharisee trained under Gamaliel, Saul approved of the death of Stephen. He was adamantly opposed

to the teachings of Jesus and claims about His resurrection. But, you and I know the rest of his story, how Jesus will save him and lead him to be one of the most powerful witnesses for the gospel, specifically of reaching Gentiles for Jesus.

But here's the thing: if God saved the most violent opponent of the gospel in that day can He not save today's adversaries too? And while our initial reaction might be wanting God to remove them, if we think like Jesus we'll pray for them. And did you know praying for God's enemies,

Conforms us more into the image of Christ (Matt. 5:43-48)

Look at what Jesus said in Matt. 5:43-48

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The context here of being perfect is to act like the Son of the Father. When we pray for our enemies we act like Jesus, who prayed that God would forgive these same type of religious zealots – who blindly thought they were actually doing God's will – when He was being persecuted with crucifixion.

To pray for our enemies is empowering as well as encouraging. Because when Jesus' adversaries give us a hard time, we can inwardly smile and think to ourselves 'If only you knew what I can do for you. That I can call on my God who has the power, if He so chooses, to make you a follower of Jesus Himself. But even if He doesn't, that you can hurt me physically or verbally but that doesn't change my eternal security. And God keeps track of all these things and rewards me and you end up separated from God suffering far worse than what you're causing me.'

This is what bugged the religious leader so much about Jesus; whenever they tried to trip Him up or arrest Him or beat Him and even crucify Him, He never responded with evil back. They could not rattle Him. And when we pray for God's adversaries, once in a while He saves them. And that

Reminds us all of God's grace (1 Tim. 1:12-17)

The fact that you and I sit here as believers in Jesus and not antagonists of Jesus is a reminder to thank God for His grace and mercy. This is what it did for Paul. We read his take on his salvation in 1 Tim. 1:12

¹² I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. ¹³ Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. ¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Paul was saying, 'I didn't know any better. I didn't know I was full of sin. I didn't recognize that I wasn't honouring God in my religious zeal, I was blaspheming God. Until God met me and poured out his grace on me and my eyes were open to see His mercy – that He saved me from eternal punishment and graciously gave me an eternal satisfying purpose, helping others come to know Christ and growing with them in Christ.'

So next time you're annoyed and maybe frightened by one of God's adversaries, pray for them. It calms us, helps us see things from His perspective and empowers us to know we are the one really in control and are eternally secure in God.

The gospel spreads and as Stephen is taken down by man, God raises up a replacement – Philip.

⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city

God empowers Philip through the Spirit to perform signs and wonders to validate the authenticity of the message, much like Jesus' miracles validated His message. And where does he go? Samaria. People who were part Jews and thus despised by the Jews, and who were despised back by the Samaritans. But God joins them together through the gospel. What happens when people respond to the gospel? Joy. When we make sharing Christ the purpose of our life instead of trying to satisfy ourselves with temporal comforts of this world

Expect Your Life to Become Joy-Filled **(8:5-8)**

I want to encourage you to memorize v.4 and 8 together.

⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ... ⁸ So there was great joy in that city

Why was there great joy in a Samaritan city? Because they heard the gospel and it changed their life. They found out that they weren't right with God after all. That they all had sin and separated them from God. That no matter what they tried to live for it never satisfied them. But, that's everyone's problem. No one is different. So God sent Jesus to solve that problem And die on the cross for our sins. And then rising from the dead to assure us that death on earth is not the end, that there is eternal pleasures at God's right hand (Ps. 16:11).

And the joy of seeing people saved can't be beat. It increases our joy. Why? Because we're doing what we're called to do and living now with eternity in mind.

We all get into complacent periods in our life, where sometimes our goal is to get home from work and sit down and do as little as possible. Commercials and advertisements inundate us with luxuries and rewarding vacations (because we deserve it) and 'needing' the next newest gadget or get on the next social media craze that everyone's following [blindly] like Pavlov's dog. While we make temporal plans to do as little as possible and think that's ideal, God says 'How's that going for you? Not as satisfying as you thought, right? You want some joy and purpose in life? Pray for the lost. Pray for opportunities to talk about Jesus. Invest your time, energy and resources in helping God's people be Jesus' witnesses in the places where you're comfortable (Jerusalem and Judea), in places where you're uncomfortable (Samaria) and with people and places you've never met or experienced (the ends of the world).

Jesus said in John 10:10,

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

And Paul explained that in 2 Cor. 5:15

¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

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If you have any comments or questions please contact us at olivet@rideau.net