

Acts 042  
Great Persecution  
Acts 8:1-4  
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Let's take our Bibles this evening and open them to Acts 8:1. We are at the end of the whole treatment on Stephen. We've had Stephen's arrest in chapter 6. Stephen's defense, most of chapter seven. Stephen's stoning, that's where he dies, first martyr in the church age, end of chapter 7. And that speech that he gave made the Sanhedrin so angry that not only did they stone Stephen to death—in Acts chapter 8:1-4, this leads to the third persecution of the church. So, the first persecution really involved Peter in chapter 3. The second persecution involved the apostles as a whole. And that's where they were actually flogged. And then all this information concerning Stephen has transpired. And now what happens is we move into persecution number three, which is the biggest persecution that the Jerusalem church has faced. So here is an outline of that third persecution that we're going to look at tonight. Six-part outline. And notice, if you will, verse 1, Saul's role in Stephen's execution.

I. Stephen's Arrest (Acts 8:7:1)

II. Stephen's Defense (7:2-23)

III. Stephen's Stoning (7:54-60)

**IV. Third Persecution (8:1-4)**

A. Saul's role in Stephen's execution (1a)

B. Third persecution against the Church (1b)

C. Result of the persecution: scattering (1c)

D. Stephen's burial (2)

E. Saul's persecution of the church (3)

F. Ministry of those dispersed (4)

Acts 8:1 says, *Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death*. You might remember earlier in chapter 7:58, it says *...they began stoning him (Stephen) and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul*. Saul—who in chapter 9 is going to become Paul—played a role in the execution of Stephen. I mean, they're basically laying their cloaks at Saul's feet as the executioners are throwing rocks

at Stephen. And if you look at chapter 8:1 which we just read, it says *Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death*. So, Saul, a Pharisee, not only agreed with putting him to death, but he actually took pleasure in it. That's the way the Greek reads. Over in Acts 22:20, it uses the same idea. It's Paul who gives his testimony over there. It says: *"And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I was also standing by approving—"* in other words, taking pleasure in it— *"and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him."* This is an interesting thing related to how people get saved.

One of the things to understand about evangelism—and we went into this a little bit last time—is, evangelism in the Bible is analogized to planting seeds, farming. The Bible was written in agrarian times. So, when Jesus described the process evangelism, this is what he said in John 4:34-38 *"...Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this case the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor."* He's analogizing the whole process of evangelism to planting of seeds. Paul the Apostle does the same thing in First Corinthians 3:6-8. Paul says, *I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants, and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.*

The reason I'm bringing this up is I believe that what's happening here in the life of this man Saul—who is going to become Paul when he is converted in Acts 9— is he is watching Stephen's execution. He is hearing Stephen say things like Acts 7:59, *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"* Acts 7:60, *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"* He's seeing the power of the Holy Spirit manifested through this martyr Stephen. And I believe that what's happening is a seed is being planted in his heart. And once the seed is planted, what the Holy Spirit does is He waters the seed, and He brings it to fruition. When we understand that this is how evangelism works it takes a lot of the pressure off of us, because a lot of times we feel like if we share our faith, we need to see a conversion. And if we don't see an immediate conversion, then I guess we failed in our assignment. When the truth of the matter is, what God often uses us for is to simply to

plant a seed. The Holy Spirit will water the seed and maybe bring someone else later across the person's path that you planted the seed within. And that's how the person will get saved. I mean, in hindsight, I can look at my own conversion and I can see many, many seeds that were planted long before I actually trusted in Christ for salvation.

