Acts 8:1-8 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. 4 Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. 5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 6 And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. 7 For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. 8 So there was much joy in that city.

What would happen to the church if persecution like this came to the Greenville area? How would you live? How would you respond? Where would you go? What would you do? These aren't unfamiliar questions to many in the Middle East this morning as they rise to worship Jesus on this Lord's Day. How about for us here and now, how will we live? I believe that God has perfectly timed this passage from the book of Acts for us today, to help us see persecution from His perspective. I believe God wants to prepare us, to comfort us and to instruct us, so that we don't fear but that we live in joy for Him each day today.

Acts 8:1 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

As we enter into the scene of the passage we just read, it is a sobering one. We are coming in right after the murder of Stephen. Stephen has just been killed for preaching the good news about Jesus Christ. As we have seen over the past two weeks as we’ve studied the account about Stephen, he was preaching the good news that Jesus replaces the temple and is now ever-present with His people and that Jesus fulfills the law and so, those who are His people are forever free from the law of sin with its curse and death and instead can have new life in Christ Jesus.

The Jews didn't recognize their own Messiah though and they were stiff-necked – they refused their own Master and killed not only Jesus but Stephen as one of His first martyrs. And at the beginning of verse 1, it says, “And Saul approved of His execution”. Saul was a young man at the time, as chapter 7 tells us and he watched over the garments of those who stoned Stephen. Stoning was a hot and bloody affair – it took a while and a deal of effort to hit someone with stones enough times to kill them, so they took off their cloaks and laid them at Saul's feet, so he could watch out over them and make sure they weren't stolen. And now, we see that Saul was no passive observer. He didn’t watch in horror – he watched up front and personally approved of Stephen’s bloody, violent, painful execution. The NASB puts it more clearly and says “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death”. Saul had become a religious fanatic and along with others was persecuting his own Creator and those who followed Him. He wasn’t
alone though. It says that “there arose on that day, a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem”.

Now, it is worth noting that up until now, there was no church outside of the church in Jerusalem as far as we know from the Biblical record. Jesus had commissioned his followers to go and make disciples of all nations and to teach them to observe all that He commanded and He promised to be with them always to the end of the ages. Then, in Acts 1:8, the last thing that Jesus said to them before He was taken up into heaven was, “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.”

They have definitely been effective witnesses in Jerusalem, spreading the Word about Jesus until the testimony of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish rulers, in Acts 5:28 was that they “have filled Jerusalem” with their teaching. Oh that it would be said that our own city might be filled with the true, life-giving, vibrant teaching about the good news of Jesus Christ.

At this point, the church had grown to somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 people. Up until now though, they have not taken the life-transforming message of the gospel of Jesus outside of Jerusalem. But now, a great wave of persecution arose against the church and the church was scattered.

It doesn’t tell us why the apostles didn’t leave Jerusalem. But we know from earlier, it wasn’t for lack of boldness in proclaiming the good news about Jesus. Probably, the apostles stayed to encourage and care for those being persecuted in Jerusalem? Maybe the apostles stayed like captains who choose to go down with their ship? Or maybe they just stayed to do the hard work of taking the gospel to the hardest place? Maybe you have been placed in a difficult job or a difficult situation with a difficult neighbor because God intends to use you there?

Did you notice the words that Luke used about where the church was scattered though? He wrote that “they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria”. Luke is doing something here. He is showing a direct correlation between persecution and the purposes of God. He is showing that persecution is the means God uses to expand the church.

1. We can trust God in the midst of persecution

On the heels of execution and great persecution of the church, God uses Satan’s attempts to crush the church to expand the church. You see, Luke is driving home the central thread of Acts, that “God’s Plan Continues Unhindered”. This passage is a direct demonstration of how “Jesus expands His church, through the Spirit’s power, despite all opposition.”

But they weren’t unaffected – they were sad, they grieved and verse 2 says, “Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.” Why does Luke give us this detail? Typically when it speaks of lamentations like this, it means that those who knew the person would go into a period of loud mourning for a month or more, as they remembered the victim and were affected by their death. I think Luke gives us this detail in Acts for a few reasons perhaps.

You see, it was a godly thing to bury Stephen. Even though the teachers of the law had made rules forbidding the burial of someone who had been stoned for blasphemy, they courageously buried Stephen, although even just the act of burying him would have brought scorn from those
who killed him. But it says that they buried him and made great lamentations over him. They boldly declared their support and defense of Stephen in burying him.

