

July 28, 2013

# *A Gospel Centered Community*

## *Scattering Gospel Seed*

### **Acts 8:1 – 13**

On January 9, 1985, **Pastor Hristo Kulichev**, a Congregational pastor in Bulgaria, was arrested and put in prison. His crime was that he preached in his church even though the state had appointed another man the pastor whom the congregation did not elect. His trial was a mockery of justice. And he was sentenced to eight months imprisonment. During his time in prison he made Christ known every way he could. When he got out he wrote, *"Both prisoners and jailers asked many questions, and it turned out that we had a more fruitful ministry there than we could have expected in church. God was better served by our presence in prison than if we had been free."* (Herbert Schlossberg, *Called to Suffer, Called to Triumph*, p. 230)

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus told His disciples: *"But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for My name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Luke 21:12-13* Jesus tells them beforehand that persecution is coming. He makes it clear that prison awaits. They should expect this. It shouldn't be a surprise. And in telling them, He is telling us the very same thing. In fact you might say that this is the gospel pattern – suffering and persecution result in life and joy. The life and joy comes to people not in spite of persecution and suffering but because of it. The text before us this morning makes it clear that God intends that the suffering and persecution of His church be the very means through which His people spread the truth and joy of Jesus to bless the world. It is not His only means, but it does seem to be a pattern throughout church history.

More than any other book in the Bible, the book of Acts shows us what the church should be about in the world. It show us what the mission of the church is – Taking the gospel to the world. In the first chapter, Jesus gave His disciples the defining mission statement: *"But 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** And for the first seven chapters we've only seen the spread of the gospel in the city of Jerusalem. But all of a sudden there is an explosion of gospel proclamation that sweeps into the bordering regions of **Judea and Samaria**. And the first verse of chapter eight tells us that this explosion happened because of persecution. *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. Acts 8:1* In fact if you look ahead to chapter 11, you can see that the death of Stephen and the ensuing persecution, was really the catalyst for the beginning of the worldwide spread of the gospel. *"Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews."* **Acts 11:19**

And that tells us first of all that **God is sovereign over persecution and suffering**. In fact, He makes persecution and suffering serve His own purposes. You might say that suffering and persecution are the handmaids of the gospel. They serve the gospel in a way that comfort, ease and prosperity do not. Look at what happened: *"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."* **Acts 8:2-4** Comfort, ease and prosperity are often the source of great inertia in the church. Inertia is the tendency of something that is moving to keep on moving, or conversely, something that is at rest to stay at rest. And through the first seven chapters, the church was content to stay at rest in Jerusalem. And there is no denying that great things were happening there in Jerusalem. But God was interested in those things happening in the rest of the world as well. And they didn't seem to be going beyond the walls.

So along comes a man named Stephen, and a man named Saul. And we see Saul holding the robes of those stoning Stephen and as the NASB puts it – giving hearty approval to those who were killing him. And then Saul goes on a rampage against the church – going into the believer's homes, dragging them out and putting them in prison.

Which caused great concern and a rush to get away from the city. But it also resulted in widespread proclamation of the gospel. What initially looks like setbacks and defeat from a human perspective is really the means God uses to position His church for a much greater advance and more magnificent display of His wisdom and power and love. When the Communists won the day in China in 1949, they quickly outlawed Christian churches and missions and missionaries, thinking they would purge China from the 'running dogs of imperialism' and the poisonous message of Christianity. But when the bamboo curtain went up on that country some 25 years later, instead of killing the church, the world discovered that it had grown from some seven million to over 70 million under persecution.

And what is so interesting about this is that the apostles apparently stayed in Jerusalem. That's what verse one told us. Now there may be some very good reasons for this, such as the guys who were really hot against the church were from the Hellenistic Jewish congregations as we found out in the last chapter – and since the apostles were Hebraic Jews, perhaps the persecution didn't really impact their living situation as much as the Hellenistic Jewish Christians. And we know that all the believers in Jerusalem didn't leave, there were upwards of an estimated 15,000 in Jerusalem at this time – but many did. But it took persecution to rouse them out of their gospel inertia. One commentator put it like this: *'Apparently when the Christians were altogether under the powerful and gifted leadership of the apostles, they had been fairly passive. They had simply brought their friends to hear the great preaching...but when they were scattered, away from their leaders, they gathered up the courage to communicate themselves what they had learned'.*