This is the kind of thing that's happening with this man, Saul. Right now, he is an opponent of Stephen. He is an opponent of the new church. But God is having him watch these things and a seed is being planted. Saul actually plays a role in Stephen's execution. I mean, not only do they lay their cloaks at his feet as they throw rocks at Stephen, but he is giving hearty approval to the execution of Stephen, even taking pleasure in it. But no one is beyond the grace of God, because this very man, Saul, who did these things, is going to become the Apostle Paul in Acts 9, one of the great advocates of Christianity. Without Saul becoming Paul, two-thirds of our New Testament epistles would disappear. This then leads to this third persecution, second part of verse 1 in chapter 8. It says: *...on that day a great [Greek: *megas*] persecution began against the church in Jerusalem.* Notice it says, "and on that day." What day? The day that Stephen was martyred. On that very day the Sanhedrin was so angry at what Stephen said that they took it out not just on Stephen, but on the Jerusalem church. This then becomes the third persecution. This is called the great persecution because the other persecutions were serious, but they were kind of minor compared to what's going on here. The troublemakers in the first two persecutions, Acts 3 and 4, were the Sadducees, because they were upset over the new church and its belief in the resurrected Jesus— which, by the way, we're getting ready to commemorate at the end of this month. Resurrection Sunday. That's what really made the Sadducees upset, because the Sadducees didn't believe in a resurrection of any sort.

The more the early church talked about the empty tomb, the more it upset the Sadducees. And so that's why the Sadducees persecuted the Jerusalem church in Acts 3 and 4. This third persecution is bigger because now the Pharisees, the legalists, are jumping on board. Saul is going to be an instrumental force in this persecution. And he was not a Sadducee. He was a Pharisee. And so that's why the persecution here is getting bigger. And then also you'll notice the word "church." Acts 8:1, *And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem.* Notice Acts 8:3, *But Saul began ravaging the church.* Now, this is very important because there are many people today in a movement called hyper-dispensationalism, sometimes called ultra

dispensationalism. They do not believe the church started in Acts chapter 2 the way we teach it and believe it here. They think the church started with Paul. You really can't have the church as we know it today without Paul starting it? Well, that obviously is a big problem theologically. Because here you see the word "church," *ecclesia*. And Saul is still Saul at this point. He's not Paul yet. He's not a believer. So that's clear evidence that you have the church before Paul. Therefore, Paul didn't start the church. Man never starts the new dispensation. God does. Paul's function was to explain the church, not to start it. And he does that primarily in the book of Ephesians and other places.

The church is something that God started in Acts 2, and it existed before the conversion of the Apostle Paul. So therefore, this idea that mid-Acts dispensationalism, Paul started the church. It obviously can't work. In fact, here is Acts 2:47. And notice what it says in the King James Version: *praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the **church** daily those that were being saved.* Now Acts 2:47 in the New American Standard Version doesn't use the word "church," because what you have there is a text critical issue. Sometimes the Greek copies that we have contradict each other, not on major points. They agree with each other on 99% of things, if not more. But sometimes the manuscripts that we have contradict each other because we don't have the originals, and the only thing that's inspired is the originals. So according to the King James Version, the word "church" appeared in the majority of the manuscripts. So that's why it uses the word church in the King James Version. The New American Standard Version is following the idea that the earliest manuscripts are the most reliable. In the earliest ones, the word church doesn't appear. But let's just assume that the King James Version on this point is the correct reading. There again is clear evidence of the church's existence at the end of Acts 2, long before we even know who Saul was or is. Long before Saul became Paul in Acts chapter 2.

Paul did not start the church. He explained it. God started the church age in Acts chapter 2. Over in Acts 5:11— and there's no manuscript disagreement here— concerning the slaying of Ananias and Sapphira, it says, *And great fear came over the whole church [Greek: *ecclesia*] and over all who heard of these things.* If you don't believe the church started in Acts 2, the way the New King James renders it... well, everybody agrees it started in Acts 5. Acts 5 is a long way before Acts 7 and 8, where we're introduced to Saul, who is converted to Paul in Acts chapter 9. And Paul the Apostle later in the book of Philippians says he persecuted the church before he was

saved. He writes in Philippians 3:6, *as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law found blameless*. So, if the church started with Paul, what in the world was Paul persecuting before Paul became Paul the Christian?

