

## God's Purpose in Persecution (Acts 8:1-8)<sup>a</sup>

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### Context

1. **Martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7)**
2. **Persecution has intensified: to the point of death**
3. **Judaism, in its opposition to this new sect, "The Way," has become emboldened**

### Acts 8:1-8

1. ***"[1] Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. [2] And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. [3] As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. [4] Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. [5] Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. [6] And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. [7] For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. [8] And there was great joy in that city."***<sup>1</sup>

### God's Purpose in (Allowing) Persecution

1. **Evangelism: the Church flees from persecution and is dispersed into new regions**
  - A. **vv. 4-5, "Therefore, those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them" (Acts 8:4-5)**
  - B. **Jesus makes an interesting statement in the gospels connecting persecution and evangelism**
    - I. **"When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes." (Mat. 10:23)**

## C. Historical examples

- I. **1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries: Christianity spread as it was persecuted by Rome**
  - II. **7<sup>th</sup> century persecution of Nestorian Christians by Islam<sup>2</sup> → “Nestorians take the gospel to the Huns, Medes, Elamites, Arabs, Indians, and Chinese”<sup>3</sup>**
  - III. **12<sup>th</sup> century onward, persecution of true Christian by various churches empowered by the state**
    - a. **Albigenses<sup>4</sup>**
    - b. **Waldenses<sup>5</sup>**
  - IV. **13<sup>th</sup> century, Spanish Inquisition<sup>6</sup>**
  - V. **14<sup>th</sup> century, Lollards in England<sup>7</sup>**
  - VI. **15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, protestants in England and France fled Roman Catholic persecution to Northern Europe (including men such as John Calvin, William Tyndale, John Knox)**
  - VII. **1685, Huguenot pastors ordered to leave France, 800 meeting places destroyed. 200,000 Huguenots leave France to Switzerland, Holland, Britain, Germany<sup>8</sup>**
  - VIII. **Puritans (Separatists) who fled persecution from the Church of England**
    - a. **1593, 300 separatists fled to the Netherlands<sup>9</sup>**
    - b. **1608, 100 separatists fled to Holland<sup>10</sup>**
    - c. **1620, back to England, then the Mayflower sails from Plymouth with 102 Puritans for America (the "Pilgrims")**
    - d. **Along with other European missionary efforts, led to the evangelization of large portions of the New World**
- D. **Historically, persecution has forced believers to flee to new areas which also led to evangelization and the spread of the faith**

## 2. Purifies the body of Christ, the Church

- A. **When persecution arises, only those willing to pay the price will continue to stand for Christ (elaborate)**
  - B. **Reveals and flushes out those who are not truly His**
    - I. **These are “Christian Professors” - those who “profess” Christ, but have not been born again**
    - II. **These are those who say, “Lord, Lord,” but do not do what Jesus says (Luke 6:46)**
    - III. **They take upon themselves the moniker of “Christian,” but they live in ways which deny Him**
    - IV. **They dilute and undermine the work of the true Church**
    - V. **Jesus mentioned them in His parable of the sower**
      - a. **These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble. (Mark 4:16-17)**
  - C. **As a result, the visible Church shrinks, but the true Church which remains is refined and spiritually strengthened**
  - D. **Divested of the chaff, the true Church becomes more powerful, consistent, and effective in its work and witness**
3. **Transforms the lives of individual believers by way of testing and trial<sup>11</sup>**
- A. **PERSECUTION PURIFIES: by bringing us to recognize our own deficiencies, to a more accurate perception of ourselves**
    - I. **God compares this to being refined in a smelter: Isa. 48:10 - *Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction***
      - a. **“Refined” is from צָרַף [šarāp̄] meaning to “remove impurities in metal to make the precious metal pure”**
    - II. **Psalm 66:10-12 - *For You, O God, have tested us; You have refined us as silver is refined. You brought us into the net; You laid affliction on our backs. You have caused men to ride over our heads; We went***

