

## Scattering Joy (Phillip in Samaria)

Acts 8:1-8 on January 24, 2021

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*Please read Acts 8:1-8 before going further in this transcript.*

Before we jump into the message today, I want to tell you about one of the ministries that our church has called “Blankets of Blessing.” The name pretty much describes the ministry: they sew blankets to bless people with. About a week and a half ago, I was walking through our Fellowship Hall and I noticed a DISTURBING sight: one of the ladies from our church was sewing a blanket with a VIKINGS logo on it! Well, I couldn’t just let that slide, so of course, I expressed my genuine concern. They knew I was teasing, and we all had a good laugh. This past Friday two of the women who serve in the Blankets of Blessing ministry stopped by my office. As they handed me a gift bag, they were both smiling. I thought, oh no, what are they up to. But, as it turns out, they brought me a peace offering, not a blanket of blessing, but rather a pillow of blessing: a beautiful Packers pillow! Although, one of them did say that I may need to use it for a cry pillow after today’s playoff game with the Buccaneers.

Well, this message is NOT about football! The message is on “Scattering Joy,” specifically the joy of the gospel. Today’s text ENDS with joy, but it certainly doesn’t BEGIN with joy. Acts 8:1 says, “...On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” “Scattered”<sup>1</sup> is an interesting word choice. It almost makes it sound like someone literally picked up the people from the Early Church and scattered them, like we’d scatter salt on an icy walkway. Like they themselves, had NO CHOICE in the matter; like they HAD to leave Jerusalem. However, clearly the apostles chose to STAY in Jerusalem. So did the other believers really need to “SCATTER”?

Today’s text shows us that there were two opposite responses to persecution in the Early Church. The 1<sup>st</sup> response was 1) Standing for the faith, staying/suffering persecution. The 2<sup>nd</sup> response was 2) Scattering from persecution and spreading the faith to other places. Stephen, the 1<sup>st</sup> Christian martyr, is an example of someone who stood/suffered for His faith in Jesus. The apostles also stayed/suffered, although they weren’t killed for their faith. Not yet at least.<sup>2</sup> Philip is an example of someone who scattered, and then spread His faith to other places. So, does this make Philip a chicken? Did he sin when he ran away from persecution, when he decided not to stay/stand for his faith? Or, is it POSSIBLE, that Stephen/Philip BOTH did what God wanted them to do?<sup>3</sup> That 1 was called by God to STAND and 1 was sent by God to SCATTER? According to the opening verses of Acts 8, God used Philip mightily. Philip preached the word wherever he went. Not only did he proclaim Christ, but he also performed miraculous healings in Jesus’ name, and he also cast out demons. Acts 8:8 concludes that Philip’s ministry brought GREAT JOY. Therefore, we might find ourselves hard-pressed to call him a chicken, or to insist that his decision to run away from persecution, was a sin.<sup>4</sup>

Please turn in your Bible to Acts 8:1. It begins, “And Saul approved of their killing him [Stephen]. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”<sup>5</sup> Stoning Stephen to death did not resolve the brewing conflict between the Jewish leadership and the Early Church. In fact, much to the opposite, Stephen’s martyrdom only stirred up the conflict. It set in motion an OUTBREAK of great

<sup>1</sup> διασπαίρω = “of scattered communities...of Christians Ac 8:1, 4; 11:19.” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 236). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. “to cause a group or gathering to disperse or scatter, with possible emphasis on the distributive nature of the scattering (that is to say, each going in a different direction)—“to scatter, to cause to disperse.” (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 199). New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>2</sup> See Acts 12:1-3, where the Apostle James is put to death about 10 years after the events of Acts 8. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1848 footnote on Acts 12:2.

<sup>3</sup> In Acts 22:17-21, the Apostle Paul records that, during a time of prayer, the Lord told him to “Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me” and then “Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.”

<sup>4</sup> Contrast this with Hebrews 11:35b.

<sup>5</sup> “For the apostles to stay in Jerusalem would be an encouragement to those in prison.” Therefore, obviously the believers in prison didn’t leave Jerusalem, excepts perhaps if they were released. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1838 footnote on Acts 8:1.

persecution against the church in Jerusalem. A key thing to notice here, is that the persecution wasn't just against Stephen, or just against the apostles and whatever other church leaders there may have been. This persecution was against the entire church movement.<sup>6</sup> In other words, even the lay people were getting dragged off and thrown in prison. Acts 8:3 explains, "But Saul began to DESTROY the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison." Things are well beyond the confines of the temple now. Christians are being hunted down; and if "hunted down" sounds a little overdramatic, consider this, Acts 8:3 doesn't use the word "destroy" lightly.<sup>7</sup> The *ESV* translates it "Saul was ravaging the church." The *NKJV* says "he made havoc of the church." Saul is not just trying to quiet them down or put up a little resistance, he wants to DESTROY the church. Just one chapter later Saul is described as, "...breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples..." (Acts 9:1) There is an almost animal ferocity to his rage and attacks.<sup>8</sup> Saul wanted to tear the church apart!