My point in bringing this up is: don't let people confuse you about this. Paul, although he had a great role in explaining the church age, he did not start the church age. God started the church age. And that's evidenced by the fact that, long before Saul was converted to Christianity, the church was in existence. This is what Saul was trying to stamp out. What we hold to here is not ultra-dispensationalism or hyper-dispensationalism. If you ever watch on TV a man named Les Feldick, he has a lot of good things to say— I think he's with the Lord now, so I guess he knows better— but he really promotes this hyper-dispensational idea that the church started with Paul, and even the hyper-dispensationalists themselves don't really even agree with each other. If you ask them, 'Well, where exactly did the church start post-Paul?' Some will say Acts 13. Others will say Acts 28. All those doctrines are doctrines that we reject. What we believe is that the church began in Acts 2, because if you go back and listen to the lessons that we did in Acts 2, we showed very clearly that the baptizing ministry of the Spirit— Jesus said, you'll be baptized in the Holy Spirit not many days from now— the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit, which is necessary to bring men and women into the body of Christ at the point of faith alone in Christ alone...the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit started in Acts chapter 2. It did not start in Acts 9, Acts 13, or Acts 28. The only thing that's happening in Acts 9, Acts 13, Acts 28, is Paul is explaining what God started in Acts 2. This is what we would call normative dispensationalism, rejecting hyper-dispensationalism or ultra-dispensationalism.

Then, this wave of persecution comes against the church. Notice the result of it. It leads to scattering towards the end of Acts 8:1 ...*and they* (the Jerusalem church members) *were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles*. So, this puts the Jerusalem believers out of the city of Jerusalem and into the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria. [map on slide 8] To use modern vernacular, Jerusalem is a city. Judea would be more of the county that the city is located within. And then Samaria is a county, if I could use modern vernacular, or a region up further north. Now this is exactly what Jesus said would happen. Remember in Acts 1:8 when He was speaking to his apostles just prior to His ascension? He said, "*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses, both in*

*Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth."*

Now, what's interesting is Jesus never told them *how* he was going to get them out of Jerusalem, into the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria. He didn't tell them that. And there's probably good reason He didn't tell them that. It probably would have terrified them. God, as you keep studying the book of Acts was actually going to use persecution to get the Jerusalem church out of its comfort zone into those surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria to fulfill Christ's evangelistic design. You know that we're reading about here in the book of Acts. So sometimes persecution is not the worst thing that can happen to a group or a person. Sometimes getting laid off from a job or fired from a job is not the absolute worst thing that could happen to a person. It could be persecution in the sense that God is moving somebody into another area that He has for them in terms of ministry. Jesus said it would happen. It's a prediction here, a prophecy. You're going to be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria. Surprise! It's going to be through persecution, though, that's going to get you out of Jerusalem, into Judea and Samaria.

You'll notice that in none of these passages do you find the words "West Bank," right? You receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in the West Bank. The West Bank is a man-made term. It's not found in the Bible. In fact, when you use the term West Bank, you're actually using a word from the Jordanian perspective, because Judea and Samaria are west of Jordan.

Jordan is east of the Jordan River there. But Judea and Samaria are not west of the nation of Israel. Judea and Samaria are east of the nation of Israel. So, when you flippantly use the expression "West Bank", we're using a politically loaded term from the perspective of Jordan, which is adjacent to the nation of Israel in the East. The Bible never uses the expression West Bank. That's a term that the politicians and so forth came up with. The proper designation for that area is Judea and Samaria, just like the Bible never uses the word "Palestine" to describe the nation of Israel. I mean the word Palestine is not found in the Bible. Palestine, over the course of time has become another politically loaded term. It was something that Emperor Hadrian, the emperor of Rome, came up with in the second century. After the Jewish presence had been removed from the land through the events of A.D. 70, he tried to pretend like the Jews were never there in the first place. Just like the Muslims try to argue today, the Jews were never there. He wanted to de-Judaize the land. And he came up with this term, Palestine, which is a derivative of philistine, which is a term designed intentionally to

mock the Jewish people. Because the Philistines were the perennial enemies of Israel. And Hadrian came up with this term, Palestine. So, when we use the term Palestine, without really understanding what we're talking about, we're using an anti-Semitic term. When you use the expression "West Bank" instead of the expression "Judea and Samaria", we're using a politically loaded term from the perspective of Jordan, not the perspective of Israel. So that's why I bring these things up, because words matter. Definitions matter. And a lot of times we throw around words and definitions that we hear without really understanding what they mean.