And in the end they were ten thousand times more effective than 12 apostles. Because it is not the job of the leaders in the church to bear the main responsibility of sharing the gospel in the world. Your leaders are given to you by God to, as Ephesians four tells us, 'Equip the saints for the work of ministry'. The real responsibility for every member of the Christian church is to scatter gospel seed widely, lavishly, promiscuously. And so Luke tells us that they were scattered like seed into Judea and Samaria, and they went preaching about preaching the word. Notice Luke does not tell us that there were strategy sessions to decide who to send and where they should go and how they ought to go about this. He just says they were scattered and in their scattering they spread the gospel. It fell from their lips as normal conversation. Evidently the gospel was their passion because Luke doesn't talk about their work situation or living arrangements or anything. They went preaching.

Which should tell us something about the main focus of our lives as believers. Unless we understand that we were redeemed in order that we might be a blessing to the nations, we have missed our calling. Man was created perfect, lacking in nothing, blessed with everything, enjoying intimate fellowship with His Creator and ruling over the world. And then sin entered the picture and he lost everything. But God in His mercy did not leave us to our fate but provided a way back to Him – back to fellowship, back to blessing, and His instructions to those who have tasted the joys of redemption and restoration is to bring the good news to everyone we can. That's why Luke doesn't talk about other stuff – instead he just says: ***those who were scattered went about preaching the word.***

And we see how they did it through four things, four characteristics of scattering gospel seed. They proclaimed the word; they had accompanying works; they built community; and they preached peace. Four things – word, works, community, peace, or more specifically here, racial reconciliation. That was the spontaneous strategy of those who were scattered. Word, works, community, peace. **First of all Word: *Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. Acts 8:5, 12*** And then down in verse 12 it says he: *preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.* So the first thing about scattering gospel seed is the word. There was proclamation, there was preaching, there was content – a body of truth. I'm sure many of you have heard that famous phrase supposedly uttered by St. Francis of Assisi: ***'Preach the gospel at all times – if necessary use words'***. First of all, there is absolutely no evidence he or any other Franciscan ever said this. And secondly, it's impossible to preach the gospel without words. The gospel is inherently verbal, and preaching the gospel is inherently verbal behavior. ***'How will they hear without a preacher?'***

You cannot just simply try to live righteously, do good deeds for others, live humbly and serve sacrificially – and hope someone notices and attributes that to God. You have to tell somebody. You have to open your mouth and proclaim the good news. You have to live righteously – you must serve sacrificially, but you absolutely have to tell somebody.

St Francis himself spent a great deal of time using words when he preached. And as one of his biographer's wrote, *"sometimes preaching in up to five villages a day, often outdoors. In the country, Francis often spoke from a bale of straw or a granary doorway. In town, he would climb on a box or up steps in a public building. He preached to . . . any who gathered to hear the strange but fiery little preacher from Assisi."* He was sometimes so animated and passionate in his delivery that "his feet moved as if he were dancing." Mark Galli, senior managing editor at *Christianity Today*, who wrote a great little book on Francis as well as a brief article on the myth of this quote, explains that Francis was quite a preacher, actually more along the lines of Jonathan Edwards or Billy Sunday than most of those who misquote him would like to think. Galli quotes another biography of St Francis: *His words were neither hollow nor ridiculous, but filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, penetrating the marrow of the heart, so that listeners were turned to great amazement.*

Secondly, the word those who were scattered proclaimed was fleshed out in **works**. *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. Acts 8:6-7* Now I don't want you to focus on the miraculous first of all. We'll get to that in a minute. Look at what happened. They were preaching the good news of the gospel, and they were ministering to both the spiritual needs and the physical needs of the people. It is easy for us in this country to sort of discount demonic activity and we attribute the ills in society to logical, scientific causes. It is difficult for a rational thinking society to account for demons. But we dare not discount or minimize demonic activity in the culture around us. Do we have a lot of dysfunction and disease and death due as a result of sin in the world? Absolutely! But we cannot forget that there are demonic powers at work in the world as well. And Jesus came to a world plagued by demons and battered by disease and brutalized by death, to proclaim that He is Lord over demons and disease and death.

