

God Uses Bad for Good • Acts 8:1-8

Most of us love success. We like it when life goes well, really well. Our favorite team is on a winning streak. Our business is prosperous. Money is piling up. Our health is really good. Relationships are just fine. Life is good!

That's the way it was for the followers of Jesus during the early months of the church of Jesus Christ. They were on a roll. On the day of Pentecost there were 3,000 new followers of Jesus. They came from all around the Mediterranean world. Who would have ever guessed or been able to anticipate that. And every day hundreds more decided to follow Jesus! Within months the Jerusalem church exploded to as many as 15,000 Jewish disciples of the Christ. The church was blessed by God and extremely popular with the people of Jerusalem. So much so that the historian Luke says in Acts 2:47 that they enjoyed *"the favor of all the people."*

Then bad things started to happen. Critics turned into enemies. Leaders of the religious establishment pressed charges against the church leaders. Stephen, one of the most promising of the young leaders of the Christian church, was murdered by a mob. And, a rising protagonist named Saul became the primary persecutor of those who believed in Jesus.

Acts 8:1-8 reports the turning point from good to bad to worse. It happened one specific day, the day Stephen was stoned to death

because of his faith. Stephen died and Saul went wild. Let's read what the Bible has to say:

And Saul was there, giving approval to (Stephen's) death.

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

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a

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

Persecution is terrible stuff. It is often perpetrated by those who truly believe they are right. Religious persecutors are convinced that they are on God's side of the truth. They often decide the threat is so great that any method to accomplish their purpose is justified—including deception, personal attacks and violence.

Persecution is usually inflamed by fear. There is fear that the opponents will spread their beliefs, will undermine the establishment and may eventually take over.

Most of us are prone to identify with those who are being persecuted. We see ourselves as unlikely to attack someone else for their beliefs. But there is probably the potential for persecution in all of us. We fear viewpoints that disagree with our beliefs.

Actually, I have some sympathy for the passion of this persecutor named Saul. I look at Saul and I think that here is someone who was really zealous for God, who really believed that these Christians were a major threat and was

willing to do anything to exterminate them. But I hate what he did in persecuting those whom I consider to be sisters and brothers in Christ. On the day Stephen was murdered, the day when a group of godly Jews buried his body with tears of grief, on that same day, Acts 8:3 says, *"... Saul began to destroy the church."*

Our English translation uses the word "destroy" but actually the Greek word that's used is a whole lot more violent. It is a word that they used in first century Greek to refer to an animal violently attacking another animal and ripping it apart. The mental picture is of a mountain lion or a coyote pouncing on a grazing sheep, tearing through its

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skin with sharp teeth and claws, ripping out organs and muscles. It's a bloody and violent horror. That's the word that is used for what Saul was doing to the Christians.

Saul went from house to house looking for Christians. He had authority from the religious establishment and warrants to arrest and imprison. And, it wasn't just the leaders. It wasn't just men. It was anyone he could seize, men and women alike. Prison was awful. Those who were thrown into prison were given illegal trials, often they were severely beaten and sometimes they were murdered illegally. Saul was out to stop the church of Jesus Christ no matter what it took.

But let me tell you, the church cannot be stopped! Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, ". . . *I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*" "Hades" was their word for death and "gates" referred to the leaders of towns who "sat at the gates"—sort of like the town council today. The Sanhedrin couldn't stop the church. The critics couldn't stop the church. Saul couldn't stop the church. Satan himself cannot stop the church.

The August 28, 2006, issue of TIME magazine had an interesting article which said:

After four failed attempts over a millenium and a half by foreign missionaries to gain a foothold in China, Christianity is finally taking root and evolving into a truly Chinese religion. Estimates vary, but some experts say Christians make up five percent of China's total population, or 65 million believers. And thousands more are converting every day. . . .

It's not that persecution in China does not continue. The TIME article tells about Brother Chow (not his real name):

He is every inch the model of the modern Chinese Christian, a preacher who doubles as a businessman. Despite his pressed jeans, polo shirt and fancy mobile phone, he professes to believe in a deep, ancient faith, one that he says has carried many a Christian through persecution. "Why don't I think it will be a problem? Because as time goes on, the government will get to know the Christian spirit and realize that God exists." He smiles with the secret knowledge of a true believer. "And then," he says, "they will become Christians, too."

All of this is to say that Christians should never be totally surprised by opposition or persecution.

Not that the results are always the same. In extreme cases believers may be martyred like Stephen. In other cases they may be supernaturally delivered. But, in every case, country and century God uses the best and the worst to advance his gospel, to multiply Christians and to grow the church of Jesus Christ.

Okay, so it didn't look good for the first century Christians. Stephen was dead, believers were in jail and large numbers of others had to flee Jerusalem to save their lives. But, that's the whole point of how God operates. He uses bad things for good ends.