So, the church is pushed out of Jerusalem, now into Judea and Samaria, through persecution ushered in by Saul of Tarsus; which means we are now in part two of the book. What did Jesus say? 'You're going to be My witnesses in Jerusalem.' That's chapters 1 through 7. We finished that. Then He said, 'You're going to be My witnesses in Judea and Samaria.' That's part two of the book, chapters 8 through 12, which is what we're moving into now. Then He says, 'You're going to be my witnesses to the remote parts of the earth.' That's chapter 13 through the end of the book. Paul's three missionary journeys, the journey ultimately to Rome, where the church gets outside of the borders of Israel for the first time. And that'll be part three of the book. So this expression, Judea and Samaria tell us that we're moving into part two of the book.

You'll notice that the church was scattered. It says they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Now it's from this word "scattered" that we get the word *diaspora*. Here it's used in the verb form. Acts 8:3-4 says: *But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off the men and the women, he would put them in prison. Therefore, those who had been scattered (diaspora) went about preaching the word.* And this scattering of the church is going to be brought up again in Acts 11:19. *So then those who are scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen, which is what we're reading about here, made their way to Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch, speaking the word to no one except the Jews alone.* So, the word scattered comes from this word *diaspora*. And basically, it's referring to the Jews living outside the borders of Israel in what is called the diaspora. But that's what this word means, a scattering. God probably allowed this scattering of his people to occur so they'd get outside the borders of Israel, because He knew forty years down the road, AD 70 was coming.

In the events of AD 70, Rome would come against the nation of Israel and kill over a million Jews. Jesus predicted that was coming in Matthew 24, and on Palm Sunday, which is this Sunday, where He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, Luke 19, proclaims His messianic credentials to the nation. Then He starts to weep in verse 42. He says, *"If you even you know what would make peace, but now it has been hidden from your eyes..."* And in verses 43-44 He said, *"For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another..."* I mean, this is all in Luke 19:42-44, Palm Sunday. *"...because you did not recognize the time of your visitation."* So, there is a covenant consequence to the nation of Israel rejecting her king. And I think this is God's way of, before the horrors of A.D. 70 would unfold, getting His people out of Jerusalem, out of Israel so their lives could be spared. There was something that happened around A.D. 66. Eusebius records it, the church historian. And there you can see the dates when Eusebius wrote, end of the third century, beginning of the fourth century. He makes reference to a prophecy that was given to the church in Jerusalem to get out because A.D. 70 was coming. And here's the direct quote from Epiphanius. And Eusebius records this prophecy also. It says:

"But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approved men there before the war, [before AD 70] to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella. And when those that believed in Christ had come thither from Jerusalem, then, as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men, the judgment of God at length overtook those who had committed such outrages against Christ and his apostles, and totally destroyed that generation of impious men."

This is recorded not just in Eusebius's ecclesiastical history, but it's also recorded in the writings of someone named Epiphanius. They were told to get out because Jerusalem was going to go down, which it did at the hands of the Romans in A.D. 70. And they were told to flee to Pella, which would be east of the Jordan River in modern day Jordan. It says Pella was a town situated beyond the Jordan in north of Peraea, within the dominions of Herod Agrippa the Second. The surrounding population was chiefly Gentile. And there's some references in Pliny and Josephus where you can learn a little bit about Pella in biblical times. But there were prophecies given; you've got to leave



Jerusalem and get to Pella, or else you're going to be swallowed up by the Roman invasion, and you're probably going to die.

So, the fact that God allowed Saul of Tarsus to get the church out and into the diaspora, I think probably was another way that God was getting His people out of harm's way before the horrors of A.D. 70 would take place. It's just happening several decades in advance. You have to look at this as the gracious hand of God. God is allowing this persecution from Saul of Tarsus to move the church into the master's design for evangelism, because 'You're going to be My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the remote parts of the earth.' And secondarily, it was gracious in the sense that He was trying to get them out of harm's way before A.D. 70 would transpire. And there would be subsequent prophecies later on, telling the church to leave Jerusalem because A.D. 70 was right around the corner. Now you notice that everybody left. Most of the people left because of the persecution, except the apostles.