And I think that Luke also gave us this detail to show that it is appropriate for Christians to grieve. It is appropriate for disciples of Jesus to lament the death of the righteous. In the past week, since I mentioned the persecution of Christians in Iraq last week, the accounts of the persecutions seem to have gotten worse and the great persecution of the church in Iraq and Syria is deeply grievous. It is right that we should grieve and mourn over the beheading of Christian children and the rape and murder of their Christian parents. It is right to make great lamentation over them.

It is not unexpected that followers of Jesus are killed even as He was. He told us this would be the case. But it is not right that it is so. It should sadden us and make us cry out to God. It should challenge us to reflect on whether we would be willing to die for the simple act of preaching the good news about Jesus Christ, in the face of such horrific opposition and threats. If we were faced with the threat of death or torture for ourselves or our loved ones, would we still be so bold as to proclaim the truth of the gospel and to affirm our faith in the resurrected Jesus Christ?

Stephen was so bold and he was brutally murdered for it. Many Christians this past week were murdered for their faith. Persecution like this is lamentable and we should be affected by it. It should make us long for the day when every name will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is the Lord. It should make us grieve not only for those who are killed but also for those who murder.

You see, as Paul tells us, “we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against every principality and power and wickedness in high places”. We lament that all things, all beings and all people are not yet in obedience to Christ. But let us remember that God’s plans are not hindered by persecution too. We mourn as those with hope - hope that God will make all things new.

Revelation 6:9-11 “those who have been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne”... “were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.”

There is hope that those who have died for the word of God and the witness of Jesus Christ have been made new. And there is hope that even persecution is not outside of God’s control. There is hope that even though we don’t understand it, somehow, God knows how many martyrs there will be and ordains their death, even at the hands of wicked people, who are hating God, so that God might bring about His purposes.

What the church experienced in the book of Acts and shortly after Luke wrote was not isolated. In addition to this persecution, around 65 AD, Nero brutally murdered Christians as well. And throughout the ages, countless brothers and sisters have been murdered for preaching about our risen Savior.

Most of you would be familiar with the general account of 5 missionaries back in 1956, who were all speared by members of Auca people in the jungles of Ecuador. Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully and Roger Youderian were all elated when they finally had a chance to make contact and share the love of Jesus with the tribe. Jim radioed his wife Elizabeth and
said “We’ll call you back in three hours”. They were later found downriver from where they were killed. However, through the work of Elisabeth Elliott and Rachel Saint, the sister of Nate Saint, many of the Auca or Huarani tribe came to follow Christ and there is a thriving Christian community there today. Even in this story, not everything is rosy today. The church there has difficulties and challenges like every church faces. But they have the good news and it came about from some really bad news.

We don’t know how God might use the current persecution of Christians in many areas of the world today. But we do know that God’s plans are not hindered by persecution and that God uses persecution to carry out His purposes. In Jerusalem, our text tells us that “Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” The word that Luke uses for ravage is the same word used to describe a savage wild beast as it tears apart its prey and drags them off. Saul was like a wild beast, ravaging, tearing apart the people of the church. He systematically entered house after house and dragged off men and women indiscriminately. He didn’t even have mercy on women as might be expected today – he dragged off everyone and committed them to prison.

In Acts 9:1, it tells us that Saul was burning with desire to put to death the disciples of the Lord... Then Saul, who was later renamed Paul after he was born again by the Holy Spirit when he believed in Jesus, wrote in Acts 22:4 of what he did himself when he said, “I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.” He threw them into prison, he persecuted them to their death and arrested both men and women. Families were torn apart and left destitute. Children were left parentless. Yet, through it all, the cause of Christ was not hindered. But it wasn’t because of taking up arms or making false conversions through threat of death. Verse 4 tells us what the means of the expansion of the church, kingdom of God was. It says, “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.” Preaching the Word is the means by which the church expands and God’s purposes are carried out.

2. **We should preach the word wherever we are scattered**

We moved into our house about a year ago and we still don’t really have a lawn to speak of. In the back yard though, from high up, things look pretty green. That is because of an insidious little plant called dandelion that has dispersed and spread all over our lawn. Everyone here is familiar with dandelions and how when they are dry, their little seeds blow off with the white fluff that is attached to them. My kids like helping out and making wishes on the dandelions by blowing on them.

