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## **The Big Splash** **Acts 8:1-8**

Last week our family went for a swim on the East Fork above Sunset falls. It was a beautiful spot with refreshing water. I'm not sure why the four big steelhead kept hanging around with all the splashing and rock throwing. Yes rock throwing. At some point for the boys and I, the rocks and water seem to just naturally be gravitationally attracted to an activity that I have never seen women doing. For some unknown reason it seems to be incredibly fun to pick up the biggest rock we can carry and drop it off the highest ledge available, to see who could make the biggest splash. We quickly determined that the bigger the rock the bigger the splash, the more surface area, the wider the splash. And, if you angled the rocks just right when you dropped them in the water we could really get the wave to splash all over mom and Olivia. Which they didn't mind because of it being so hot outside. Of course it became a contest as to who could get the splash to go up the highest and splash out the farthest.

Our story in the book of Acts continues with a large rock that comes crashing down at a suffering angle into the relatively safe waters of the city of Jerusalem. The rock that makes the big splash is the persecution that follows after the stoning of Stephen and it sends the believers squirting out all over Palestine. Persecution comes crashing down on the believers and splashes them all across Judea, Samaria and into the rest of the world.

That last phrase ought to have a familiar ring as this was God's plan for the early church right from the start. Let me read from Acts 1:8 "But you shall receive power after that the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea

and in Samaria and even to the remotest part of the earth.” That is an outline that explains how it all took place in the early church, just exactly as God had planned. The good news message starts out in Jerusalem. And it’s been some time following the death of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and still most of the believers are still in Jerusalem.

The first 7 chapters center around this ministry to Jerusalem and at the close of the books focus on Jerusalem, we read how Stephen was killed by an enraged Sanhedrin who couldn’t deal with the truth that had been clearly placed before their eyes. Couldn’t deal with the truth that they were just like their fathers of old, their patriarchs who can a consistent track record of rejecting God’s message and His messengers. They couldn’t come to admit that God was indeed behind Jesus. They couldn’t deal with the fact that Jesus had eliminated the need for a priest to talk with God. They couldn’t handle the idea that Jesus sacrifice of his own body for our sin was complete and no longer did they need to sacrifice animals. They could not admit that they had murdered and put to death the son of God...so once again they kill God’s messenger. They take Stephen out of the city and stone him to death. He is the first Christian martyr.

The men who stone Stephen take off their coats and lay them at the feet of a man named Saul from Tarsus. This is a cameo appearance of one who would be incredibly transformed by the God and because of the preaching of Stephen and the influence of the Holy Sprit. More then his name would be changed. The Sanhedrin tried to silence a voice that was upsetting the city and instead they awakened a voice that God would use to turn an entire empire upside down.

Lets read together Acts 8:1-8 a passage of scripture that begins with persecution and ends up with proclamation. Along the way we are going to learn some powerful truths about how God works that will help us better join Him in what He is about. In this mornings talk we are

going to learn some great things to know if we are a water droplet being flung out of a safe comfortable pool of water, having just been splashed by a great big rock of suffering or persecution. Lets (READ Acts 8:1-8)

First lesson we learn about how God works is this: God seems to have no problems in allowing persecution and suffering in order to accomplish His purposes. God will allow difficult things to come into your life, into my life in order to spread truth and accomplish what he wants to do to take us to the place we have never been before and to forge into us great things we would never dream of. God will allow suffering to accomplish His purposes. V. 1 and there arose a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea, Samaria. There it is. The scattering. Literally the word scattering means to be sowed like seeds and the persecution was scattering them like seeds thrown around all Palestine. People were hearing about Jesus who had never heard it before. If I am a believer in Jerusalem at that time, I'm sure the heated persecution and suffering must have felt like a terrible tragedy, but in fact it was God's plan. Acts 1:8, it was God's plan.

God was using Paul as an instrument to shove out the believers into missions. Saul was ravaging the followers of the way. He didn't even spare the women v.3, but would drag them all off to prison. Yet what looked like a tragedy on the face of things, God used for an even greater good to spread the good news and accomplish his purposes. Jesus had commanded his disciples to go out into all the world and here the death of Stephen kicks off a huge rock that splashes them clear across the countryside.

On January 9, 1985 Pastor Hristo Kulichev in Bulgaria was arrested and put in prison. His crime was that he preached in his church even though the state had appointed another man as pastor whom the congregation had not elected. His trial was a mockery of justice and he was sentenced to 8 months in prison. When he got out he wrote this, “

Both prisoners and jailer asked many questions and it turned out that we had a far more fruitful ministry there than we could have expected in church. God was better served by our presence in prison than if we had been free.