The apostles are staying behind. Why are the apostles staying behind? Well, they're probably staying behind in Jerusalem to shepherd what limited flock remains. The flock had been greatly reduced because everybody scattered because of this persecution. But the apostles stayed behind in Jerusalem to minister to this reduced flock. Once you understand this, we see that there has to be a New Testament. Because if the apostles are staying behind in Jerusalem and the rest of the church is scattering to different areas, they have to have instruction. I mean, it's not like you can pick up your cell phone and talk to the apostles and say, What do we do in this case? What do we do in that case? They have to start receiving letters from the apostles who were in Jerusalem when the Hebrew Christians moved into the diaspora. So had that not happened, most likely, we wouldn't have our New Testament. We certainly wouldn't have the book of James, who was written to 'the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.'

How did the twelve tribes get dispersed abroad of Hebrew Christians? —those that were believers? Well, Saul of Tarsus is the instrument God used to get the church out of Jerusalem into another area. In this case, I think they went to Babylon. They also went to north central Turkey. And if that hadn't happened, we wouldn't have the book of James. Because if one of the apostles was with them in the dispersion, there would be 1 to 1 contact telling them, here's what you do in this case. Here's what you do in that case. But because the apostles stayed behind in Jerusalem to instruct the flock in the

diaspora, you had to have the letter of James explaining a particular issue. Practical sanctification. So, no dispersion, we wouldn't have the book of James. No dispersion, we wouldn't have the book of First Peter. Because First Peter 1:1 says, *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens scattered (diaspora) through Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia and Bithynia who are chosen*. So that's part of the group that fled up north to north central Turkey. Peter is not with them. They needed instruction. One of the things they needed to be instructed about is how to handle persecution. I mean, you can't just look up Peter's website. He's got to write them a letter. Because of this scattering, we have James in our New Testament. We have First Peter in our New Testament. First Peter is connected to Second Peter and Jude. We have those in our New Testament. There's a bunch of them wondering if Christ is the King. Where's the kingdom? Because to the Jewish mind, King and kingdom go together. So, Matthew writes to them, explaining that Christ is the King, but the kingdom has been postponed. If you don't have the scattering, you don't have Matthew's Gospel. You see that? So, the fact that the apostles are staying behind in Jerusalem while everyone else scatters is really an amazing thing to think about. Because without that reality, without that phenomenon, I mean, we would be devoid of all kinds of New Testament books and New Testament truth.

And then you go to verse 2 and we have Stephen's burial. *Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him*. This expression, "devout men," is only used four times in Luke's writings. Luke wrote Luke and Acts. It's used of Simeon in Luke 2:25. It's used of the Jews in Jerusalem, Acts 2:5. It's used of Ananias, Acts 22:12. And it's the only other time it's used is right here. So, these devout men were very spiritual men, pious men. And they're the ones that took Steven's corpse and decided to bury it. Now, notice that they didn't have Steven cremated. I'm going to get into trouble with this. They didn't call the Neptune Society and reduce him to ashes and scatter them into the ocean. Because you don't find cremation in the Bible. Everyone that dies is buried. The proper biblical method for dealing with the loss of someone— particularly if they're a believer— is not to cremate them but is to bury them. In fact, cremation, when you study it out, really comes from paganism and not biblical Christianity. I mean, everybody in the Bible is buried, except people that they don't want to show any respect to. They just leave them unburied like the two witnesses in Revelation chapter 11. Now you're saying, Wait a minute, pastor, you're really bothering me now because grandma loved Jesus, and we had her cremated. Don't worry about it. Because God is completely