The picture that Luke uses in verse 4 is a little like the scattering of dandelion seeds. The church was persecuted and they were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. And wherever they went, they carried the seeds of God’s Word with them and they went about preaching the Word.

Now, these people were not apostles. We don’t even hear that those scattered had any formal role in the church nor that they were leaders. We do know that the whole church was scattered though and that the activity of those who were scattered is summed up as “they went about preaching the word”. They weren’t daunted by persecution and being scattered.

Imagine though being scattered suddenly like this. Imagine if we all were forced out of our homes and had to leave and go to other areas. Imagine a rush to pack up all the stuff in your
garage and basement and attic and having to find some kind of transportation and then leaving our homes. Imagine having to find a place to stay or maybe knocking on your aunt Susie’s door at 2 in the morning and explaining why you are there, with all the kids in tow and asking if you can stay in her 2 bedroom rambler indefinitely.

Imagine looking for a new job back then. There was no monster.com or job.com or snagajob.com back then. Employment was hard to get. Imagine trying to sell your wares where you didn’t know anyone. Imagine trying to set up shop and get the word out about what you did without a telephone or yellow pages or website or business cards, etc. This would not have been easy living. In addition to experiencing the death of family members and imprisonment of family and friends, it would have been very difficult to make a living and adjust to being scattered.

But the early believers were not thwarted and overly consumed by the challenges they faced and whatever they did, in whatever circumstance their scattering left them, they went about preaching the Word. God empowered and enabled them through the Holy Spirit to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. And everywhere they went, they “went about preaching”.

I wonder if that could be said of the church today. Is it true that wherever Christians are scattered today, we go about preaching the Word? If not, I wonder why not? I wonder if we are willing to die for Christ and the life-changing message that has transformed us into a new creation. I wonder, how would we live if we faced persecution? What would we do if we were scattered? I wonder how much we are distracted and side-tracked and consumed with the difficulties and challenges of life and we forget the most important thing we’ve been given – new life in Jesus Christ.

I think why the early church was so radical and wasn’t daunted by persecution and scattering was that they understood what it meant to be a Christian. They counted the cost of following Jesus and found Jesus more valuable than all of life. They could have been persecuted where they went – but they went undaunted.

Wherever we have been scattered to: Travelers Rest, Anderson, Spartanburg, Taylors, Easley, Simpsonville, Mauldin, Greer, and Greenville – could someone write of us, “they went about preaching the Word”? In thirty years, will our children write that we lived for Jesus and to see people come to know Him? Will they write that we were consumed with telling people about Jesus who is the only way for the salvation of all mankind? Will it be said that we went about preaching the Word, even though it was potentially embarrassing and socially unacceptable or at times awkward?

They went about preaching the Word because they had been changed forever and they saw that the world around them was lost and dying in their sins. They saw that there were far more important matters than social acceptance – they saw eternity was at stake.

Jim Elliot once famously paraphrased an earlier writer when he said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” Jim Elliot wasn’t a fool. Or maybe he was – he was a fool for Christ.

The apostle Paul once said in 1 Corinthians 3:18-19, “Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God.” And a few verses later, he explained what
looking like a fool meant. He said chapter 4 verse 1: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Let’s be that kind of fool, like the early Christians. Let it be said of us that we are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. If we live this way, we won’t be foolish in God’s eyes. These early Christians weren’t really fools. They lived for what was really worth dying for.

I wonder if we are living this way now? What appeared to be God closing the door through persecution, was nothing of the sort. Opposition and persecution was God’s way of opening the door to the spread of the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah – the Christ – the chosen One of God to take away the sins of the world.

So we see in verses 5 and 6, the example of Philip, yet another, non-ordained, so-called “ordinary Christian” and it says, “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.” He proclaimed Christ and the Holy Spirit was mightily at work in and through him, as signs were performed, giving testimony to the message that he proclaimed.

It says in verse 7, “For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.” Yet again, we see the risen Jesus Christ at work in the life of a believer. The Holy Spirit empowered him to speak boldly and God attested to the message through powerful demonstrations of miraculous healing and deliverance. Yet again, this is a direct answer to prayer. Whenever the disciples faced opposition, they prayed.

At the beginning of Acts, after Jesus departed, they prayed and the Holy Spirit came. After they faced the first recorded opposition of the Jewish Elders, the apostles came back to the church and they prayed. Remember that account in Acts 4? Turn in your Bibles to Acts chapter 4.

