

THEY PREACHED THE WORD WHEREVER THEY WENT

Acts 8:1-25

Key Verse 8:4 *“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”*

Last Sunday, we learned about Stephen’s glorious martyrdom, which became the catalyst for the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. When Stephen was killed by the Jews, a young man named Saul was present, and he approved of their killing of Stephen. Godly men took Stephen's body, buried it, and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Saul considered the believers in Jesus to be a very dangerous group that threatened Judaism, and he persecuted them with increasing violence and brutality. He was authorized and supported by the Jewish religious leaders. Luke says, *“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem”* (1b). The word persecution is used twice in the book of Acts, in 8:1 and 13:50, and 8:1 is the only one with the adjective ‘great.’ The implication is that the persecution was enormous. The phrase “Saul began to destroy the church” makes it clear that the persecution was the work of Satan, who was trying to destroy God's church. The history of God is about the spiritual battle against Satan. It is only natural that Satan would persecute believers and the church of Jesus Christ in order to prevent the expansion of God's kingdom. Jesus told his disciples, *“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hates me first”* (Jn 15:18). When we are persecuted in the world, there is no reason to think it is strange. We are being persecuted because we are obeying God's Word and living as disciples of Jesus. If we are not experiencing any persecution and our life of faith is peaceful, we need to examine our faith. We need to seriously consider whether we are compromising with the world.

Satan has tried to destroy the church of Jesus Christ, but the church of God will never fail. Rather, through the power of Jesus who has overcome the world, the church of God will overcome persecution and expand the kingdom of God. Today’s passage is an excellent example of this truth. In the face of the great persecution, all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. The apostles were in great danger of being killed, but they obeyed Jesus' command and did not leave Jerusalem. However, the rest of the saints were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. And what did they do? *“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went”* (4). The word ‘scatter’ appears twice in verses 1 and 4. The Greek word for ‘scatter’ is *διασπείρω* (*diaspeirō*). It is often used to refer to the act of spreading out or disseminating something, such as seeds, information, or people. The noun form of *διασπείρω* (*diaspeirō*) is *διασπορά* (*diaspora*), which you may have heard of. When it is said that the early church members were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, it doesn't mean that they had prepared to move a year or even a month in advance. It

means that they were suddenly forced to leave Jerusalem, where they had been living in stability, because of severe persecution. This means that they had to leave their homes overnight in a hurry with only essential items in small bags. They left Jerusalem, not knowing where they were going. I can only imagine how they felt when they had to leave their homes, jobs, and stable lives, and flee to foreign lands. I remember in 2009, after receiving threatening phone calls, I left Venezuela in a hurry with my wife and children and went to Chicago. In the car on the way to the airport early in the morning, I was in tears as I thought, "I am here in Venezuela preaching the gospel and helping people in this country. Why are they persecuting me and driving me out of this country?" I was overwhelmed by the uncertainty of my future. I can only imagine what it was like for the early church believers who had to flee Jerusalem and live as strangers.

But they did not despair and lose faith in their situation; on the contrary, they preached the word wherever they went (4). How was this possible? It was because they reflected on what God's will was for them in the situation of great persecution and accepted God's good will, and obeyed it. In the midst of the great persecution, the apostles and believers would have prayed and sought God's will. They believed that God was in control of all things in the world. We, too, believe that God is working in the history of this world to accomplish His will. So what was God's will for the great persecution of the saints in Jerusalem? The apostles and saints may have remembered Jesus' final commission 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 in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth***" (Acts 1:8). God's amazing power was being revealed in Jerusalem. The church grew, gathering thousands. The church in Jerusalem was filled with the Holy Spirit. But they hadn't yet obeyed Jesus' final commission. Maybe they didn't think it was time yet. Or maybe they liked their current life in Jerusalem so much that they didn't want to step out of their comfort zone. In any case, they knew they needed to carry out Jesus' Great Commission, but they weren't actively doing it. So, God shook up their comfort zone with persecution. Once the persecution started, they couldn't stay in Jerusalem any longer, and it made them think about what God's will was. And they realized that it was time to leave Jerusalem and go to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth to preach the gospel. And they accepted that it was God who had made their circumstances, and they actively obeyed God's will. So they preached the word wherever they went. And everywhere they went, people came to faith in Jesus and had their lives changed, and churches were established.