It is not His only way, but often it seems God does not shy away from allowing persecution and suffering to spread the truth of the good news and to forge character and holiness into the people of faith.

On Sunday January 8, 1956 on the shore of a lonely river deep in the Ecuadorian jungle, five missionaries were murdered by the Auca Indians. News of the massacre rocked the world and to some the deaths were a senseless tragedy. Five young wives no longer had husbands. Children no longer had a daddy. Five missionaries who were intent on sharing the good news their voice snuffed out. But those with deeper spiritual insight saw things differently.

Here is what Elisabeth Elliot wife of another martyr Jim Elliot wrote. To the world at large this was a sad waste of five young men. But God has His plan and purpose in all things. Lives were changed by what happened on that secluded jungle beach. In Brazil a group of Indians deep in the Mato Grosso upon hearing the news, dropped to their knees and cried out to God for forgiveness for their own lack of concern for their fellow Indians who did not yet know of Jesus. An Air force major stationed in England, with hundreds of hours of flying experience, immediately began making plans to join Missionary Aviation Fellowship. From Africa a missionary wrote; our work will never be the same. We knew two of those men and their lives have left their mark on ours. Off the coast of Italy, an American naval officer was involved in an accident at sea. As he floated alone on a raft, he recalled the words of Jim Elliott which he had read in a news report "When it comes time to die, make sure that all you have to do is die." He prayed that he might be saved, knowing that he had more to do than die. He was not ready. God answered his prayer and he was rescued. In Iowa an 18 year old heard

the news about the five deaths in Ecuador and went into his bedroom and prayed for a week. Then he announced to his parents, "I'm turning my life over completely to the Lord, I want to try to take the place of one of those five."

At first glance Stephens death looks pointless. Here is the rising cream of the Christian leadership crop getting cut down far short of his potential. He was a gifted evangelist with a deep knowledge, full of the Holy Spirit, great reputation, with a heart of a servant. And yet, even though God allow the evil one to cut him down, it wasn't early. It was God's perfect timing and the splash of his death and the persecution that followed sent out waves of missionaries into the surrounding areas Judea, Samaria.

V. 2 is an interesting insert. After talking about Saul and the persecution and the scattering in v.1 and the same theme renewed in v.3, why v.2 stopping to mention that devout men loudly lamented over Stephens death? I think the author Luke mentions that because there might have been some blaming of Stephen for the persecution. Luke makes it clear that it all started because of Stephen's speech to the council. 8:1 says "and on that day...a great persecution started." Acts 11:19 says "So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen..." You can almost imagine some prudent well meaning believers in Jerusalem saying; If Stephen had just been more careful with his words. The first part of the speech was inflammatory enough without calling our elders stiff-necked murderers who never keep the Law. He should have toned it down a bit. It's always these hotheads that get us in trouble and now my husband and daughter have been hauled off to prison. My neighbors, the whole city is against us. Our home are destroyed and now we're running in fear like refugees. Why didn't he just think before he spoke. Luke inserts verse 2 to show that Stephen is honored and not blamed. Luke explains that all through his speech this man full of grace and glory had a face that

shown like an angel. And here in v.2 devout men are speaking loudly in the streets that what Stephen had to say, what he lived for and what he died for was in fact right on. The worldly minded person will be concerned with good and kindred and status and comfort, but the devout people, the god-fearing, god loving people think about life the way Jesus thinks about life. They let good and kindred god, this mortal life, also; the body they may kill, God's truth abideth still...They have found the mighty fortress that is our God.

God will allow persecution and suffering to accomplish His purposes. Persecution will accomplish what obedience does not do. God is the one who is directing the orchestra of events to spread the greater purpose of the good news. The believers in Jerusalem didn't blame, they didn't get discouraged when they were forced out of Jerusalem under some very difficult circumstances. They trusted that God was still in control of events, even the difficult ones. They knew that God has an incredible ability to work things out for the ultimate good.

Recently, I talked with a guy who's been in the hospital for over a month. A car fell on him. He almost died and may lose his leg. Yet, he lay there saying it's the best thing that has happened to him. He is praying that God spares his leg, but even if He doesn't God has used this event to bring him back to himself and the time in the hospital has brought him freedom from the stuff that kept dragging him down.

Think for a moment about your own life. Think about the difficult, painful, suffering times. Is it not through those times we experience the deeper things of God? Have you been out of work for a long time? Lost your job? Forced to move? Have you been rejected by a college? Death of someone close? Did you not get the job promotion you hoped for? Have you been relationally rejected? A father? A mother? A girlfriend dump you for another? These are all disappointments to us, pains and sufferings, but God uses them to plant us where he wants us.

