

Sunday, August 24, 2025 | Martyrs

Week 2 | Acts 8:1b-8 | “Diamonds”

READ: Acts 8:1b-8 (ESV)

^{1b} 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, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was much joy in that city.

There are *three* things you need to make a diamond: carbon, heat, and pressure.¹ And although it may sound simple, the processes involved are extreme. First, the carbon must be heated to at least 2,200°F and then compressed to around 725,000 psi. To put that in perspective, 2,200°F is double the temperature of a lava flow, and 725,000psi is roughly the same weight as two Boeing 747s stacked on top of each other over the surface area of a postage stamp.

Likewise, just as pressure and heat form diamonds, persecution multiplies the church. Though no believer should ever wish for persecution, they may still take heart in knowing that, should they be persecuted, it has eternal and far-reaching implications. God never wastes a bad day; he uses them all for the good of the Kingdom (cf. Rom. 8:28). The more the gospel is hunted, the faster it moves. The more the gospel is hunted, the farther it spreads.

I want you to notice two things:

i. Vs. 1b-3 – The Barbarism of the World

Vs. 1a – Luke says, Stephen’s martyrdom was the spark of a “great persecution against the church in Jerusalem.” This is the first of two times that the word *diōgmós* (“persecution”) is used in the book of Acts. Another instance is in Acts 13:50, where Paul and Barnabas were

¹ The information in the introduction was taken from this article: Graff, Franks, “How to make your own diamonds,” August 10, 2022, *PBS North Carolina*, <https://www.pbsnc.org/blogs/science/how-to-make-your-own-diamonds/> (accessed August 23, 2025).

expelled from Antioch of Pisidia. The term *diōgmós* refers to “a program or process designed to harass and oppress someone.”² The church had been arrested (4:3), warned (4:12), flogged (5:40), martyred (7:58-60), and now there was all-out persecution.³ This is the sort of thing mentioned throughout the NT. In the parable of the soils, persecution is one of reasons that the seed of God’s word doesn’t take root (cf. Matt. 13:21). Paul, writing to the church in Rome, encourages that nothing, not even “[persecutions](#),” can separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35). Paul tells the church in Corinth that even when he’s weakened by “[persecutions](#)” he can be strong in the Lord (2 Cor. 12:10).

The reality for the believer is this: the world is barbaric to believers. Jesus’ own brothers taunted him and, in reply, he said, “[The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil](#)” (Jn. 7:7). Darkness hates the light because it exposes its evil deeds. It lashes out, trying to snuff out the light. But the darkness cannot overcome the light. One of the last things Jesus told his disciples, “[I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world](#)” (Jn. 16:33). Look for peace in the world and you’ll be disappointed. But if you look for it in the Lord, you’ll never be disappointed.

Luke says the Christians were “[all scattered](#).” Given that the apostles stay behind and Luke mentions a thriving Christian presence in Jerusalem later in the book of Acts (cf. 8:26; 9:26, 28, 31; 11:22), his use of the term “[all](#)” is hyperbolic. Luke is simply saying that while many Christians stayed in Jerusalem, many had no qualms about leaving.

The term “[scattered](#)” is the Greek word *diaspeiro* from which we get the word “diaspora,” a term most often associated with the dispersion of Jews during their exile under Assyrian and Babylonian captivity (cf. LXX Lev. 26:33; Deut. 4:27; Est. 3:8; Jer. 13:24). [How ironic that, this time, it is not a non-Jewish nation persecuting the Jews but the Jews themselves turning on their own.](#) And as the English translation implies, these believers were “[scattered](#)” to the four winds, like seed in the hands of a farmer, which means they fled in different directions.⁴

Most of the believers left Jerusalem heading north to “[Judea and Samaria](#).” Later, we learn that they went even further, going northwest to Phoenicia on the coast, then to the island of Cyprus in the middle of the Mediterranean, and then to the city of Antioch in Syria, over 300 miles

² DBAG (2000), 253.

³ Bock, Darrell L., *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 317-318.

⁴ Louw-Nida (1996), 1:199, “to cause a group or gathering to disperse or scatter, with possible emphasis on the distributive nature of the scattering (that is to say, each going in a different direction)—‘to scatter, to cause to disperse.’”

northeast of Jerusalem (cf. Ac. 11:19). Why did they travel so far and to such places? Perhaps, many of these were Hellenistic Jews. They may have come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost and, now that the city had become hostile, **they were returning home.** Regardless, we cannot help but see a fulfillment of what Jesus said in Acts 1:8, **“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.”**

Although many believers left Jerusalem, Luke states that the **“apostles”** remained in the city. It is unclear why they didn’t leave along with the others. Given the lack of condemnation here and the fact that, in other places, fleeing persecution is permissible if not outright encouraged (cf. Matt. 2:13; 10:23; 24:16; Jn. 10:39), we can rightly say that the Christians who fled the city did nothing immoral. Perhaps the apostles remained with those believers who, for one reason or another, were unable to leave the city. Or to abandon Jerusalem was to forfeit the city to the powers of darkness. Whatever the rationale, the twelve were brave to stay. They exemplify Prov. 28:1, **“The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.”** **Courage is a key characteristic of a Christian.**

