



CHURCH SCATTERED (July 10)

(ACTS 8)

INTRO

Have you ever had one of those sweet and sour lollies? You know the ones I mean, you pop one into your mouth and it starts off incredibly sour, but you persist and you soon break through the sourness into the sweet centre.

Well, this passage in Acts 8 starts off sour but ends up sweet. In fact, it ends up being incredibly inspiring and encouraging, but it starts off very disappointing and even disturbing.

And in order to explain why it's so initially disappointing and disturbing, I have to take you back to Acts 1.

In Acts 1, we are told of the final instructions that Jesus gave his followers immediately before his ascension back into heaven. He said to them,



“Return to Jerusalem and wait for the gift my Father promised ... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:4,8)

Matthew, at the end of his gospel, records some additional words of Jesus at this time, when he writes, in Matthew 28:20:



Matthew 28:18-20 “Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

So the disciples were to go back to Jerusalem, wait for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and then “Go!”. Go out into all the world, starting with Jerusalem, their immediate city, then Judea and Samaria, which is their local area, then to the ends of the earth – the whole world! Pretty simple instructions, you'd think. Wait for a little bit, and then GO!

But did they go? Let's follow the story in Acts.



In Acts Chapter 2, we read of the Holy Spirit coming upon them as Jesus predicted. Peter then preaches a cracker of a sermon and 3,000 people are converted! Pretty impressive! And later on in that chapter we read of the vibrant church that was founded in Jerusalem. I preached on that passage a few weeks ago, but let me remind you what it says.



Acts 2:42-47 “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people.”

Great things are happening! This church is Spirit-filled, they are enjoying wonderful teaching and wonderful fellowship, and you can sense that they are about to burst out of Jerusalem and take the gospel to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus had commanded them to. Right? But do they?

No. They don't. Not in any significant way. In Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, the Christians remain in Jerusalem. And there is no historical evidence of any missionary activity by them beyond the walls of their city.



It's not until Acts 8, that the church is finally FORCED to leave Jerusalem when a great persecution broke out against the Christians. A prominent Christian in the Jerusalem church named Stephen was killed, and the Jewish authorities started going door to door arresting Christians, so the believers fled the city and finally took the gospel message with them to other cities and towns. Finally, the gospel gets outside Jerusalem.

How long did that take, in real time, from Acts Ch. 1 when they were told to go, to Acts Ch. 8, when they actually went?



The answer is: about 8 years! We know for a fact that it was 8 years, because the Great Dispersion as it is called (this persecution of Christians which caused them to flee from Jerusalem) occurred in AD 35 – we know that from history – and that, as it turns out, is almost roughly 8 years after the resurrection of Jesus and his Great Commission, which we can fairly accurately date to AD 27.

The point is, for 8 long years the Gospel stayed in Jerusalem. And during those 8 years there is no historical evidence that even the smallest church was started up anywhere else in the world, not even in the towns and villages immediately surrounding Jerusalem. Now, obviously there must have been SOME Christian presence in places beyond Jerusalem during those years, because some of those who were converted on the day of Pentecost were visitors to Jerusalem, and they would have returned to their home towns after the religious festival was over. So there would have been a scattering of individual Christians in other places, but the historical record doesn't show any evidence of active churches coming into existence during these 8 years, and certainly no missionary endeavours originating from Jerusalem.

It's only after the Christians in Jerusalem were scattered by this terrible persecution, that we read of deliberate, active missionary endeavour beyond the walls of Jerusalem.

- Philip preaches in the city of Samaria and people are converted and baptised (**vv.4-13**)
- Peter and John hear about what is happening in Samaria and go and visit, and join the preaching, and then also preach in other Samaritan towns and villages on their return journey to Jerusalem (**vv.14-25**)



- Phillip is then prompted to go to the south-west of Jerusalem to preach the gospel to an important Ethiopian travelling on the road to Gaza, who is converted and baptised (**vv.26-39**)
- Finally, the chapter ends with Philip travelling north again, through the coastal towns all the way to Caesarea, preaching the gospel as he goes (**v.40**)

Now, while all of this is very exciting, the disturbing part of the story is that it took about 8 years for the Jerusalem Christians to even take the gospel to their nearby towns. Let me read verses 4 and 8 again:



“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Phillip went to the city of Samaria and proclaimed Christ ... (8) and there was great joy in that city.”

So, finally, after 8 years, the gospel is preached in the city of Samaria. Finally, they get the gospel! And they receive it with great joy! And you tell from this, that the Gospel is brand new news to them, right? Now it's wonderful that they finally get the Gospel. But do you know how far away the city of Samaria was from Jerusalem?



The distance between Jerusalem and the ancient city of Samaria was just 46km! And remember, the Christians in Jerusalem had had 8 years to get that far! And although they did have their religious differences, there was regular trade and commerce between those two cities. And bare in mind, that Samaria had been specifically mentioned by Jesus in the Great Commission as a place he was commanding them to take the Gospel: ***“You are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”***

But, for the first 8 years, the church in Jerusalem kept the gospel to themselves. For 8 years people all over the world were living and dying without the knowledge of Jesus the Saviour, and the Christians in Jerusalem didn't even think to go down the road and tell the people in one of their nearby towns! Forget about going to the ends of the earth – they didn't even make it past the city gates!