capable of recycling the ashes of grandma from the ocean for the final resurrection. It's not like if you cremate a grandma and she's a believer she won't participate in the final resurrection. And I understand that a lot of people do cremations rather than burials because cremation is less expensive. Well, when is godliness easy? I'll just submit that to you. Since when is godliness easy? Godliness always costs more. It's harder to be godly than it is ungodly. Now, I understand that people get into these difficult financial binds, and particularly when you lose somebody and they move in the direction of cremation rather than burial. I'm in touch with that emotion. I'm just here to tell you that if you're trying to figure out which method to use of a deceased loved one in Christ, and you want to follow the one that has the best biblical support, you would follow burial. If you follow cremation for someone, it's not the unpardonable sin. God is capable of recycling ashes from the ocean into a body for the final resurrection. Just as easy as he's capable of taking someone's remains that are buried. But you will not find the concept of cremation practiced by anyone in the Bible. It's practiced by pagans in the Bible. Burial is what the godly throughout the generations have always done.

Now I have gotten this question a lot; it's one of those questions that comes up really frequently. You know, pastor, what is it, cremation or burial? My old answer was, 'I don't know if I have an opinion on it.' I was sort of ambivalent. I didn't really take a stand because I really didn't know any better. I thought both were fine. I have been persuaded, though, by an article written by the late Norman Geisler that you can find online. Just type in 'Norman Geisler' and type in 'burial versus cremation.' It'll come right up. I think his article is very fair. He goes through all the different arguments that people advocating cremation advance. But he shows, I think conclusively that the scales of evidence—when you want to actually try to look at this whole thing biblically—tip in the favor of burial rather than cremation. In fact, he told me once that his original title for the article, which he decided not to use, is Why the Saints Should Not Make Ashes of Themselves. And that might be a little over the top. So, I don't think he used that particular title, but you can find this article and you could go through it yourself and search the scriptures yourself. You know, come to your own conclusion. Don't believe something just because I say it. But I do lean in the direction of burial. Not based on expense or efficiency but based on: I'm trying to figure out which method is most God honoring. Geisler's article moved me off of the agnostic side of it, where I just didn't know, to more in the direction of burial. You'll find this over and over again in the Bible.

Someone dies; they're buried. I mean, it goes right back to Abraham and Sarah at the cave of Machpelah, all the way through the Bible. It's always a burial.

You also see here in verse 2 that they made a loud lamentation over Stephen as they were burying him. Now, according to Jewish tradition and Jewish law, if a criminal dies, you can't cry out loud. I mean, you can bury the criminal, but you can't show any remorse. Stephen was an executed criminal. And they continue to weep and wail. They appreciated Steven so much, these devout, pious men, that they decided to violate Jewish tradition and Jewish law. They grieved greatly over Steven as they were burying him, which the law said they weren't supposed to do. And I hope we understand that when someone dies that you love in Jesus, it is completely and totally appropriate to grieve. A lot of people have this view that, well, I'm not supposed to grieve because they're a Christian, and I'm going to see him again. There's no biblical support for that at all. In fact, Paul the Apostle in First Thessalonians 4:13 says, *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep*— died, in other words— *so that you will not grieve, as do the rest, who have no hope*. Paul never says, 'don't grieve.' That's one of those verses that's misquoted constantly. People think it means when your loved one in Jesus dies, you're not supposed to grieve. Paul never says, 'don't grieve.' What he says is, don't grieve, as do the rest of the unsaved world who have no hope. I mean, don't grieve as if you're never going to see the person again, because you're going to see him again at the resurrection, at death, or the rapture, whichever comes first. So, grieving is completely acceptable. It's completely appropriate. Just don't do it like the unsaved world does it, as if they're never going to see the person again. Because if they're a believer and you're a believer, you are going to see them again. It's not a goodbye. It's a see you later, but the see you later is still painful. So, grieve. They're wailing here over Stephen, even though he's a godly man. And these devout men are going to see him again one day.