I appreciate that Luke doesn't see a demon behind every sickness or trouble; but neither does he dismiss demonic causes altogether. There were unclean spirits, crying out and coming out of many, the text says. There were many people in Samaria who were under the power and influence of demons. And Philip dealt with them. I remember meeting Carlos Anacondia of Argentina and hearing him tell stories of his crusades there and all the demonic activity that was stirred up by the gospel. He told about one crusade he held that seemed to draw more than the usual opposition from the cults and the Catholic church in the city. And as they opened the crusade, the local Catholic parish held a march in protest around the stadium where Carlos was speaking, carrying a large statue of their patron saint and the Virgin Mary on a platform carried on the shoulders of several men. And as this procession of hundreds of people came into view of the open gates to this stadium, where Carlos was preaching, an invisible powerful force, like a mini-hurricane, blew out of the stadium and lifted those images off the shoulders of those men and smashed them against the building across the street. Which effectively ended the protest.

Those who were scattered recognized the need for ministry to the spiritual and the physical needs of people. People were delivered of demons – and people were being healed. And the result was that people were paying attention to the message. If we only preach the gospel, and yet never do anything to minister to peoples spiritual and physical needs, they're not going to hear the message. They paid attention because they heard the preaching **and** they saw the works. If we only preach but never show compassion, we might as well go home. Peter told his readers in his second letter: *Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. 2 Peter 2:12* We must by all means preach the gospel – **and** we must exhibit gospel works. **If we only preach and never do, they won't hear us. But if we only do but never preach, they won't glorify God.** When the city sees us pouring out in ministry to the hurting and the poor, and when they see peoples lives being incredibly transformed spiritually and physically, then they'll listen to what we have to say.

One more thing this tells us is that when we preach the gospel, we should expect the miraculous; understanding that the miracles are not **the point**, but only serve **to point** to the miracle maker – Jesus. We should expect demons to flee at the name of Jesus; we should expect people to be delivered from Satan's power in dramatic ways; we should expect the paralyzed and the lame to be healed. The gospel is the **power of God** and the power of God is not limited to the salvation of souls. The story of the gospel is one of creation, fall, redemption and restoration, and we shouldn't be surprised when God restores full use of limbs to a paralytic and heals lame people to walk again.

Neither should we be discouraged when they all are not healed. Jesus told the unbelieving crowd in Nazareth: *'...there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.'* **Luke 4:27** God is sovereign over all sickness and all healing. And we should expect Him to demonstrate His authority and preach this and pray for this because our God is not powerless to save and to heal.

Gospel proclamation is accompanied by gospel works which brings **gospel community**. *But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.* Acts 8:12 Notice that everyone who believes gets baptized. Nobody just believes. They believe and they are baptized. Why? Well there are a lot of good reasons for this, but the ultimate one is that it is the command of Scripture. When you believe, you get baptized. There is all kinds of symbolism in baptism that we won't get into in this sermon, being baptized into Jesus death and raised from the waters of death to resurrection life, baptized into one body, baptized into Christ, and so forth. But what baptism does is identify you as a member of this redeemed community. On the day of Pentecost, three thousand believe and the Scriptures tell us, they were added that day to the church.

Baptism is not a private thing, it is public. Baptism is not individual it is communal. In baptism you're making a promise and a commitment – you're saying to God and to those in the community, and to the unseen angels and demons, that Jesus is Lord of your life now and you are going to follow Him wherever He leads. You're identifying with Jesus Himself, with the others who are being baptized; and that means you are now part of that community of people who have also made that stand; and you hold each other accountable and encourage and support one another. Baptism doesn't save you – in fact we'll take up that case next week with Simon the Magician. But nobody just believes and lives an individual Christian life – 'Just me and Jesus'. They believe and are baptized and come into community with other believers.