In my last year of seminary, I hadn't even put a resume' together because I had been planning to pastor at the church in California I had done an internship with. I was really looking forward to that...and then I got the call. Sorry we have decided to pursue the next Pastor's position as an older man that can counsel families. I was disappointed...but trusted God that he would have something even more perfectly suited for me. And here I am right where God wants me. Last week I got an email that the Men's retreat which I was to speak at in Hawaii had been canceled. I was bummed for a about 2 seconds. But since I was studying this sermon I brightened up knowing that God must have something far more greater for me to learn and experience. Something even better than Hawaii. Wow! it has got to be great. I can't wait to find out what it is.

Are you feeling pressure today? Suffering? Well, it may not necessarily be for a punishment for sins. When we are getting hammered on sometimes its because we have made some real foolish and sinful choices. Sometimes we get punished for our own sin. If you your suffering sincerely ask God if there is something you need to repent of an clean up before him. If not, then it may well be that the suffering and pressure is coming because it is God's way of moving you, even pressuring you into a new experience, into a new and deeper understanding of his truth, a new opportunity for ministry, a new place to discover some core truths that will help you and bless you and others around you. I tend to like God's more positive motivators like reward and a new and better job and friends that can come alongside and encourage me...but some of God's greatest lesson seem to come out of the crucible of crisis. And God is not afraid of allowing persecution and suffering to accomplish what He wants to do in us and through us.

There is a tremendous lesson here for us who are living in a very wealthy American church. The lesson is that comfort, ease, wealth, safety and freedom often cause a heaping load of inertia on the church. Inertia is the tendency of something that is standing still to stay standing

still and also the tendency of something moving to keep moving. It's what keeps the winning baseball teams continuing to win even more than they should and it keeps the losing teams continuing to lose even more than they should. The very things that we think would produce people and energy and creative investment in the body of time and money actually produce the opposite. Safety, wealth, stability and comfort bring weakness, apathy, self-centeredness, defensiveness, pride, and a preoccupation with control and security. All things that are death to a church. The point is not that all wealth is evil and for us to seek persecution, but we certainly need to be wary that prosperity and security can be devastating to God's mission. And the church becomes more like the frozen chosen than a vibrant impassioned force to rattle the very gates of hell. God has called us to fishers of men, not keepers of the aquarium. (Larry King quote. God wants to do something here....and He does. Look for him to shake you up. Look for him to shake up our church body. Expect that he will toss in a huge rock and watch the water droplets splash all over. What will seem like a terrible tragedy God will use in a powerful, unimaginable way to benefit God's kingdom, God's church and God's people. Expect it in your own life. That's not the way God only works...but He sure does seem to do it a lot.

Acts 8:1 ff

Above Sunset falls swimming. Boys throwing in rocks. Bigger and bigger rocks to see who could make the biggest splash and get mom and Olivia the wettest. Theories as to how to throw. What side to land in the water, the angle the rock hits the water in order to make the biggest waves. Persecution is a rock that is going to explode the believers out of their comfortable fishing hole in Jerusalem and they are going to go a long way and they will get others wet with the good news of the gospel. Rom 1:16 "It is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes" Persecution became a splash in the pond to send the gospel rippling outward

Following the early church is like trying to track a wounded deer in the woods, drops of blood mark its trail.

For two years the Christians have been involved in city evangelism and now its time to go out.

And Saul was in hearty agreement

With putting him to death. (very much in favor of snuffing out this messenger and his message)

And on that day a GREAT persecution arose

Against the church

In Jerusalem

And they were all scattered

Throughout the regions of

Judea

And Samaria....except the Apostles.

Havoc: the idea of a wild animal scattering its prey.

Scattered "diaspora" means to scatter seeds by the wind. God used the wind to plant seeds in new soil in order to grow.

The waves of persecution have come. It is no longer limited to their leadership. Now all who claim to be believers in Christ are taking the heat, losing their jobs, getting beaten on by their neighbors even relatives that don't want to have anything to do with Jesus and are pretty ticked that they seem to think things need to change. The temple was the economic center and that is changing. It's hitting some pocketbooks. People don't like change.