Later in his life, Paul reflects back in Acts 26:9-11, "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even HUNTED THEM DOWN in foreign cities." You see, Paul may NOT have personally killed Stephen or personally killed ANY of the Christ-followers, but his involvement in the persecution of Christians, and his vote cast against them, certainly contributed to many of their deaths. John Stott puts it this way: "Saul of Tarsus had blood on his hands."<sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> Paul didn't just go after Stephen and the other leaders though, and he didn't just go after the men, Acts 8:3 makes it clear that the women were also dragged off and thrown into prison.<sup>11</sup> The entire church was at risk, so pretty much the entire church took off; they got OUT of Jerusalem. Except for the apostles, the church SCATTERED!

However, we soon discover that in God's wonderful, providential way, He is actually working out His good purposes for the church because...

**1. Persecution resulted in Christ-followers scattering the message about Jesus wherever they went.** Acts 8:4 tells us, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." As it turns out, "The gospel advances, despite - even because of -the persecution."<sup>12</sup> Leaving Jerusalem in a hurry, simply meant spreading the gospel message more quickly. Verse 1 clarifies that all of them "were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria." So God uses this scattering as part of His strategy for spreading the Gospel. This scattering moves forward the fulfillment of Jesus' prophetic words back in Acts 1:8, "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."

MAP: So, if we look at our map, at the end of this transcript, that orange arrow points to Jerusalem. The blue arrows point to Judea/Samaria. Judea was the region surrounding Jerusalem. Samaria was the region just north of Judea. One author points out: "What seemed a disaster, the scattering of the church, has resulted in a successful mission that was not the result of human planning... Sometimes God, puts us in places, we do not plan on, to further his work."<sup>13</sup> Think about that, "**Sometimes God, puts us in places, WE do not plan on, to further HIS work.**"<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The church in Jerusalem was the Church, because, at this point in history, the Church really hadn't spread much beyond the confines of Jerusalem.

<sup>7</sup> Destroy = "λυμαίνω...to cause harm to, injure, damage, spoil, ruin, destroy." Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 604). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>8</sup> In Acts 8:3, "The Greek underlying this phrase sometimes describes the ravages of wild animals." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1839 footnote on Acts 8:3.

<sup>9</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 145.

<sup>10</sup> Paul was obsessed with persecuting the church, because he was obsessed with opposing the name of Jesus. This attack on the church wasn't just about the church, it was about the NAME of JESUS! Jesus actually speaks to Saul in Acts 9:4-5, "...Saul, Saul, why do you persecute ME?" "Who are you..." Saul asked. "**I am Jesus**, whom you are persecuting."

<sup>11</sup> See Acts 22:4.

<sup>12</sup> *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2232 footnote on Acts 8:4.

<sup>13</sup> Quoting in part from Johnson, Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 321.

<sup>14</sup> Let's think about this idea of "scattering" a little more. Back in Acts 5, the Sanhedrin was FURIOUS with the apostles. In fact, they were SO furious, that they were ready to put them to death! But a Pharisee named Gamaliel talks them out of it, by sharing two examples from history. Each example is about a group of people who followed a particular leader, but once that leader was killed, the group scattered and came to nothing. The idea being, I suppose, that since Jesus had now been killed, this group of believers in the Early Church, would likely come to nothing. In Acts 5:36-39, Gamaliel

One of the Christ-followers who was scattered was named Philip. We've actually met Philip before, back in Acts 6, when we met Stephen. You see, Philip was 1 of the 7 Deacons/Servants; he worked right alongside of Stephen, making sure that the Hellenistic Jewish widows got their daily distribution of food. Therefore, Philip was likely deeply impacted by Stephen's death. (Perhaps you could imagine serving on a board or committee with someone from church and then suddenly they are stoned to death.) He was likely one of the people in Acts 8:2 who "mourned deeply for him." He may have even been one of the godly men who buried Stephen.<sup>15</sup> Be that as it may, the persecution against the church in Jerusalem caused Philip to scatter north, to Samaria.

**2. Philip's ministry in Samaria brought great joy to that city.** Acts 8:5 tells us that, "Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there."<sup>16</sup> As we come to the point in time, of Philip's ministry in Samaria, it may cause us to wonder how much the disciples had already been mulling over, this eventual reality. The fact is, Jesus' followers may have been reflecting back on His encounters with the Samaritans, ever since He told them back in Acts 1:8, that THEY would be His witnesses in Samaria. They may have been wondering how Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 was going to jive with Jesus' earlier instructions back in Matthew 10:5, forbidding them to "enter any town of the Samaritans." Or, what about the opposition that they had encountered from the Samaritans back in Luke 9, when James/John offered to "call fire down from heaven to destroy them." (By the way, Jesus did rebuke them for behaving this way.) But it does make one wonder, if ever since Jesus' said that they were going to be His witnesses in Samaria, if the disciples may have been thinking to themselves, "HOW'S THAT gonna work!?"