Here, we learn that God Himself fulfills His mission. What is the mission of God, *Missio Dei* in Latin? In the narrow sense, God's mission is the coming of the kingdom of Christ on earth through preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the broad sense, God's mission is living out of Christ's love for our neighbors. It includes preaching the gospel and all the practical acts of feeding the poor, healing the sick, and helping those in need with the love of Jesus so that they may receive Jesus as their Savior. I want to ask you a question: Is God's mission the task of only a certain privileged group of believers? Are some called to fulfill God's mission, while others are not? No! All Christians are called

to participate in God's mission because God is a missional God. Mission is the very nature of God! To carry out His mission, God sent His only Son Jesus to earth to die on the cross, and after Jesus' resurrection, Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit to accomplish God's mission. The Triune God, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, send the church, the Christian believers, to go around the world so that people who don't know Jesus can know his love, receive the gospel, be transformed, and live new lives as disciples of Jesus. Therefore, to participate in God's mission is the essence of our life of faith, the motivation and purpose of Jesus' calling for us.

Some people feel overwhelmed when they hear that they are to fulfill God's mission. They think that they are not yet spiritually ready for it. They think that their lives are too busy and that they do not have the time and material resources to do it. However, there is one most important thing to remember in participating in God's mission: "God Himself is the one who does God's mission." God is the one who is doing it, not us. So we don't have to worry about God's mission at all because God is doing it, and we don't have to feel burdened by it. So, what are we supposed to do? Just sit on the sidelines and watch? No, we are supposed to actively participate in God's mission, which is being led by God Himself. We are partners and coworkers in God's mission because God is excited to use us to accomplish His mission. This requires us to observe closely what God is doing in our midst, discover it in wisdom and prayer, and then actively obey and participate in His work.

That's how the members of the early Jerusalem church realized what God was doing and became active in God's mission. One example is the story of Philip the evangelist. He was one of the seven deacons in chapter 6 and was full of the Spirit and wisdom. He went down to a city in Samaria. What kind of place was Samaria to the Jews? Jews did not associate with Samaritans (Jn 4:9). The antagonistic relationship between Jews and Samaritans stems from the long history of Israel. The Samaritans had intermarried with Gentiles and fallen into syncretism, worshiping many pagan gods in addition to the God of Israel. So, the Jews despised the Samaritans and treated them as Gentiles. However, Jesus went to Samaria to preach the gospel. Furthermore, when he gave the Great Commission to his disciples, he explicitly said that the gospel was to be preached in Samaria. Philip remembered this command from Jesus and actively went to Samaria to preach the gospel. He was a Hellenistic Jew, but he put aside all his prejudice against Samaritans and obeyed Jesus' command to preach the gospel in Samaria.

The spiritual condition of Samaria was desolate. In one of the cities in Samaria where Philip went, the people were being entertained by a sorcerer named Simon. Simon boasted that he was someone great. All the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is rightly called the Great Power of God." Simon had been influential, honored, and powerful in the city for a long time, using the power of evil spirits. But when Philip proclaimed the Messiah there, performed signs, drove out demons, and healed the sick, people believed in Jesus and received the gospel. And they were baptized, both men and women. And there was great joy in that

city. When people receive the gospel, joy overflows. God's wonderful work of salvation was revealed in Samaria. So when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria to support Philip's ministry. Although the Samaritans believed in Jesus, the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them. They had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. So Peter and John placed their hands on them and prayed for them. Then, they received the Holy Spirit. Some people question how the Samaritans could not receive the Holy Spirit if they believed in the name of Jesus Christ. In the general case, no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). All those who have confessed Jesus are those who have received the Holy Spirit. However, Samaria's case was special. It seems that because of the importance of the ministry in Samaria, God waited to give them the Holy Spirit until the apostles Peter and John came from Jerusalem to pray for them. And when Peter and John came and prayed for the Samaritans, they received the Holy Spirit. This seems to have been God's plan so that the Samaritans would be welcomed into the Christian community under the approval of the two main apostles of the church. Because the apostles saw the Holy Spirit working among the Samaritans, they were naturally welcomed into the Christian community, including the church in Jerusalem.

