

Text: Acts 8:1-8

Title: “Unstoppable in the Face of Persecution”

Let's open our Bibles to Acts 8. Over the next several weeks I want to bite off another chunk of the book of Acts. Last Fall I began the series from Acts entitled “Unstoppable ... Living in the Irrepressible Power of the Holy Spirit.” God is on an unstoppable quest. Jesus came, lived, died and rose again to change lives. God is on an unstoppable quest to get this message out. And the mystery of His grace is that He plans to include us in His quest. The Book of Acts shows us how this unstoppable quest of God unfolds through ordinary people who are unstoppable through the power of the Spirit. **Read Acts 8:1-8.**

What we have in the first seven chapters of Acts is the account of the birth of the church in the power of the Holy Spirit. It's the greatest spiritual awakening in history, and at the same time it is the pattern for how the work of God will continue in our day. Acts is not just a description of what God did; it is a proclamation of what God continues to do through us as we live in the irrepressible power of the Spirit.

After His resurrection Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives back to heaven. Before that He instructed His disciples to return to Jerusalem where they were to wait for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit. Ten days later on the Day of Pentecost the believers (about 120 of them) were praying in a house when the room was filled with the sound of a mighty wind. Flames of fire were seen dancing over the heads of the disciples and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. For the first time there is a Spirit-indwelt church. The immediate manifestation of this is that they began to talk about the mighty acts of God in such a miraculous way that people who spoke different languages could still understand them. Jesus had already told them before He ascended back to heaven: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And the first chapters of Acts show how the Spirit empowered the church to be witnesses in Jerusalem. At the preaching of the apostles like Peter, thousands were saved, baptized and added to the church in Jerusalem.

But the unstoppable power of the Holy Spirit was not just evident in their bold witnessing, but also in their incredible love for each other. We're told how they lived life together, lovingly sacrificing and sharing their possessions with one another. And this love coupled with the message of the Gospel resulted in thousands more being saved and added to the church.

All of this, however, takes place in an atmosphere of fierce hostility to the Gospel and the church in Jerusalem. More than once the apostles are arrested, beaten and instructed not to preach anymore. Through it all the church was unstoppable. One of the church leaders was a man named Stephen who preached Christ so boldly and the Jewish authorities hated him so fiercely that they seized him, took him outside the city and stoned him to death. That brings us to Acts 8.

My prayer today is that the Spirit of God will remind us and inspire us as individuals and as a church to take up again the mission of Jesus. It's all about the mission of Jesus. We don't have a church that needs a mission; Jesus has a mission that needs a church. The question is will we be that church?

And just like our spiritual ancestors in Acts we are living out the mission of Jesus in a culture that is increasingly indifferent, if not hostile to Christ. There are three factors that Luke strings together here in showing us how we will be unstoppable.

FACTOR #1 – PERSECUTION (Acts 8:1-3)

Now when you think about all the things that could spark a spiritual awakening you might not include persecution on the list. There are many things that we could list that we think could make a church grow and be strong. Lots of money ... favor with the government ... programs that are appealing to people. But would we include persecution? The fact is that the church has always been at its best when it had the least in terms of power, prestige and prosperity. Persecution makes the church stronger, not weaker.

Acts 8:1a - And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem...

So there was a sudden explosion of persecution against the church. It came on the believers like a sudden storm. Things can change that quickly. The word "persecution" paints the picture of a systematic program to harass and oppress people for what they believe. And notice it is against the church, not just the leaders. Even as Stephen is being buried plans are made to go after the whole church. And the driving personality behind all of this is man named Saul of Tarsus, later to be known as Paul.

Acts 8:3 - But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Imagine the doorbell ringing at your house one day and the police are standing there there asking if you were a follower of Jesus. If yes, off to jail you went. So there was a way that believers were easily identified. People knew their names and where they lived.

QUESTION: Is there anything really different about my life as a Christ-follower? If your friends and neighbors were asked to point out the believers they know, would they point a finger at you. "He's one of them. She's one of them."

QUOTE – Beth Moore wrote a prophetic blog last week. In it she challenges us: "We here in the West have, generally speaking, gotten away with living out our Christianity selfishly, carnally, politically, lazily, and, forgive me and include me, sloppily. We've left it for the professionals to do for us while we've tried to stay buffered on neutral ground. That's not going to work now. Christianity has grown too inconvenient. These are days for sanctification. These

are days to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we each have been called. Let's clear out the cultural camouflage from our closets and go ahead and be willing to look different from the world and love different than the world."

ILLUSTRATION – In 2013 there was a savage terroristic attack on a shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya. As the attack began the terrorists stopped shooting and made an announcement in Swahili: All Muslims could come forward and leave without being harmed. A man named Joshua Hakim happened to be present in the mall when the shooting started and he wanted to escape. But his first name was Joshua (a Christian name) and it would be a clue to the terrorist that he was not Muslim. So he as he walked toward the terrorists Joshua covered over his first name on his ID as he showed it to the terrorists. As I read about that I wondered what I would do if terrorists suddenly showed up at Hulen Mall and started shooting people who wouldn't deny Jesus.

QUESTION: Would I rather take a bullet than deny Jesus? Would I rather take a bullet than for people to think that I'm not serious about Jesus?