\*God allows persecution and suffering to accomplish His purposes. God allows difficult times to move people to the place where he wants them. He knows that we get comfortable, too comfortable that we wouldn't ever get the message that we need to get up and move...so God uses circumstances to move us. I like it when God provides positive motivators to move us. Take a job change for instance. If you have a stable place and job you probably wouldn't ever change or even ask God if its time to move. But if there were some dissatisfaction in the job that got you to the point where you were looking. Possibly, a great opportunity opens up to move temporarily to Bend, OR. Its there that he can get you out away far enough to hear Him. I want you to go to Seminary in Dallas TX. I brought you here so you would listen and I brought you here so I could provide for you and teach you lessons you need to know.

Jesus had sent them out with a great commission. A mission. This was a job that they were to be doing. Be his witnesses. It didn't mean that everyone had to go two by two and knock on doors. Or stand up on a box in the village square. No. They simply were called to be witnesses. Be the best possible reflection of the light that God had poured into them. Follow in Jesus footsteps in the best possible way wherever God happened to place them. Be a carpenter that loves Jesus and demonstrates how much they love other people. Don't be embarrassed, ashamed or afraid of persecution. Tell how much Jesus loves you and love them too.

\*We are His witnesses. Whether we like it or not. IF you are a believer in Christ you are a living witness. Good or bad. Saturday night. On the ball field. At home. At work. In town with the guys. We are his witnesses. That is what God wants us to be in the place that God calls us to.

Problem was that God wanted the message to spread, and to do that he needed the messengers to spread. People. A strange way to spread a message using people. Not fire in the sky or video feed. Unreliable people. If I were God I think I would be worried that they didn't send the right message or that they sent the wrong message or its distorted. But God didn't seem to worry a whole lot about the fallibility of people.

Persecution will do what obedience will not do.

“Do you want to go easy or am I going to have be tough with you? I don’t like god’s arm twisting.

v.3 But Saul began ravaging the church  
entering house after house  
dragging of men and women  
he would put them in prison

v.4 Therefore, those who had been scattered  
went about preaching the word.

(Is Phillip an example of one who was scattered and preaching the word? He was the next deacon after Stephen mentioned in those who were appointed as deacons.)

Samaria: 40 miles north and west of Jerusalem. When king Solomon died, his kingdom was split into two the northern tribes of Israel rejected the southern tribe of Judah. The northerner decided to make Samaria their capital and set up a temporary cult to rival those in Jerusalem. The two nations were at war off and on until Assyria overran the northern Israel in 723bc and destroyed Samaria. Sending most of its population into exile. After that, the whole territory of the north was called Samaria. The Assyrians settled other people in that area that had a pagan religion, some stayed true to the Hebrew God but others kind of mixed in pagan and Israelite worship. They built a temple on Mt. Gerizim to rival the one in Jerusalem so that Jews labeled the Samaritans not as gentiles but as heretics. They generally avoided each other. It was the capital residence of the northern kingdom of Israel. The Greeks conquered the area in 331 BC and then was uninhabited for a long period. Revived under Pompey and the Romans in 63 bc. Herod the Great gained control in 30 BC and rebuilt it and made it one of the chief cities of his territory. The city was settled with people from all over the world many mercenaries from Europe settled there on retirement pensions. At least 6000. During the days of Christ, the relationship between the Jews and Samaritan were strained. So much so that the Jews would bypass Samaria as they traveled between Galilee and Jerusalem. Jesus however went out of his way to reach out and minister to the Samaritans. Healing a Samaritan leper, Honoring a Samaritan for being a good neighbor. Asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of water and praised a Samaritan for his gratitude. To show how much the disdain was of Samaritans, a Jewish rabbi said, “Let no man eat the bread of the Samaritans for he who eats their bread is as he who eats swine flesh.

Why was Phillip accepted? He was a Greek speaking Jewish Christian.

Further the discounting of the importance of the Jewish temple was something they wanted to hear.

v.5ff. Phillip is an example of fulfilling the great commission to the area of Samaria. Jews would be resistant to head there. Close by but no religious authority. They held that Mt. Gerizim not Jerusalem was the place to worship God.

v.6 The phrase “giving attention” to seems to keep popping up. First they give attention to Phillip and his proclaiming of Christ. The listened and were attracted to all the miracles that backed up his messages. Signs and wonders.

Wherever God sows His true believers, Satan will try to sow and mix in his counterfeits. Simon was energized by Satan. II Tes 2:1-12

Wherever Christ is there is joy, but Christ isn't in all ministries, some are phony.

It's a false ministry if some person other then Christ is exalted. Bob Tilton in Dallas Texas.

If its based on fleshly attractions. Come see Simon the magnificent. His acts certainly were not from God even though they brought him a large following.

Simon simply went through all the religious motions with the wrong motives.