Luke tells us that after Stephen was buried, there was a **“great lamentation.”** Don't mistake present-day funerals with what Jews did when they lost someone. During that time, people would put on coarse clothing, their hair would fall loose, they'd put ash on their heads, and mourners would go about wailing with their hands placed on the sides of their heads.⁵ And though burials took place quite quickly after death, the mourning process that followed could last for days, weeks, or even a month or more. When Jacob died, the mourning period lasted for seventy days (Gen. 50:3), and when Moses died, the Jews mourned for thirty days (Deut. 34:8).⁶

Now, while lamentation might seem appropriate, if we’re not careful, it may strike us as unremarkable when the reality is precisely the opposite. Remember, Stephen was stoned for blasphemy. In the eyes of the Sanhedrin, he had been rightly put to death for his crime. **The Mishnah allowed for the burial of those who had been stoned, but it prohibited any show of mourning for such people.**⁷ Thus, the fact that people publicly mourned Stephen was, in itself, a show of defiance. Christians didn't want the Jews to sweep Stephen's death under the rug. They

⁵ Fisher, Milton C, “Burial, Burial Customs,” *In Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1:387.

⁶ Bock (2007), 319.

⁷ Bock (2007), 319.

wanted the whole city to not only know about Stephen's death but also that it was a wrongful death, deserving of "great lamentation."

Vs. 3 – Yet, despite the funeral of Stephen, Luke says, "Saul was ravaging the church." The Greek word translated as "ravaging" means "to cause harm to, injure, damage, spoil, ruin, destroy."⁸ A similar Greek word is used in Psa. 30:13 (LXX) where it describes the act of a boar ripping up a vineyard.⁹ Which is an apt analogy for Paul since he was "entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison." It is hard not to see a parallel to Saul's actions and those of Nazi Germany. The Gestapo (Nazi secret police) entered the homes of Jewish families and deported them to concentration camps.

SO, WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

Persecution ought to be anticipated but not pursued.

READ: 2 Timothy 3:12-13 (ESV)

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

READ: Romans 12:14-21 (ESV)

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

ii. Vs. 4-8 – The Evangelism of the Church

Vs. 4 – Yet, despite the barbarity and the mounting opposition against Christians, believers continued to evangelize. Luke said that though they were "scattered," they went their way, "preaching the word." Far from being dejected or discouraged, as believers fled Jerusalem, they took the gospel with them. They fulfilled the great commission. This demonstrates that while evangelism can be a program, it is best achieved when Christians, as they go about their day,

⁸ DBAG (2000), 604.

⁹ Bock (2007), 319-320, in the footnotes.

bring Jesus with them. They incorporate the Lord wherever they go. In fact, one of the best examples of what evangelism looks like is in the Shema. God instructs parents, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deut. 6:4-9). The worship of the one true God had to be infused into every day of life. Likewise, the believer is so infatuated with Jesus Christ that the gospel permeates every aspect of their life.

Vs. 5 – Though Luke could’ve dialed into any one of the believers who were fleeing persecution, he focuses our attention on “Philip.” Philip was, along with Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to serve the Hellenistic widows. He was married with two daughters. He’ll play a prominent role throughout Acts. By the end of the book, he’ll be known as “Philip the evangelist” (Ac. 21:8) for everywhere he went, he took every opportunity to share the gospel. When Paul told Timothy, “Do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim. 4:5), he may have had Philip in his mind.

We’re told that Philip went to, of all places, “the city of Samaria.” That Philip went to Samaria is remarkable because, according to John 4:9, “Jews do not associate with Samaritans.” Samaria was located approximately forty miles north of Jerusalem. Around 800BC, the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom of Israel, killing or deporting the Jews (cf. 1 Ki. 17-18). The few Jews who remained in the region intermarried with their foreign invaders. As such, the Samaritans were regarded by the Jews having a defiled bloodline, a significant infraction under the Mosaic Law (cf. Deut. 7:3). In fact, during the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah (cf. Ezra 9-10; Neh. 13), if a Samaritan wanted to rejoin the community of Israel, they’d have to dissolved their marriage.

Needless to say, the gulf between the Samaritans and the Israelites only grew as time went on. Hostilities reached a peak when, in 128 BC, Samaria established its own temple and religious practices, wherein they regarded only the books of Moses as inspired. Throughout the intervening centuries, the two groups were openly hostile to each other. The Samaritans were known to kill Jewish pilgrims while they made their way to Jerusalem, and at one point in their shared history, the Jews invaded Samaria and destroyed their temple.