Another thing is that Simon's false faith was exposed through the apostles. He was baptized by Philip and followed him everywhere. But when he saw that the Holy Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me also this power so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." He was spiritually blind, and his interest was not in Jesus but in the power of the Holy Spirit. He wanted to buy the power of the Holy Spirit with money so that he could be recognized by people and maintain his authority. The apostle Peter rebuked his impure motives and called him to repentance. Because of Peter's spiritual discernment, the evil influence of the false believer in the emerging church in Samaria was removed, and the Samaritans were able to form a pure community of faith.

In today's message, I've been thinking about how we can fulfill God's mission fruitfully. To do this, it's important that we discern how God has led our church so far and what He is doing now among us. This important work cannot be done by anyone alone but can be more accurately discerned when we come together in prayer and conversation. My personal conviction is that God wants us to be a Missional Church. A Missional Church is one that discerns God's mission and actively participates in it. New York UBF was historically founded by missionaries who came to the U.S. to preach the gospel to American college students. Our senior missionaries, Paul & Sarah Kim and Peter & Mary Song, are among the first of many UBF missionaries who were sent for the world mission. Most of our missionaries here have joined the world mission work and given their lives to the Lord from when they were young. Therefore, God's mission is in our DNA and the meaning of our existence. If someone asks us an ontological question about what kind of church we are, I think we can answer that we are a Missional Church.

Looking at how God has led our church since 1970, when New York UBF was founded, is helpful in discovering what God is doing among us today. As we know, UBF began and grew out of a call to campus mission. Our missionaries and coworkers in New York UBF have made great efforts to fulfill the campus mission by preaching the gospel at Columbia University, New York University, Queen's College, St. John's University, CUNY, SUNY, etc. Now, New York UBF has 54 years of history, so in human terms, we are in the middle age. In the meantime, younger missionaries joined this ministry, local people received Jesus in this church, and many children of our families have been growing up. Now, our church has become a multi-generational congregation where people of various ages, from newborn babies to 80-year-old seniors, gather to worship God together. In addition, we have become a multi-ethnic congregation where people of different cultures gather to serve God together. This is the work that God has done among us, and we should pray and strive for our church to become a more mature and fruitful multi-generational and multi-ethnic Missional Church.

Therefore, we need to support the BBF & CBF ministry spiritually and financially so that our teachers can develop education programs to help our children grow up as God's children in a spiritual environment. We need to help HBF students to have a personal encounter with Jesus through God's Word and the work of the Holy Spirit. We need to help young families to build happy homes with harmonious marital relationships and spiritually nurture their children. We need to support and encourage our adult members to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world by spreading the gospel of Jesus in their workplaces. We need to support our senior missionaries so that they can continue to do God's mission in good health. Most of all, we need to empower our college ministry to fulfill our calling from God. In order to empower our college ministry, I will create a college ministry team to work more effectively for evangelism and discipleship among college students. We need to create a spiritual and cultural environment where multi-ethnic college students can join our church, receive the gospel, and grow as disciples of Jesus. Currently, UBF leaders are praying and moving forward with the identity and direction of being a church focused on college ministry. We will also move in that direction and support different ministries to bear abundant fruit in God.

For us to be a truly Missional Church, it is important that we become like the early church members and Philip, the evangelist, who pursued God's mission and actively participated in God's gospel work by preaching the word wherever they went. *"Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."* I pray that we can be Jesus' witnesses in New York, North America, Latin America, and to the ends of the earth by preaching the gospel of Jesus wherever we go. My fervent prayer is that our church becomes a Spirit-filled community and raises up many faithful disciples of Jesus. May God use us for His redemptive work in New York and beyond. Amen.