Acts 4:23-31 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, 25 who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ”’ Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? 26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’- 27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. 29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, 30 while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” 31 And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

How did they respond to opposition? They prayed in faith to God, the Sovereign Lord. They knew that God was and is over all things in heaven and the earth. They knew that no raging against God’s people could hinder God. Even though the rulers of the earth killed Jesus, it wasn’t outside of God’s predestined plan. And they prayed that God would look on the threats and enable them to speak with boldness and they prayed expecting that God would perform signs and wonders through the name of Jesus. And God answered their prayers then and again
and again throughout the book of Acts. And God continues to answer the prayers of His people, because He accepts the prayers of His people just as if Christ Himself was asking God for something.

Before he was killed, Stephen understood that because Jesus fulfilled the law, that meant that God completely forgives and accepted those who placed their faith in Jesus, because Jesus fulfilled the law in our place and took all the wrath we deserved. Stephen understood that Jesus is always with His people as well, indwelling them and empowering them by the Holy Spirit, to overcome in the midst of any obstacle, even though we might die.

I believe the early Christians understood and lived in the good of these truths as well. Because we see them preaching the Word of God boldly. And we see them expecting God to be with them and heal and deliver people from oppression and slavery to sin. And verse 8 tells us the result of the preaching of the Word and specifically the proclamation of Jesus by Philip – it says, “So there was much joy in that city.”

Philip brought Jesus Christ to them and there was much joy in that city. Why? They had joy because they had discovered that there really is hope. They had discovered the great Physician who can heal not just physically but can make people who are torn and broken and depressed whole again. They had joy because they heard the message about Jesus Christ proclaimed.

So often, we let so many other things rob us of joy, and we fail to see the good news of Jesus, who is the greatest cause for joy. From these verses we trust that God will use persecution and opposition to expand His church. So we shouldn’t fear when we hear of persecution or encounter opposition ourselves.

And we can see from these verses that God’s purposes are carried out as ordinary people preach His Word and proclaim Jesus and it brings much real, true, everlasting joy to a sad world. What is the main idea of this passage really? It is that...

**Main Idea:** Christians can trust God in persecution and spread His joy by preaching His Word

*Romans 10:11-15* For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. 13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." 14 But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

The man who was once called Saul wrote this passage many years after repenting from murder and persecution of the church. It goes to show you, that we never know who might be changed by God – perhaps even those Muslims who are persecuting Christians today?

And Paul tells us some things about the message he once persecuted people for. In this passage in Romans, he reassures us that if you have believed in Jesus Christ, you will never be put to shame by Him, even if your classmates or neighbor or friends or co-workers or boss or family put you to shame. If you have called on Jesus to rescue you from your sin, you can be sure that God has bestowed His riches on you, because everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.
And then, Paul challenges Christians with some questions that I think we all need to be challenged with today as well. Here are the questions that God has given us through Paul.

- But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed?
- And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?
- And how are they to hear without someone preaching?
- And how are they to preach unless they are sent?

Then, Paul tells us what God thinks of those who preach the good news. He says, “As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"” God thinks it is beautiful for us to preach the good news wherever we are scattered. And I think that is because the news we preach brings the joy of knowing God not only to us but to those we preach as well.

Although I am done preaching for today, we aren’t done with our service. Before wedismiss, I’d like to take a few minutes to pray for the persecuted church and to pray for boldness to preach the gospel and for God to move powerfully. So, if you can stay in the room please and do not leave yet. Don’t go anywhere, but instead turn and pray together with 4-6 people each and we will have 4 things that we would like to pray for.

1. Thank God that He is Sovereign over all things.
2. Pray for protection and provision for the persecuted church in Iraq and Syria specifically.
3. Pray that God would grant to His servants to continue to speak His word with all boldness (both those being persecuted and all of us here as well).
4. Pray that God would attest to His Word with miraculous works and empower His people with the Holy Spirit.

If you would like to respond to the current persecution, you can sign a petition on whitehouse.gov to help aid Christians in Iraq. You can give financially to Christian Aid organizations like the UK based Christian Aid, that is on the ground and actively helping Iraq Christians: [http://www.christianaid.org.uk/emergencies/current/iraq-crisis-appeal/index.aspx](http://www.christianaid.org.uk/emergencies/current/iraq-crisis-appeal/index.aspx). And I would urge you to continue to pray for those being persecuted.