When the Christians were run out of town they evangelized wherever they went. They told other people about Jesus. There's an interesting play on numbers in the Bible in the book of Acts. (Of course, the Bible didn't originally have chapter and verse numbers. They were added many centuries after the original writings for reference purposes.) Take a look at the connection between Acts 1:8 and Acts 8:1:

(Jesus said to them,) "*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.*" (Acts 1:8)

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. (Acts 8:1)

The fulfillment of what Jesus predicted was triggered by this persecution. Without persecution they never would have reached out to Judea and Samaria. The persecution caused the scattering which spread them to nearby provinces where they evangelized and Jesus' words were fulfilled.

Judea is relatively easy to understand. It was the district surrounding Jerusalem. The people there were Jews pretty much like the Jews in the city of Jerusalem. They looked the same, talked the same and believed the same. But Samaria was a huge jump. It's hard to comprehend the magnitude of Jewish Christians going to Samaria.

To understand this, we need a quick history lesson. More than 1,000 years before Jesus, the nation of Israel was comprised of twelve separate states, each with its own territory. The capitol was in Jerusalem. But in the 10th century BC there was a schism in the nation and two nations resulted.

The ten northern states, or tribes, were called Israel and the two southern tribes were called Judah. The southern tribes retained their capitol at Jerusalem; the northern tribes established a new capitol: Samaria.

That was bad enough, but things got far worse in 722 BC. The empire of Assyria attacked and conquered the northern kingdom, deported thousands of Jews and repopulated the country with foreigners. That meant that in following generations and centuries the population intermarried so that descendants were half Jew and half Gentile. Jews in the south largely didn't do that. As a result, the Jews in the south despised the Samaritans in the north and called them "half-breeds."

It got far worse in the 4th century BC when the Samaritans in the north, fed up with the Jews in the south because they controlled the temple, built a rival temple on Mount Gerizim and rejected the Old Testament scriptures except the Pentateuch—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The historian John wrote in the first century that "*Jews do not associate with Samaritans.*" (John 4:9) They don't even talk to them. If a Jew was going from Jerusalem to Galilee, instead of taking the shortcut through Samaria, they would take the long way which could take extra days but meant that they didn't have to set foot in Samaritan territory.

Philip was a Jewish leader of the Jerusalem church from a Greek cultural background who did something breathtaking. We read in Acts 8:5, "*Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there.*"

Let me give a side note here. Philip went down (north) to Samaria. We're uncomfortable putting those words together but we tend to think geographically in terms of a map. Samaria is north of Jerusalem, but Jerusalem is higher in elevation, so that's why it says he went down north to Samaria. But what's most important here is not the geography, it's what he did.

It's a bit hard to give a modern comparison to this. Think of the Israelis and Hezbollah in Lebanon or Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland or black slaves and white slave masters in the Confederate South or Republicans and Democrats in American politics. Philip crossed the line. Imagine what the critics must have thought and said: "What are you thinking, Philip? If they become Christians they'll ruin the church. They don't worship the way we worship. They don't look like us. They don't sound like us. There are parts of the Bible they don't understand. Stay away from those Samaritans or it will lead to compromise and heresy." I'm sure there were many ready to write Philip off as a tool of the devil.

Quite honestly, I wonder myself. Certainly the new Samaritan converts did not instantly change their place and style of worship or view of Scripture. It was spiritually risky business.

But, remember, we're talking about how the church of Jesus Christ changed the world. Those Christians were risk-takers. They loved Jesus and

they loved people. They believed in the power of the Holy Spirit. They were willing to cross lines, take chances and reach out to new people who were different. If they hadn't, Christianity today would be a sub-sect of Judaism hidden in some backstreet of the old city of Jerusalem and the Great Commission of Jesus Christ would never have been fulfilled.

The Bible translation we're using says that Philip "*proclaimed the Christ.*" Actually the term here means that he evangelized. Don't get the picture that he stood on a street corner and preached a sermon. He simply told everybody the good news about Jesus. Jesus Christ was central to his message.

There may be a thousand little variations of denominations, worship styles and secondary beliefs among Christians today but the centrality of the Gospel is essential and cannot be compromised: Jesus Christ came from heaven, died on the cross

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for our sins, rose from the dead and our only way to eternal life in heaven is through faith and trust in Jesus.

The results were amazing according to Acts 8:6-8:

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

They believed the message of Jesus. They experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. They felt joy. And it's the same formula today—Christians are people of truth, power and joy.

Now let's bring this over to us. Have you ever been fired from a job, transferred to a different city, changed to a new school or moved to a different neighborhood? It seems like the trauma of a lifetime. It's something you would never choose on your own. But, in the pattern of the early Christ, consider this your God-given opportunity to tell other people about Jesus Christ.

Are you uncomfortable that some people are different from you in their beliefs, their race, their language or their culture? Follow the pattern of the early Christians. Open up. Take some risks. Be like Philip. Love people who aren't just like you.

Is life tough lately? Do you face problems and persecution? Are there people who really bug you? Will you trust God to take the worst and turn it into the absolute best?

From the 1st century to the 21st century, from Jerusalem to China to America, in the worst of times and in the best of times, may we be Christians who truly and totally trust God for the very best through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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