

**Slide 1**

# **God's Unstoppable Mission**

## **Acts 8:1-8**

### **Introduction**

1. You and I possess the greatest news this morning that mankind has ever heard or will ever hear.
2. It is the news of a Savior who came into the world to give us salvation — freedom from the bondage of sin, guilt and the death which accompanies it.
3. Just as the Father sent His Son into the world, so His Son sent His disciples into the world telling them, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20a).
4. That command has not changed.
5. Paul Harvey once said, “Too many Christians are no longer fishermen but keepers of the aquarium.”
6. God does not call us to keep house, but to take His message outside these walls and proclaim it to those around us.
7. For the church in Jerusalem it was persecution which moved them to take the gospel beyond Zion.
8. God shares with us some great truths which we need this Lord's day — let us search for them as a soul thirsting for God.
9. Our lesson today picks up with . . .

**Slide 2**

## **I. Saul's Persecution of the Lord's Church**

### **A. BEGINNING WITH THE DEATH OF STEPHEN**

“On that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem” (Acts

8:1a, NASB95)

1. In their rage over the things which Stephen had said, the members of the Sanhedrin (the ruling Council of the Jews) drove Stephen out of the city of Jerusalem.
2. They then threw stones at him until he was dead.
3. Luke tells us that those who threw the stones “laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58).
4. Acts 8:1 tells us that “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.”
5. As Saul, who became the apostle Paul, would later recount, “And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.” (Acts 22:20, NASB95)

[He didn't stop with Stephen, but . . .]

### Slide 3

## B. HE RAVAGED THE CHURCH

“But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.” (Acts 8:3, NASB95)

1. As a result “they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” (Acts 8:1b, NASB95)
2. Saul's persecution of the church is described by Luke as his “ravaging, making havoc or destroying” the church.
  - a. The Greek word used here, *lymainō*, indicates brutal cruelty.
  - b. It was used of “a wild boar ravaging a vineyard and of a wild animal savaging a body” (Barclay).
3. He went into house after house, dragging out men and women, who he put into prison (Acts 22:4; 26:10).

“I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons,” (Acts 22:4, NASB95)

“And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them.” (Acts 26:10, NASB95)

**Slide 4****C. THE EXTENT OF HIS WRATH**

1. He “used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it” (Galatians 1:13, NASB95).
2. He did this with great zeal (Philippians 3:6).
3. He was “a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor” (1 Timothy 1:13).
4. Because of all this, he did not consider himself worthy to be called an apostle (1 Corinthians 15:9).

**Slide 5****II. The Gospel Reaches An Unlikely People**

“Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.” (Acts 8:4–5, NASB95)

**A. THE MESSENGER: PHILLIP**

1. You may remember from our study in the beginning of Acts 6 that seven men were chosen to address a neglected need among the Hellenistic widows.
2. These poor women were not receiving the daily meals which the church was providing to its widows.
3. Stephen was one of the men chosen for this task.
4. Phillip was another of the seven who appears to have also had the gift for preaching the good news.

**Slide 6**

**B. THE RECIPIENTS: THE PEOPLE OF SAMARIA**

1. The apostle John in chapter four of his gospel tells us of a time when Jesus stopped at a well outside of a city in Samaria known as Sychar.
2. There, He asked a woman for a drink of water.
3. She asked Him why He had asked her for a drink since she was a Samaritan woman and He was a Jew.
4. John then explains which she would ask such a question with the the comment, “For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9).
5. The animosity between Jews and Samaritans went back over 700 years.
6. In 722 B.C. the Assyrians attacked the northern kingdom of Israel and killed many of the Jews — others were carried off to Assyria.
7. Those left intermarried with the people which the Assyrians brought in to repopulate the land — they became known as Samaritans.
8. When those from the southern kingdom of Judea came back from their captivity in the Babylon after 536 B.C., they sought to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.
9. The Samaritans offered to help with the rebuilding, but the Jews refused their help because the Samaritans were no longer pureblooded Jews.
10. By Jesus’ day, the relationship between the two groups was no better.
11. Now, Philip was taking the message of Christ to this group of people, just as Jesus had promised His disciples prior to His ascension.
12. He went “to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them” (Acts 8:5).
13. The result was that “when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and woman alike” (Acts 8:12, NASB95).