On the other hand, they may have also been reflecting on the time when Jesus healed 10 men with leprosy, but only 1 of the 10 returned to thank Jesus, "and HE was a Samaritan."<sup>17</sup> And they may have been reflecting on Jesus' "Parable of the GOOD Samaritan," a time when Jesus made the Samaritan the HERO of the story. Jesus' most notable encounter with the Samaritan's though, was probably the "Woman at the Well." To us Gentiles, Philip going to Samaria may just sound like a nice little visit, like a kind thing for him to do. However, the Samaritan woman at the well, was pretty BLUNT with Jesus, in John 4:9 she says, "...Jews do not associate with Samaritans." Later on, she points out one of the key reasons why Jews/Samaritans don't mix. In John 4:20 she says, "Our ancestors worshiped on THIS mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."<sup>18</sup> John Stott offers us a helpful summary of this tension: "It is hard for us to conceive the boldness of the step Philip took in preaching the gospel to Samaritans...hostility between Jews and Samaritans had lasted a thousand years. It began with the breakup of the monarchy...when 10 tribes defected [*north*], making Samaria their capital, and only 2 tribes remained loyal to Jerusalem [*in the south*]. [Eventually] Samaria was captured by Assyria...and the country was re-populated by

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explains, "Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed [or we might say scattered], and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." How incredibly wise and accurate Gamaliel's words turned out to be: "You will only find yourselves fighting against God." You see, even though Jesus was killed, Christianity LASTED. It endured not only the death of Jesus, but also the death of Stephen, and many other martyrs as well. The Church of Jesus Christ was NOT stopped by persecution. It was scattered by persecution, and that very persecution fueled the spread of Christianity. SO convinced, were the followers of Jesus, that they were willing to suffer, to be dragged off and thrown in prison, even to die for their faith. You see, the Gospel of Jesus Christ did NOT "come to nothing" after His death. It was UNSTOPPABLE because it was FROM GOD! Even those who ran away from this persecution, didn't QUIT their faith, they SCATTERED their faith.

<sup>15</sup> It's worth considering Acts 8:2, "Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him." Given that Philip was a godly man, who would have been a close ministry partner with Stephen, it sure seems likely, that Philip was one of the men who gave Stephen a proper Christian burial. When Stephen's remains were honorably laid to rest by his fellow believers, they likely did this at their own risk, since this would publicly identify them with Stephen, who had just been martyred. (John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 145). You see, Jewish tradition allowed for the BURIAL of someone who was executed, BUT it discouraged MOURNING for that person. The mourning mentioned in Acts 2 implies resistance to this unjust killing, and with that resistance, came a considerable risk of retribution (*The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2232 footnote on Acts 8:2). Jewish mourning usually included beating one's chest and weeping; it could last as long as 30-70 days (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 319). This was not a quiet sadness that no one noticed, it was a public mourning. What a stark contrast between the emotions of deep mourning in verse 2 and emotions of destroying the church in verse 3.

<sup>16</sup> Those of you who remember our map, may think that is sounds funny to hear that Philip went DOWN to Samaria. Samaria is north of Jerusalem, so shouldn't Stephen have gone UP to Samaria? The reason for this is that Jerusalem was at a relatively high elevation, with valleys around it. Therefore, people went "DOWN" from Jerusalem.

<sup>17</sup> See Luke 17:11-19, especially verse 16. Also consider, in John 8:48, some Jews actually accused Jesus of being a Samaritan himself. This was either merely a derogatory or a wrong conclusion based on bad information. Jesus did hail from the north, from Galilee, but this was well north of Samaria.

<sup>18</sup> Note John 4:21-24. Also, recall Stephen's comment in Acts 7:48, "the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands."

foreigners. [Later on] the Samaritan schism harden[ed], with the building of their rival temple on Mount Gerizim and their repudiation of all OT Scripture except the Pentateuch [in other words, they only honored the 1<sup>st</sup> 5 books of the OT]. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews as [half-breeds & heretics]....”<sup>19</sup>

It is within THIS Samaritan context, that Philip is proclaiming the Messiah. But we should keep in mind, that the Samaritans also shared the Jewish expectation of watching for the Messiah. In fact, it's the Samaritan Woman at the Well who makes that clear in John 4:25, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” She was EXACTLY on point; BOTH in her own personal experience of talking with Jesus, but also in her foreshadowing of the coming events in Philip's day. The gospel of Jesus Christ has “power to break down ethnic AND religious barriers. (This is just as true for blacks/whites or Anglos/Natives as it was for Jews/Samaritans, as well as for any other groups experiencing racial tension.) The Jews hated the Samaritans as a half-breed race and as heretics, but for Luke they are examples of outsiders for whom the gospel is good news...Here they function as a mediating people between Jews and Gentiles and thus a natural step in the gospel's gradual spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (1:8).”<sup>20</sup>