***through fire and through water; But You brought us out to rich fulfillment***

- III. **Jesus granted Satan's request to "sift" the disciples like wheat (Luke 22:31)**
  - IV. **Consider Peter's idea of himself prior to having been sifted: *Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' "But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble."* (Mat. 26:31-33)**
- B. PERSECUTION REVEALS: what is in our hearts: whether we will truly live as we profess, obedient to His commandments and faithful in His service<sup>12</sup>**
- I. **Israel in the wilderness wanderings, *And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not* (Deu. 8:2)**
  - II. **Jesus to the church in Smyrna, *Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life* (Rev. 2:10)**
- C. PERSECUTION SUBVERTS: our reliance upon ourselves**
- I. **Again, concerning Israel in the wilderness, *[God] fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end - then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth'* (Deu. 8:16-17)**
  - II. **To test our faith and trust in God's deliverance, *You called in trouble, and I rescued you . . .* (Ps. 81:7)**
  - III. **As David Brewer, a Supreme Court justice in the late 1800's observed:**
    - a. **"One of the pressing dangers facing all civilized nations is the enervating influence of wealth and great material development.**

**That was the one thing which sapped the life of the great nations of antiquity and buried them in the tombs of their own vices. In each there was a wonderful accumulation of wealth, marvelous manifestations of material splendor, but the moral character of their citizens was undermined thereby and they declined and fell. The hanging gardens of Babylon, the pyramids of Egypt, the sculptured beauty which lined the streets of Athens, and all that luxurious display which attended the centering in Rome of the products of the civilizations of the earth in their day provoked the admiration and were the boast of their citizens. They passed through the same round of experience. Wealth brought luxury, luxury brought vice and vice was followed by ruin and decay. And now we dig through the accumulating dust of centuries to find even the ruins of their vanished splendor.”<sup>13</sup>**

- D. PERSECUTION PROVES: whether we love God with all our heart and all our soul**
- I. **Concerning Israel’s reaction to a false prophet, *you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul* (Deu. 13:3)**
  - II. **Until our love is tested, it is unproven — like Peter, our own assessment of our dedication and love for God is unrealistic, unreliable**
- E. PERSECUTION APPROVES: the work of God in our lives is shown, as testimony to the world of the work of God**
- I. ***Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him* (James 1:12)**
  - II. **“Approved” is from **δόκιμος** [*dokimos*], meaning “genuine, honored”**
  - III. **This purpose is not focused at overthrowing that which is being tested, but on revealing its adequacy**
  - IV. **Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted, not to see whether He would sin, but to demonstrate that, unlike Adam, He would not—indeed, could not (Luke 4:1)**
- F. PERSECUTION DEMONSTRATES: the keeping power of the Spirit of God before an unbelieving world**

- I. **Jesus connected persecution with testimony, *But watch out for yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. You will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them* (Mark **13:9**)**
- II. **Persecution, in some settings, is the means by which God brings the testimony of the believer to places where it would otherwise never be heard**
- III. **In my [previous message<sup>c</sup>](#) in the book of Acts, we found this it be a major purpose behind the ultimate response to persecution: martyrdom**

#### G. **PERSECUTION MANIFESTS: evil's irrepressible opposition to the light**

- I. **Paul warned Timothy, . . . *all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution* (2Ti. **3:12**)**
- II. **When we, as Christians, merely live as we should, then our very presence serves to judge those who embrace ungodly practices**
- III. **The devil and fallen flesh hate the “fragrance of Christ” — with permeates the nature of those born-again by His Spirit**
  - a. **Paul mentions this aspect in his letter to the church at Corinth, *Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?* (2Cor. **2:14–16**)**
- IV. **We don't even need to “do anything” and evil will react.**

#### 4. **Persecutors become powerful witnesses to the faith when God gets hold of them**

##### A. **Saul**

- I. **Dedication and zeal in opposition to "the way"**
  - a. **Saul watched over the garments of the false witnesses (Acts **6:13**) who stoned Stephen, the ones who partially disrobed in order to more effectively throw stones (Acts **7:58**; Acts **26:10-11**)**

- b. **He consented to Stephen's death (Acts 8:1), made havoc of the church, dragging Christians off to prison (Acts 8:3)**
  - c. **In the next chapter, we will find him breathing threats and murder against the disciples (Acts 9:1), and petitioning the high priest for letters authorizing him to travel to Damascus to arrest believers and bring them bound to Jerusalem (Acts 9:2)**
- II. **Attributes which God can use, if and when the persecutor comes to faith**
- a. **Motivation - they are dedicated and energetic in their task**
  - b. **Behavior - their actions are consistent with their beliefs (they please God in this: they are not hypocrites)**
  - c. **Jesus said, speaking to the church in Laodicea, *I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth (Rev. 3:14-16).***
    - i. **Jesus prefers hot, *but even cold is better than lukewarm***
- III. **Bear witness to an enormous change in belief**
- a. **Consider how unbelievable Paul's conversion will soon be to the early church which he is currently found persecuting.**
  - b. ***Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?" (Acts 9:20-21)***
  - c. ***Later, when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple (Acts 9:26)***
- IV. **Motivation after conversion**
- a. **Paul's service is energized by his previous persecution of Christ. *Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than***