Gospel proclamation is accompanied by gospel works which builds gospel community which brings **gospel peace**. Specifically here we are talking about racial reconciliation. In Ephesians, Paul calls the gospel, the gospel of peace. And it means that through the gospel, we not only have peace with God, but peace with one another. The gospel is the only thing that can cut through our prejudice and bias and bring wholeness and peace to people who are separated by ethnic and social and cultural distinctions. One of the reasons perhaps that the gospel had not gone out from Jerusalem to Samaria was because of the long history of racial prejudice the Jews had against the Samaritans. **Samaria** is directly north of Judea, and if a Jew had reason to go from Jerusalem to say, Galilee, a straight line would lead him through Samaria. But Jews would never do that. Instead they would go around through Perea and into Galilee. To venture into Samaritan country would defile a Jew. Jew's hated the Samaritans – and for the most part the feeling was mutual. There was incredible racial hatred between the two groups.

And yet, these believers are pushed out of their comfort zone by persecution, and they start scattering gospel seed in Samaria. This was unthinkable at that time. Samaritans to the Jews were no better than pigs – unclean. And don't forget that these Christians were first of all Jews. Redeemed Jews, but nonetheless Jews who had been taught from infancy that Samaritans were to be avoided at all costs. That's why the Samaritan woman of John chapter four was so astounded that Jesus would even speak to her. But through the lens of the gospel, *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* Galatians 3:28 And if you think about it, there is not much to choose between the so-called races. We're all made of dirt. There's white dirt, red dirt, yellow dirt, brown dirt, black dirt, but it's still dirt. We would think it was weird if we saw one clump of dirt refusing to interact with another clump of dirt just because it's another color. Or one clump of dirt telling another clump of dirt "I'm better than you are." **The gospel destroys racial prejudice and brings gospel peace.** When the world sees people who would otherwise never have anything in common, loving each other and caring for each other, that's when they sit up and pay attention.

A black man and a white man were driving down the road, debating the topic of whether Jesus was black or white. On and on they went. Back and forth. "He was white" says the white guy, "because he was Jewish, and the Shroud of Turin confirms that he was Caucasian." "No he was black." says the black man. "Noah's descendants settled in Ethiopia, and the lineage of Jesus is from there." The two men were so busy arguing, they weren't watching the road and slammed into a semi, and both of them were killed. Immediately the two men wake up to find themselves with Jesus, who says, "**Buenos Días, Senors!**"



What happens then, when the church is scattered, spreading gospel seed to the nations? Verse 8 tells us: *So there was much joy in that city.* **Acts 8:8** Gospel proclamation accompanied by gospel works creating gospel community bringing gospel peace, **produces gospel joy**. There was much joy in that city. Luke doesn't say the believers were filled with joy – that's a given. Suffering and persecution work in the believer's life to send them into the world to scatter gospel seed that fills them with joy unspeakable and full of glory as Peter puts it in his first letter. But here Luke says that there was much joy in that city. Why? What did the city have to be joyful over? One clue is in Proverbs 11 that says '*When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices...*' Proverbs 11:10 Because the gospel message brings healing and restoration in its wake; because spiritual strongholds are broken by its proclamation; because people are healed and lives are radically transformed by its message – the city cannot help but be filled with joy. Good News! Good News!

And I think we need as a church to ask ourselves, if things are going well with us, if we as a church are prospering, how can things go well with us in such a way that the whole city looks at Summit and says, 'We don't necessarily believe what you believe, but we're glad you're here. You're a blessing to this place'. The only way that happens is to be scattering gospel seed in word, work, community and peace. Samaria didn't have joy until the Christians were scattered. And that must have been hard. It is not easy being torn from your home and thrust into a foreign environment. But until they were scattered, there was no life or joy for Samaria. You might say that this is the gospel pattern – suffering and persecution result in life and joy. The life and joy comes to people not in spite of persecution and suffering but because of it. God grant that we would be scattered as gospel seed not only in our neighborhoods and in this city but in the nations.

*Heavenly Father, gracious God,*

*Your main plan and the end of Your will is to make Christ glorious and worshiped and beloved in heaven above and on earth below. And to that end You make all things serve Your purpose and plan, both joy and blessing, persecution and suffering. Nothing falls outside the boundaries of Your care and intention that Christ be magnified in our lives through the gospel. As those who have been rescued from destruction and filled with everlasting joy, let us be scattered as gospel seed in the world to proclaim with our lips and demonstrate through our deeds the immeasurable worth of Christ Jesus our Lord. May we be a community of faith that sows gospel peace and produces gospel joy in our neighborhoods and in our city and in the world, we pray in the precious name of Jesus our Savior, Amen.*