

SCATTERING AND GROWING**Acts 8:2-25**

Intro: This is purslane. Some people apparently cultivate it so they can eat it – maybe you do. I just know this – I do not like it – I’m sure it would make me sick (and apparently some varieties do) and I consider it a scourge! It will grow anywhere and once it starts it takes over. If you want it out of your garden, it does not work to chop it out with a hoe – if you do that every piece will take root and grow its own plant – it’s that much like a bad dream. To rid yourself of this menace – you need to pull it out by the roots – making sure you get all of it – and throw it far, far away. Or lay it out on the concrete or the blacktop on the street where it will wither away as it dies a prolonged death.

As you might detect, I’m a lot like the anonymous narrator of the Dr. Seuss book that grumpily proclaims “I do not like them, Sam-I-Am. I do not like green eggs and ham.” when I whine, “I do not like it, I do not like purslane. I do not like it in my garden, I do not like in my yard, and I really do not like it on my plate.” But purslane’s persistence to propagate is a picture of the Church in Acts 8. Listen as I read and then I’ll explain. (Read Acts 8:2-8)

As we finished our study of Acts 6:7-Acts 8:1 last week one of the final literary visuals was Stephen praying for his killers as they hurled stones onto his body. As he died – he saw into heaven as he was given a glimpse of his reward for his boldness and faithfulness, he implored, “*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*” *And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”* Acts 7:59b-60a. And then as we move into Acts 8, we read this very concise sentence, *And Saul approved of his execution.* Acts 8:1. Now remember, the first time we see Saul mentioned is a few verses prior in Acts 7:58 where he is named as the keeper of the coats of the mob who murdered Stephen. Our text goes on to say that Saul was ravaging the church and he was full of hatred against these Christ Followers, both men and women, who refused to recant their faith in the Risen Jesus. The result was they fled Jerusalem – most of them – with the exception of the apostles – to other areas in the region – namely Samaria – that home to the hated Samaritans. Yes! Even Samaritans could get saved! We read that the escaping Christians . . . *went about preaching the word.* Acts 8:4. They were on the run and spreading the Good News of the Risen Jesus Christ all along the way! They were Saul’s purslane – the more he chopped – the more the message spread. Stephen’s prayer, Saul’s persecution, and the proclamation of the fleeing believers caused Saint Augustine to say “*The church owes Paul to the prayers of Stephen*”.

They were scattered like seed and the seed germinated and flourished. But . . .

It took hard times to make it happen

- This is why F. B. Meyer wrote, “*This persecution was overruled to scatter the church, which had grown too prosperous and secure, and needed to be reminded of the Lord’s injunction to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. The light must be diffused; the salt must be scattered. How often God has to drive us by trouble to do what we ought to have done gladly and spontaneously!*” Meyer is referring to the Great Commission in Acts 1 where, just before Jesus returns to his Heavenly Father, he tells his disciples, “*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.
- The Church had to be rattled out of its comfort zone and into the mission field preaching as they went. Philip is the only preacher mentioned – but the text makes it plain that everyone was sharing Jesus. In Acts 1:8 Jesus clearly told His followers to look beyond Jerusalem and bring the gospel to Judea, Samaria, and the whole world. But to this point, Jesus’ followers had not done this. The Great Commission was his disciples to go from Jerusalem and change the world, but up until Saul began his marauding they had not done it.
- David Guzik says this, “*The resulting good of the spread of the gospel leads some to see this persecution as being the will of God. God can and will use pressing circumstances to guide us into His will. Sometimes we have to be shaken out of our comfortable state before we do what God wants us to do.*” Does God make things happen so his will can be done? I remember on March 15, 2020 the Covid-19 mess had descended on the world and we were scared. That was the first of 13 Sundays that we did not gather together for corporate worship – and that morning we had gathered via ZOOM for the first time. That afternoon, at the

request of Mayor Matt Miller, about 40 or 50 pastors and community leaders gathered in the Ashland City Council Chambers for a time of prayer. Quite a number of us prayed for wisdom and protection and deliverance from this unknown and potentially terrifying disease. I distinctly remember one person praying, “Lord, I don’t know why you are doing this to us, but we are relying on you to bring us through it.” I remember distinctly remembering that I recoiled at the thought of God causing a pandemic on humanity, but I knew that is where much reformed Christian theology ends up. I reject that. My belief is that God does not work that way. The truth is, God uses tragedy for redemption and that’s exactly what he was doing as the people of God fled from Jerusalem.