**they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me (1Cor. 15:8-10)**

- b. **Those who were previously enemies or mockers of Christ, having come to faith, are very aware that the change can only be explained by God's purpose for their lives**
  - i. Thus, Paul wrote *Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me (Php. 3:12)*
- c. **Witness the missionary journeys of Paul and his letters, comprising 13 of 27 books of the NT**

**V. Endurance under persecution and suffering**

- a. **One wonders how the other Apostles would have held up under the program which God had for Paul?**
- b. **God revealed to Ananias, *I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake* (Acts 9:15)**
- c. **Those who have previously persecuted Christ, but then turned, must inevitably taste their own medicine. Consider some of the conditions under which Paul ministered for Christ:**
  - i. *Are they ministers of Christ? —I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness— besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches (2Cor. 11:23-28)*
  - ii. *. . . the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:23-24).*
  - iii. *Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came [to Lystra]; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead (Acts 14:19)*
  - iv. *To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labor, working with our*



*own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now (1Cor. 4:11-13)*

v. *But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings (2Cor. 6:4-5)*

d. **Former persecutors have a deeper understanding and appreciation of what it means to be an enemy of Christ—Paul had already stood in the place of his enemies and mockers**

## VI. Forgiven much, owes and loves much (Luke 7:40-47)

- a. **Believers who previously zealously opposed Christ come to know their great dependence upon God's grace, His unmerited favor**
- b. **They are well-aware of the judgment they deserve and the mercy they've been extended**
- c. ***And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life (1Ti. 1:12-16)***
- d. **Paul, more than any, will become the apostle of grace**

## Persecution is according to the permissive will of God

1. **God is not the author of evil, but neither can His will be thwarted by evil**
2. **The persecution of the early Church in Acts 8 were in accord with the permissive will of Jesus**
  - A. **Here, we find Philip evangelizing in Samaria**
  - B. **Jesus had previously said, ". . . you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8b)**

3. **In the sovereignty of God, all things ultimately serve His purpose: even persecution**
  - A. **And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. (Rom. 8:28)**
  - B. **What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:31)**
4. **If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. (1Pe. 4:14)**
5. **As the Church Father Ignatius of Antioch observed “Christianity is greatest when it is hated by the world.”<sup>14</sup>**

Mon Jan 19 09:04:07 2015



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Endnotes:

1. [NKJV](#), Acts 8:1-8
2. [Ref-1379](#), 100
3. [Ref-1379](#), 412
4. [Ref-1379](#), 109
5. [Ref-1379](#), 115,413
6. [Ref-1379](#), 413
7. [Ref-1379](#), 414
8. [Ref-1379](#), 243,419
9. [Ref-1380](#), 50
10. [Ref-1380](#), 55
11. Additional related passages: Job [23:10](#); Pr. [17:3](#); Ecc. [3:18](#))
12. Additional related passages: Jdg. [2:22](#); [3:4](#); 2Chr. [32:31](#); Jer. [12:3](#); [20:12](#)
13. [Ref-1275](#), [para. 703-708]
14. [Ref-0217](#), 103

## Sources:

- NKJV** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0217** J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989).
- Ref-1275** David J. Brewer, *The United States A Christian Nation* (Philadelphia, PA: John C Winston Co., 1905).
- Ref-1379** Edmund Hamer Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Gospel Folio Press, 1931, 1999). ISBN: [1-882701-53-4](#)<sup>e</sup>.
- Ref-1380** David Beale, *The Mayflower Pilgrims* (Greenville, SC: Ambassoard-Emerald International, 2000). ISBN: [1-889893-51-X](#)<sup>f</sup>.

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**Links Mentioned Above**

- a** - See [http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts\\_by\\_Tony\\_Garland/24\\_Acts\\_8\\_1-8/index.htm](http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/24_Acts_8_1-8/index.htm).
- b** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c** - See [http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts\\_by\\_Tony\\_Garland/23\\_Acts\\_7\\_51-60/index.htm](http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/23_Acts_7_51-60/index.htm).
- d** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.
- e** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?1-882701-53-4>.
- f** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?1-889893-51-X>.