So the first factor in the continued expansion of the Gospel is persecution. And the second factor is a result of that...

FACTOR #2 – SCATTERING (Acts 8:1,4,5)

Acts 8:1b - And all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

So most of the believers in Jerusalem were forced to leave the city. You see, Luke recalls that Jesus said that Spirit-empowered witnesses would saturate Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). And now he shows us the way God is going to get them to Judea and Samaria ... through the scattering that will come from persecution. And v.4 says that wherever they were dispersed they preached the Word. Now Luke zeroes in on one of those believers as an example.

Acts 8:5 - Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there.

Philip (like Stephen who had already been killed) wasn't an apostle. He was one of the seven chosen by the church as "deacons." And, like Stephen, he was a powerful witness. So Philip went to Samaria. This is an important detail. Samaritans were hated by Jews and many Christians. Yet this is where Philip went. Why would he go there? Remember Jesus, on His way to Jerusalem, made a stop in Samaria, even in the face of protests from His disciples. A whole city is turned upside down when Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well. I think Philip went to Samaria because he had the heart and the Spirit of Jesus that motivated him to go to these despised people.

QUESTION: Do I possess the heart of Jesus for people who are far from God? Do I love them the way He loves them? Do I see people the way Jesus sees people? Or do I see them through the lens of my own selfish interests?

ILLUSTRATION – Let me just show you, frankly, how I struggle with this myself. I'm embarrassed to say this, but it's true. A few weeks ago I was driving through my neighborhood and I drove past the house of a neighbor who rarely mows his grass. The people who live around him all take care of their yards. But this guy goes weeks without mowing his grass or trimming his hedges. I thought, "Well, I'm going to email the neighborhood association or maybe I'll just leave an anonymous note in his mailbox." Then the Lord slapped me up side the head. I haven't taken the time to walk down the street to meet this guy. I know nothing about his spiritual condition, but I'm all bothered about the fact that he doesn't mow his yard. Am I the only one who struggles like this?

Philip has no hesitation going to these people who, for hundreds of years, have been considered to be scum by the Jews. The bigotry and prejudice had been passed from generation to generation. But it stopped with Philip.

QUESTION: Am I willing to be scattered among people who are far from God?

Now there's another important lesson embedded in this story that we must hear. It took something painful, stressful and dangerous to get Philip to the Samaritans with the Gospel. God does amazing things in the "negative spaces" of life. Let this soak in. Believers are being dragged out of their homes and put in prison ... men and women. People are forced to leave town. But God is doing something amazing through this. And it's all about the mission.

QUESTION: Can I be open to the good things God will bring out of bad places? Some of you are going through bad places right now. You've lost a job. Your health has deteriorated. You've had to make some major changes in your life that you're not excited about making. Can you see the new doors that He is opening and the good that He can bring out of that for His glory?

So what is the good thing that God does out of the scattering? That's the next factor:

FACTOR #3 – EVANGELISM (Acts 8:4-8)

Acts 8:4 - Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

"Preached" is the Gk. word *euangelidzo*. When you see it spelled out it resembles the word "evangelism." It means "to bring good news." So there's Good News (that's the message that Christ came to live, die and be raised from death to make us right with God). And the Good News must be told or proclaimed. And that's what Philip did. Verse 5 says he went down to Samaria and "proclaimed Christ there." So there's a *mission*. And the mission has a *message* that is truly Good News. And the message requires *messengers*. That's evangelism, and that's

our job. In 1951 a former pastor of our church, Dr. C.E. Matthews, wrote a book called *Every Christian's Job*. And that job is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

QUESTION: Am I running from my responsibility to be a witness for Jesus?

The easiest place to hide is at church where we all look, talk and behave alike. We can become like a country club that exists to keep members happy rather than a hospital for broken lives.

QUESTION: Am I willing and able to speak the Gospel to the hard places to hard people?

It's a heart and a head issue. Is my heart willing and is my head able to engage others in conversations about Christ?

Now let's just drill down a little more into Philip's ministry in Samaria. For it wasn't just what Philip *said* that made the difference in that town. It's what he *did* ... how he lived. Acts 8:6-7 tell us Philip performed miracles, even though he wasn't an apostle. The miracles gave credibility to the message. But there's something else the miracles demonstrated ... compassion. The miracles relieved human suffering. And the result was...

Acts 8:8 - So there was great joy in that city.

Philip went to people with the compassion of Jesus and the message of the Gospel, and it brought great joy to the city. Paralyzed and crippled people were healed. Tormented people were delivered. Is there great joy in our city because we are here? Is there great joy in your neighborhood because you live there? In your school? In your office?

QUESTION: Do non-believers around me want what I have in Christ?

Let's just take a look in the mirror. Do people see the peace, love and joy that we have in Jesus and think, "I want what they have." If they sense in us grace and unconditional love ... that we really care ... that we're really interested in their well-being, then, yes, they're more likely to want what we have. But if we give off the smell of self-righteous condemnation and pride then they're not interested. And the sad thing is that they are not really rejecting Jesus ... they're rejecting the way we portray Jesus through our selfish lives. So maybe we have some repenting to do. Maybe today we start over. We walk out of this room with changed hearts.