Preoccupation with the material rather then the spiritual. You can't buy God.

v.9 In the same place a magician with astonishing powers Worked the people of Samaria. He claimed to be someone great. Everyone listened to Simon. For a long time he had astonished them with his magic arts. He was interested in money making. He wanted some of that new magic and was willing to arrange a business proposition so he could do it to. I'm sure he was thinking about how he could easily pay off his initial investment in just a few short weeks with power like that. He could recognizer it was stronger and better then anything he had.

v.12 But now they were giving attention to the new deal in town. Philip and Jesus. They believed his preaching the good news. People were identifying themselves as believers and so Simon decided to get on the bandwagon. He too believed. He was baptized. He became a disciple of Phillip. He watched the signs and wonders and the one who constantly amazed others was he himself constantly amazed b.13

Simons faith was not in the word of God but in the power itself and the miracles he saw Phillip perform. James 2;19 says the “demons also

believe and shutter.” He continued with Phillip not to see how to follow Christ better and obey, but to get tips on how to use the power.

Early church father Iraneous speak of Simon as the father of Gnosticism and early arch-villain of the church.

Sin of Simon when we...

Seek spiritual power or abilities to put ourselves forward

When we preach or teach simply to gain status or recognition in the church

When

v.14 Apostles receive word that god is really moving in the people of Samaria through the ministry of Phillip so they send down Peter and John to check it out. The apostles go up and pray for them to receive the holy spirit. The delay of the holy spirit here was key in avoiding a church split, continued estrangement as it brought the Christian leaders from Jerusalem into contact with Samaritans and both can see that this is a god thing that ought to bring people together that have typically been estranged.

v.17 they laid their hands on them and they received the holy spirit. It doesn't say what happened so they could tell it came. It simply said it came and they knew it. They may have spoken in tongues. They may have had a rushing wind and little flames flashing. They may have simply began to exercise their gifts the holy spirit gives. In other times they spoke it tongues to validate that yes the holy spirit did show up.

v.18 Now Simon is looking for the cookbook, the catch. What is the trick. Simons learn to do magic by waving your hands just right and saying a few words. Putting a few potions together you get actions. Simon zeros in on what he can see. The laying on of hands and says, That's it. He pulls Peter off to the side and whispers, "Give me some money and teach me this magic. Deputize me. Let me in on the trick. Give me the authority. So that everyone I lay hands on could also receive the HS. Peter using discernment flushes out his motive.

"You money grubbing louse. Do you think this is all about making money. Do yo think this is why we made the trip up from Jerusalem? I hope you get buried by all your money. Peter was not a guy who was about to kiss up to the rich new believer.

Most Bible translations soften this up from the Greek. JB Phillips doesn't when he translates Peters words from the Greek it says, "To hell with you and your money." The HS will not be a commodity that will be bought or sold.

Do you think you could possibly buy the gift of God with money? Then you have totally missed the entire point. Get your heart right with God. Repent of these sinful attitudes

Discernment. You are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of sin. Gall is a poisonous herb, mentioned eight times in the OT so probably not the same herb that was mixed with the drink given to the Lord on Calvary.

When does the HS come on believers? Romans 8:1-17 it pretty clear that no one who does not have the HS is a Christian. So.. are the Samaritans who responded to Philip's preaching Christians prior to the apostolic laying on of hands?

Option 1 not yet real believers. But would Phillip have baptized them had he doubted their belief? Luke doesn't cast any doubt on their faith

Option 2 A person receives the HS only by apostolic laying on of hands.

Option 3 God held back the HS in this unique case so the apostle could confirm that the Samaritans were part of the church.

In 19:1-7 the men at Ephesus have not yet been baptized into Jesus or received the HS they get both at once with the laying on of hands by apostles

In 10:44-48 the HS comes before baptism without laying on of hands and only after hearing the gospel

In 2:38 HS comes without laying on of hands but after hearing the gospel.

In 9:17 Saul receives the HS when Ananias not the apostle lays hands on him.

The order so varied suggests that God can do whatever he wants in a particular situation. Acts doesn't suggest a pattern that is normal, but baptism and HS reception are normal for Christians.

The HS is a person. He is God. We see that the object of our relationship to the HS is not that we might have more of him so that we can use him, but rather that He might have more of us and use us.

Simon's "pray for me" is a cop out. Pastors hear it all the time. Peter wanted Simon to get down on his knees and pray repentance. Nothing wrong with praying for people, but He was refusing to do what he was challenged to do and passed the buck on to others. He wanted them to pray for him