GOD'S RESPONSE

So, what did God do about it? He forced them out into the world. Most Bible commentators believe that this persecution that broke out in Jerusalem, recorded for us here in Acts Chapter 8, was ordained by God. For 8 long years God had waited - and finally he got tired of waiting. He lit a stick of dynamite and blasted them out into the world.

And so we read, in verses 1-3:



Acts 8:1-3 “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”

It's difficult for us to envisage the terrible distress that these Christians were under. History tells us that many Christians were put to death. And within a few short days almost the entire church was forced to flee from Jerusalem.



Whole families escaping in the dead of night, gathering together a few meagre possessions, gathering up their children running for their lives under cover of darkness, leaving everything behind; their homes, their businesses, their network of extended family and friends, and fleeing into the night.

It would have been horrific! The children would have been asking their parents, ***“Mummy, Daddy, what's happening?”*** And the parents themselves would have been wondering, ***“Where is God? Why is He allowing this to happen?”***

I WANT TO MAKE THREE VERY BRIEF APPLICATIONS FROM THIS STORY



1. GOD SOMETIMES USES PAINFUL TRIALS TO BRING US BACK TO HIS PURPOSES

For these early Christians it would have been an incredibly painful trial, but the result was incredible good for the kingdom of God.



By the end of that year, AD 35, as a result of this Great Dispersion of Christians, brought about by this persecution, the Gospel had spread North, through Samaria, Judea, Galilee, and south west into Egypt - and dozens and dozens of churches had sprung up in towns and villages right around the Mediterranean.



Romans 8:28 "All things work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose."

Notice the word "purpose". God sometimes uses painful trials, to bring us back to **his** purpose.

Are you going through a painful trial at the moment? Sometimes a whole church can go through a painful trial too, can't it? Have faith. Trust in God's purposes. He often uses painful trials to bring us back to His purposes. Weather the storm, hold onto God, and believe in the good that He will surely bring.

"All things work together for good..." - not just some - all things!

The second important lesson for us from this story is that ...



2. GOD'S PURPOSES ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN OUR PERSONAL COMFORT

The church in Jerusalem was very comfortable. They were happily meeting together. They had wonderful fellowship in one another's homes and in their public meetings, sitting at the feet of the Apostles, soaking up their teaching. And all those lost people out there in the world - they were a long way away, and **"we'll get to them eventually"**.

But God effectively said to them, **"If your comfort is stopping you from fulfilling my purposes, then let's get rid of that comfort for a little while shall we? Let's get that right out of the way."**

It's easy to get comfortable isn't? To put our comfort first. And let's face it, that's how most people in the world live their lives: **"If it's convenient, I'll do it. But if I DON'T feel like it, if it interferes with my comfort and happiness, I WON'T do it."**



But listen to what Jesus says; **(Matt 6:33) "Seek first my kingdom and my righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well."**

It's one of the great paradoxes of being a Christian. The more you seek your own comfort and happiness, the less you'll have of it. But the more you seek God's kingdom, God's purposes first, the more blessed you will be and the more you will experience his deep and abiding joy.

What about you? Are you a Kingdom seeker or are you a comfort seeker?



3. GOD'S PRIMARY PURPOSE FOR THE CHURCH ON EARTH IS TO SEEK AND SAVE THE LOST – TO MAKE DISCIPLES

Jesus said, **"Go into all the world and make disciples ..."**

The church's primary purpose is mission. It's why God has left us on the Earth and hasn't already whisked us up to heaven.

God has a primary purpose for the Bathurst Diocese of the Anglican church. His primary purpose isn't for us to enjoy good fellowship – although it's A purpose. His primary purpose isn't for us to have good worship, to be well organized, to be financially viable, to have successful events – although all of those are good things.



God's primary purpose for our whole diocese and for each parish individually is that we clearly and effectively share the message of Jesus with our local communities and beyond. That we don't keep it to ourselves. That we do everything we can to reach as many people as we can and impact every generation that we can with the good news of Jesus.

You see, when we get to Heaven, God isn't going to ask us, "How did your committee meetings go? How did your fete go? Or your parish council meetings? And were your services well-organised? Did you balance your

budget?” – as worthwhile as all those things are. God’s primary concern will be, ***“How did you go sharing the good news of Jesus with your local community? Were you faithful in sharing Jesus with the world around you?”***

CONCLUSION

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[SKIP]

There’s a book called, The Purpose Driven Life, by Rick Warren, a Baptist Pastor, and I really like the opening paragraph, and I’d like to read those opening words to you, as I conclude this morning:



“It’s not about you. The purpose of your life [and your church] is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your comfort, or even your happiness. It’s far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by His purpose, and called for His purpose.”

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