**Slide 7****III. Our Lord and the Mission of His Church****A. GOD UTILIZES PERSECUTION TO SERVE THE GREAT COMMISSION (ACTS 8:4)**

"Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word."  
(Acts 8:4, NASB95)

1. Up until now in the book of Acts all the ministry has taken place in Jerusalem.
2. No one has moved out into Judea or Samaria.
3. On the day of our Lord's ascension back to His Father, He told His disciples that the coming of the Holy Spirit was to empower them for missions in Jerusalem and beyond, "you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (Acts 1:8b, NASB95)
4. Now Luke tells us that as a result of Stephen's martyrdom those two areas are being reached in that order — "and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." (Acts 8:1b, NASB95)
5. Three chapters from now, Luke will again confirm this missionary purpose of the persecution (Acts 11:19-20)

#### **Slide 8**

"So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus." (Acts 11:19-20, NASB95)

6. There is a valuable lesson here for us.
7. It isn't just that our sovereign God can turn setbacks into triumphs.
8. The lesson is that things such as comfort, ease, affluence, prosperity, safety and freedom often cause tremendous inertia in the church.
9. Inertia is the tendency of an object at rest, in this case the church, will remain that way until it is acted upon by an outside force — i.e., persecution.
10. Those things that we think will produce the greatest growth of our Lord's church and in which we heavily invest our resources (i.e., personnel, time,

money) may often have the opposite effect.

11. Instead of a church growing in spirit and number, we find one marked by weakness, apathy, lethargy, self-centeredness and a preoccupation with security.
12. If we go back to Jesus' parable of the soils, we find that while some do fall away because of persecution, there are others who do so because "the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Mark 4:19).
13. The point is not that we should seek persecution, but that we should be careful that we do not allow prosperity and excessive ease and comfort and affluence hinder our proclamation of the gospel.
14. Let us not be disheartened if we are persecuted for righteousness sake, but filled with hope, because our Lord is able to make that persecution serve the great commission of His church (cf. Matthew 5:10-11; John 15:20).

"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:10-12, NASB95)

"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also." (John 15:20, NASB95)

#### **Slide 9**

### **B. OUR ADVERSARIES CAN BECOME ADVOCATES FOR CHRIST**

1. Sometimes our worst enemies become our best friends.
2. Saul, himself, said that it was his goal to destroy the church

"I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it;" (Galatians 1:13b)

". . . not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received

authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them." (Acts 26:9-10)

4. This same Saul would eventually be converted and become the greatest friend and advocate Christianity had ever known.
5. Thus , a deadly persecutor can become a great ally and partner in the cause of Christ.
6. This gives us hope that those who are enemies of Christ now can become our brothers and sisters in Christ who work alongside us in sharing the gospel.
7. This is the power which God has to change lives.
8. I am reminded of what the apostle Paul would write a number of years later in his letter to the saints in Rome (Romans 1:16-17).

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17, NASB95)

9. It is important that we each look upon our adversaries with the eyes of faith and pray that someday through the power of God they may have the turn-around that Saul had.

#### Slide 10

### **C. THE WORD OF GOD IS GOOD NEWS WHICH BRINGS JOY**

1. Even though the Word of God brought persecution, it is still good news and brings joy.
2. The paragraph that begins with verse 4 ends with verse 8.
3. In verse 4 Luke tells us that "those who had been scattered went about preaching the word" (Acts 8:4, NASB95).
  - a.
4. The very Word that had brought persecution they announced as good news.
5. Verse 8 confirms that it was good news because it states, "so there was

much rejoicing in that city.”

6. The joy that arrives is much greater and longer-lasting than the persecution, so the trade-off is worth it.
7. Why was there such joy in Samaria?
8. Verse 7 gives us one reason — unclean spirits were coming out of many and those who had been paralyzed or lame were healed.
9. But the main reason for the joy is found in verse 5: “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.” (Acts 8:5)
10. Christ alone has the power to deliver us from Satan and all his evil.
11. Christ alone has the power to heal our bodies now and to raise them in the resurrection.
12. Christ alone has the power to take away our sin and make us right before God.

## Conclusion

### Slide 11

1. As we conclude our lesson this morning, I want to leave you with the words of the Samaritans who had met Jesus following His encounter with the woman at the well outside of Sychar.
2. Those of us who are Christians here this morning are part of a kingdom that is eternal, one against which no other can stand.
3. Our message is one of a Savior who came to this earth, lived among us to show us how to live, and then died on a Roman cross to take away our sin.
4. He offers to us forgiveness of the sin in our lives which separates us from the one true and living God.
5. He calls us to Himself in obedient faith.
6. Will you respond to His invitation today?