- Guzik puts it this way, “*Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word: The end result was for the glory of God, because the persecution simply served to spread the message. We shouldn’t think that those who left Jerusalem left as formal preachers. Most were “accidental missionaries” who talked about Jesus wherever they went.*” I love that! Would that we all would be accidental missionaries – so full of the good news that we spread it everywhere we go no matter what the circumstances. I think it was Guzik wrote this, “*Most people don’t come to Jesus through a professional preacher or an evangelist; they come to Jesus through people just like us.*” Over my ministry I cannot even imagine the number of times I have had a parishioner tell me some like “Pastor, you need to talk to Joe or Joan, They need to hear about Jesus!” And I think, “What can I tell them that you cannot tell them?” and too few times I have said that out loud. YOU can and should share Jesus with your life and your words.
- Great things were happening because God’s people were talking! But I need to move on! Briefly, let’s look at Simon the Sorcerer and how he and the church learned . . .

The Holy Spirit is not for Sale

- Listen as I read the remainder of the text (Read Acts 8:9-25)
- Simon was a popular guy who used his occult practices to conjure up sensational things and he was getting very rich from it. In other words he was consorting with Satan to gain notoriety and a fortune.
- But he knew he met his match when he ran into Philip and his good news of Jesus Christ. He saw the miraculous things Philip and other Christ Followers were doing by the power of the Holy Spirit– so he got saved. Maybe it was real and maybe it was that he just wanted a piece of the pie – we don’t know, and it’s not good to conjecture. I do like what Bickel and Jantz point out when they write “*God’s truth will always win out over Satan’s lies. Simon isn’t stupid so he figures. If you can’t beat ‘em join ‘em.*”
- Simon and the other Samaritan converts had received Jesus as Savior but in Peter and John’s estimation – they still needed a greater infilling of the Holy Spirit. Was this because the Samaritans’ experience of salvation was of lower quality than that of the Jews? I think not, but I really don’t know. I suspect that the apostles were using the revival in Samaria as a teachable moment about the absolute necessity of the infilling of the Holy Spirit.
- Simon watched this and then his entrepreneurial proclivity kicked into high gear. He offered to pay Peter and John for the gifts they so obviously had. Peter’s response was swift and sure. The text says it was, *May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!* Acts 8:20. But that translation is a little tame compared to the language in the original – what Peter actually said was something more like, “*To hell with you and your money – you can’t buy God or his Holy Spirit!*”
- Albert Winn says this “*The Holy Spirit is not a power to be manipulated, but power to be obeyed. He is not a genie whom we command. He is the Lord and commands us.*” This is powerful and we must remember it because it still happens. Charlatans abound, especially on TV, who play with the fears and desires of seekers to gain fame and fortune. You can’t buy God.
- Well, Simon gained notoriety alright! His name is where we get Simony which is described in Wikipedia as “. . . *the buying or selling of spiritual things, including church offices, sacraments, or sacred items. . . . it is considered a grave sin in Christian tradition, particularly in Roman Catholicism.*” It historically has been a real issue in the Catholic Church as factions and families fought for power with violence, intrigue and bribery especially for the papacy. This is not the case today – but it was. As I pointed out a bit ago – it’s alive and well in so-called protestant groups – so we would do well to refrain from casting aspersions.

- Here's the point, repentance is possible even for those who consort with the Evil One. The apostles offered Simon the possibility and he sought it with *"Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."* Acts 8:24. We have no further information on Simon even though his plea seems to be more about saving his skin than saving his soul. But who are we to judge? We have the promise that *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* 1 John 1:9.

Conclusion: Here's the promise: Truth drowns out lies. Simon tried his magic on the Holy Spirit and lost. The apostles returned to Jerusalem preaching the Good News all along the way – to Samaritans! The Church was scattering – physically and spiritually as they spread the gospel. And it was growing as the seed of the Gospel seized hungering hearts. It was all about Jesus. Let me close with this from Charles Spurgeon, *"Beloved friends, I delight to preach to you all the doctrines which I find in God's Word; but I desire always to preach the person of Christ above the doctrine; the doctrine is but the chair in which Christ sits as a Prophet to instruct us."* Amen.