There had been racial and theological division between the Jews/Samaritans for HUNDREDS of years! BUT, the gospel message had the power to heal this division and create unity in Christ; fixing both the racial/theological division in one fell swoop.<sup>21</sup> Acts 8:8 concludes, “So there was great joy in THAT city.”<sup>22</sup> In that SAMARITAN city. So now, with the benefit of hindsight, we can clearly see how God providentially used Stephen's martyrdom, to promote the church's mission.<sup>23</sup>

So, what does all of this mean for you and me today? Let's respond in at least 2 ways. First of all, **1. Let's all tell at least 1 person about Jesus this week.** Let's be intentional about scattering the Good News about Jesus, wherever we go. Acts 8:4 tells us that, “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”<sup>24</sup> That phrase, “preached the word” may put us off a little; because it kind of makes it sound like this is a job for “professional preachers”; for full-time, paid, trained, vocational pastors/missionaries. But rather than thinking of it this way, we should really think of it more like refugees from a Christian diaspora. As they were fleeing from persecution in their home city of Jerusalem, the lay people in the Early Church shared the Good News about Jesus along the way, wherever they went, in their everyday lives.<sup>25</sup> The fact is, there are numerous examples, all throughout church history, of lay people advancing the gospel's explosive growth and impact.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes, this is due to shortages of trained, vocational ministers, sometimes this is due to ministers being jailed, or intentionally sidelined or removed from certain areas. But, ALL of the time, this is due to God's providential work, through ALL of His people. I appreciate how Pastor Kevin DeYoung says it: “[The gospel] went where ordinary Christians went. When the pastor speaks of Christ, people are not surprised. When anyone else does it, people are AMAZED!”<sup>27</sup> A 2<sup>nd</sup> way that we can respond to today's message is this:

**2. Let's bring joy to at least 1 hurting person this week.** In addition to his message about Jesus, Philip also brought a ministry of miraculous healing and spiritual warfare. Although most of us probably don't have the same gifting that Philip had, we can certainly minister to people's hurts/needs in Jesus' name, and we can certainly pray for them in Jesus' name. Supernatural signs like the ones

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<sup>19</sup> Stott's quote continues... “Jesus' sympathy for them, however, is already apparent [from His earthly ministry]. Now, in Acts 8, Luke is obviously excited by the evangelization of the Samaritans and their incorporation into the Messianic community.” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, pp. 147-148.

<sup>20</sup> *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2232 footnote on Acts 8:4-8.

<sup>21</sup> Before our modern hindsight judges this debate too harshly, let's keep in mind the silly things Christians have argued about and divided over in our own day and age. Divided opinions come quickly/easily among people looking for something to disagree about.

<sup>22</sup> “Luke's Gospel often mentions joy.” See the list of verses in Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 326.

<sup>23</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> “The scattering of the Christians was followed by the scattering of the good seed of the gospel...as they fled, far from going into hiding, or even maintaining a prudential silence, [they] preached the word wherever they went.” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, pp. 145-146.

<sup>25</sup> See John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 146.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/worth-a-thousand-years-of-waiting> or read John R. W. Stott's notes about Communist China in *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 146.

<sup>27</sup> Kevin DeYoung & Chris Ranson, *Acts: A Visual Guide*, Christian Focus Publications, Scotland, 2018, message on Acts 8:1-8.



Philip performed are still possible, but far more often today, God uses the sign of His church: A group of all kinds of different people who love/care for others.<sup>28</sup> Much like Philip's ministry, genuinely caring for people's real/tangible needs, is often the best way to convince people that we have a message worth listening to. We need believers who will go out and be involved in this world! How has God providentially SCATTERED each one of us, to the far reaches of northern Minnesota. Or, from wherever some of us are sitting as we read this transcript or listen to this message online? Last week our livestream went out to over 80 different screens, in at least 6 different states: so WHERE has God scattered YOU today? And, WHAT are His providential plans for YOU to scatter joy while you are there?

Christ-followers in the Early Church, shared Jesus, "WHEREVER they went." Wherever they went to school or work. Wherever they went in their community or world. Wherever they went down south during the cold winter season or on vacation. **Wherever God has sent You, He sent you there for His purposes, for His glory. He scattered you there, so that you could scatter joy there.**



<sup>28</sup> Kevin DeYoung & Chris Ranson, *Acts: A Visual Guide*, Christian Focus Publications, Scotland, 2018, message on Acts 8:1-8.