And then this leads to Saul's persecution of the church, verse 3. But Saul began ravaging the church— Now who is Saul? Saul is a Pharisee. How do we know he's a Pharisee? Because Philippians 3:5, when Paul is giving his legalistic credentials, calls himself a Pharisee, *circumcised the eighth day of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee*. So, this makes the persecution that the church is now under, not just a persecution, but a great persecution. Because the other persecutions involved the Sadducees, who were upset

over resurrection teaching. Now, what's happening in Jerusalem concerning the church is so severe, that the Pharisees, the legalists who believe in a future resurrection, are now involved in the persecution. It's kind of interesting that Saul is "ravaging the church," it says. Now that's evidence of the Holy Spirit's work. When someone gets angry, we have a tendency to think they're far, far away from Christ. You share your faith with somebody, and they start getting visibly upset. 'Oh, that person will never get saved.' In fact, it's the opposite. The more upset they get, the closer they are to salvation. Why are they upset? Because they're having to actively suppress what's true. And the more you witness to such a person, it exposes the insanity that they're involved in. Of suppressing the obvious. And they get upset about it.

You remember David? Adultery then murder. Remember that? Nathan the prophet confronts him and tells the story about the powerful man that took advantage of the weak man. Remember David's reaction? 2 Samuel 12:5, *Then David's anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die."* That's anger. And then Nathan turns around to David and says, you're the man. So, the fact that David is angry at what Nathan is talking about demonstrates that David was holding down truth in unrighteousness and getting upset about it, which meant that David's repentance was nearer than further away because of his anger. His anger indicated that his repentance was close. See that? I bring that to your attention, because you'll share your faith with someone at work, or at school, or in your family, or even a Christian; and you're trying to help them to grow to the next level. And if they get really upset at you, don't think that 'Boy, I sure messed this one up. I sure missed the will of God on this one.' In fact, the fact that they're upset means you're flying over the target. I mean, if you're not getting someone upset, you're probably not doing it right. And I'm not talking about making people upset because we're obnoxious. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about speaking the truth in love. If someone is getting upset over that, it means you're flying over the target. That's all that means. The person to worry about is the person that has like no reaction to it. They're like emotionally devoid. 'Oh, I'm happy for you' kind of thing. 'I'm glad you found enlightenment in your particular guru, but I'm happy with mine over here.' No emotion. That's a person that's probably not under the convicting ministry of the Spirit, but the person that's upset, that, to me, is evidence of conviction.

This is what Paul/Saul is doing. He is angry at what Stephen has said. And all we have got to do is move one chapter to the right to see how close Saul is to becoming Paul. It's kind of interesting. Saul studied under a Pharisee named Gamaliel. Acts 22:3 says that. Paul says, "... *brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel,*" Remember what Gamaliel said in Acts 5? Hey, don't persecute this church, because if it's not of God, it's going to fizzle and die. But if it is of God, you're going to find yourself fighting God. And you would think that Saul, being a student of Gamaliel, would have heeded those words. Saul does not heed those words. He has totally cast those words aside. And he's just coming at the church now with full throttle. And it says here in verse 3 that he starts to ravage them from house to house. Why is he going into their houses? Because that's where the early church met. You don't have chapels, cathedrals, stained glass windows, church buildings. I mean, it's going to take centuries for those things to even be invented. The early church is meeting in people's homes all the way back in Acts 2:46, when the church first started. It says: *Day by day, continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house...* That's why Saul is going into their houses, because that's where the Christians are meeting.

That's why Second John verse 10 says of heretics ...*do not receive him in your house...* and I used to think that meant that the Jehovah's Witnesses. Not if, but when they come to your house, you can't invite them in for a glass of lemonade in the Houston sun in August. You've got to leave them outside your house. That's what I used to think that meant. And yet that's not what that means. It's okay to be hospitable to the Jehovah's Witnesses and use it as a witnessing opportunity. You know, give them a glass of lemonade or whatever. So, what does it mean when he says, don't receive the heretics into your house? The house is the church. The church is meeting in the houses. In modern day vernacular, we would just put it like this: do not give the heretics a pulpit. Do not let them set up their book tables in the foyer, as some of the Muslims in this area have tried to do in our church. 'Oh, let us come in and distribute our literature.' Thanks, but no thanks. Don't let them teach your kids Sunday school lessons.