In short, Jews and Samaritans hated one another. According to Köstenberger, “Samaritans were thought to convey uncleanness by where they lay, sat, or rode on, as well as by their saliva or

urine.”¹⁰ In fact, the word “Samaritan” was used as a pejorative by the Jews (cf. Jn. 8:48). And, as a rule, the Jews and Samaritans tried to stay out of each other’s way. To even eat with a Samaritan was as bad as if a Jew had eaten pork.¹¹ There was such a strong prejudice against Samaritans that one Jewish rabbi regarded every Samaritan woman as unclean since, according to him, they were in a constant state of menstruation.¹²

Yet, despite the clear animosity between Samaritans and Jews, Philip “proclaimed to [the Samaritans] the Christ.” Apparently, without hesitation, Philip brought the good news of Jesus Christ to a community which had been ostracized from Israel for nearly eight centuries. In fact, as we know, though not every town in Samaria welcomed Jesus during his earthly ministry (cf. Lu. 9:51-56), one town did. In John 4, we’re told the story of the Lord’s interaction with the titular ‘Woman at the Well’ and the mass revival that came shortly thereafter. This may be the same town where Philip traveled.

Vs. 6-7 – As Philip proclaimed the gospel, “crowds” gathered and, “with one accord,” they “paid attention” to the up-and-coming evangelist. Their attentiveness was due in no small part to the fact that Philip was able to perform “signs” as he preached. As one of the men personally commissioned by the apostles, Philip must’ve been given the ability to perform miracles like the apostles. Though, as we’ve said before, this wasn’t, strictly speaking, a ministry of miracles. Philip did wondrous things, such as exorcising “unclean spirits” and healing the “paralyzed” and “lame,” as a way to authenticate the message of the gospel.¹³

However, don’t miss the meta-commentary that is unfolding at this point. The church was under severe persecution in Jerusalem. Unbelievers were trying their hardest to destroy the church. In response, the church scattered, taking the gospel with them. Isaiah 52:7 says, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” Christians left Jerusalem because they were being hunted for their attachment to Christ. However, the same thing that drove Christians away is the same thing that propelled Christianity into the world. Christians came from the mountains of Jerusalem, publishing the gospel of peace to the hillside, meadows, and seas. Do you see? Christian persecution multiplied what it intended to snuff out.

¹⁰ Köstenberger, Andreas J., *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 149.

¹¹ Bock (2007), 324.

¹² Kruse, Colin G., *John*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 152.

¹³ Bock (2007), 326, Miracles, for Luke, draw people into considering the message.”

Vs. 8 – How did the Samaritans respond to Philip’s message? Luke says, “So there was much joy in that city.” This is quite the contrast with Jerusalem. That which filled one city with murderous rage filled another city with “much joy.”

As we discussed at the end of our study of the book of Luke, joy is a central theme throughout Luke's Gospel. The angel told Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth would bear a son in their old age, and this would bring them “joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth” (Lu 1:14). When Mary was pregnant with Jesus Christ, she visited Elizabeth, and we're told that the baby in Elizabeth leaped for “joy” inside the womb (Lu. 1:44). After Jesus' birth, angels visited some local shepherds and told them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy [emphasis added] that will be for all the people” (Lu. 2:10). In Luke 6:23, Jesus tells believers to “rejoice in that day, and leap for joy” when we’re persecuted. In Luke 8:13, the “good soil” is characterized as the sort of person who receives the word of God “with joy.” After Jesus sent out his disciples, we’re told in Lu. 10:17, they “returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!”” But then Jesus says, “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (vs. 20). After the Lord excised a demon from a woman, Luke tells us “all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him” (13:17). When Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep and coin, he punctuated each lesson with the same takeaway: there is heavenly “joy” over one sinner that repents (cf. Lu. 15:7, 10). And, in the story of the prodigal son that follows, the father tells the older brother, “It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (15:32). After Zacchaeus climbed down from the sycamore tree and we’re told the tax collector received Jesus Christ “joyfully” (19:6). And, lastly, during the triumphal entry Luke tells us “the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen” (19:37). And then, after Jesus’ ascension, we’re told, the disciples “worshiped [Jesus] and returned to Jerusalem with great joy [emphasis added], and were continually in the temple blessing God” (Lu. 24:52-53).

Luke is the Historian of Joy, and here, in Acts 8, amid severe persecution, we see this emphasis on joy once again. Such an emphasis is found throughout the NT. Jesus said in John 15:11, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” John said in 1 John 1:4, “And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.” Paul said in Romans. 15:13, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

And, specifically, throughout the NT, there is an emphasis on joy amid persecution.

James said in James 1:2-3, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Peter said in 1 Peter 1:3-9,

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this, you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

So, what's the takeaway?

A faithful witness is guaranteed a joyful harvest.

READ: Psalm 126:5-6 (ESV)

Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

READ: Galatians 6:9 (ESV)

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Video Description:

Martyrs | Week 2 | Acts 8:1b-8 | “Diamonds”

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

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¹⁴ The information in the introduction was taken from this article: Graff, Franks, “How to make your own diamonds,” August 10, 2022, *PBS North Carolina*, <https://www.pbsnc.org/blogs/science/how-to-make-your-own-diamonds/> (accessed August 23, 2025).