So, when it says don't let them into your house, what he's saying is don't give them a platform. You never give a false teacher a platform before the assembled saints of God in God's church. Now, how do I come to this conclusion? Because that's where the early church met. They met in individual houses. And that's why Saul is going here from house to house. And then look at this. No gender discrimination here ...*dragging off men*

*and women, he put them in prison.* Now why does Luke mention the women? Women are very prominent in Acts. They're also very prominent in Luke's gospel. And although women were treated like subordinates and second-class citizens in biblical times, Jesus elevated women like no other historical character ever has elevated women. And Luke is bringing that out in his gospel. And in the sequel called The Book of Acts, you'll see references to women constantly. Acts 1:14 says, *These with all one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.* There are women participating in prayer there in the upper room, Acts chapter 1. And Saul knows that women have a vital role to play in the outworking of God's purposes. So here he is persecuting the women just like he does the men. He's taking both groups and throwing them into prison. When he gives his testimony in Acts 22, he says, I persecuted this way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons.

Lastly, notice the Ministry of the Dispersed. They start evangelizing. Very convicting to me, because when I run into problems, I want to just put my tail between my legs and shrink away. These early believers did not do that. Persecution did not silence them. In fact, persecution, as far as I can tell, made them bolder. I mean, think about being thrown out of your own house. Being thrown out of your own country for nothing more than believing in Jesus as the Messiah. Acts 8:4, *Therefore, those who had been scattered (diaspora) went about preaching the word.* Now the word for preaching here is *euangelizō*, which is the word for evangelism. So, they kept right on moving. And as they were scattered and went to different places there they were evangelizing. And that's a nice segue into verse 5 through verse 25, because one of the guys that went evangelizing was named Philip. Who was Philip? Deacon number two. When you look at the selection of deacons in Acts 6, Stephen is mentioned first. That's why his story is recorded first. Philip is mentioned second. That's why his story is recorded second. And he is going to go down—geographically—from Jerusalem into Samaria. Exactly what Jesus said would happen. And he's basically going to start a revival amongst a bunch of people that were racially hated by the Jews. And one of the guys that's going to get saved here is a magician, a sorcerer named Simon. And so that whole story is recorded in verses 5 through 25, which we'll start looking at next time.

And then right in the middle of the revival, the Holy Spirit—first an angel, then the Holy Spirit will say, Leave Samaria and stand on a road that goes through Gaza. Today the

Gaza Strip is in the news constantly. It's that area. The angel doesn't tell him why. He just says, 'go stand there.' So, he does what he's told. Would you do that? I don't know if I would do that. Hey, leave the revival and go stand on this road, which is basically desert. But he does what he's told. And here comes a worshiper, the Ethiopian eunuch, leaving Jerusalem and going back to Ethiopia, who happened to be reading Isaiah 53. Talk about the providence of God. We know what Isaiah 53 is about, right? The Messiah. And then the Holy Spirit says—the Greek here is interesting: "*glue yourself to the chariot.*" And then Philip does that, and he shouts up to the eunuch, Do you understand what you're reading? And the eunuch says, 'Well, how can I know unless someone guides me?' So, the eunuch invites Philip, who left this revival, up into this chariot at the exact time that the eunuch is reading Isaiah 53. And Philip uses Isaiah 53, which is a prophecy about Jesus written 700 years in advance, to lead the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ. And then the Ethiopian eunuch—he must have started the Baptist denomination because he wants to get baptized right away. Check this out: full immersion. And then when it's all over, he goes back to Ethiopia. Well, that's how the gospel got to Ethiopia. That's how it got into Africa, because Philip did what he was told. Probably made no sense to him. 'Leave a revival and stand on a road that has nothing here but desert.' Well, God knew what was going to happen because God desired the gospel to get into Africa, and that's how it got there.

And the whole story is going to be given to us in the second part of Acts chapter 8. So, verse 4, they went about preaching the word, that leads really nicely into this man, Philip, who's going to have a ministry in Samaria, and then he's going to have a ministry in Ethiopia without ever going to Ethiopia.