

“Scattering the Seed”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 9/06/2020
Text: Acts 8:4-8 at FBC of Newport, NH

//4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. 5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city.//

—Acts 8:4-8 (NIV)

I saw a video of a modern farm tractor planting seeds in a huge field in the Midwest. It could literally drive itself using GPS guidance while the farmer monitored computer screens keeping track of virtually every seed being placed in the ground. Compare, or contrast, that with Jesus’ parable of the seeds landing in different kinds of soils. In his day it was common for farmers to liberally throw their seed everywhere. That’s why in the parable some of it landed on the path, some on rocks, some among thorns and some on good soil. I’ve got nothing against modern farming methods (they have a miraculous quality of their own, but I’m grateful the spread of God’s Word is likened to the ancient farmer before that of the modern.

After Stephen was martyred and widespread persecution broke out against the newborn church, Philip was one of those who had to flee from Jerusalem. This is not the Apostle Philip. All twelve of the Apostles stayed in Jerusalem. This is one of the seven hellenistic Jewish believers, just like Stephen, who had been chosen to serve those in need among the greek speaking members of the church. He chose to go to a city in Samaria, possibly Gitta, the birthplace of Simon the sorcerer who comes up later in verse 9. There in Samaria, Philip chose to preach of Jesus being the true Messiah. He preached where he was. So as these persecuted preachers were scattered from Jerusalem, the seed was being distributed in all directions by the very persecution aimed at burying the body of Christ a second time.

Actually, In a sense, God is like the ancient and modern farmers both. While it may seem like God is just letting his Word be taken by the winds of the world, surely there is a carefully arranged plan at work through the monitoring of the sovereign wind of God’s Holy Spirit. Luke himself is aware of that plan. He gives us Jesus’ words at the beginning of Acts saying: “... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8b) The seed of these witnesses for Christ have already spread through Jerusalem and Judea. Luke singles out Philip to show the Word of Christ is now arriving in Samaria.

A good Jew at that time might not think of Samaria as soil capable of producing any growth at all, let alone fruit. Samaritans were despised as corrupt half-breeds. These were the people who stayed in the Holy Land while most were forced away in the Exile. They intermarried with outsiders who had been shipped in by the Assyrians to take over the land and the Jews adopted their pagan ways. Though they did repent later and tried to adopt God's ways again. Even so, these were the people who opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Exile as they still had many differences with the traditional Jews. Right up to Jesus' day most Jews considered the Samaritans to be a compromised, corrupted and contemptible people.

But Philip doesn't have the mind of a typical Jew. He has the mind of Christ and that free throwing farmer's hand about him. He chooses to go to Samaria. And he openly preaches Jesus Christ to them as the Messiah—even their Messiah.

Do you remember when Jesus traveled through Samaria, in John 4? There he met a woman who was not only a Samaritan, unpopular with the Jews, she was unpopular even amongst the Samaritans themselves. This is indicated by the fact that she had to draw her water from the town well during the heat of the day so as not to be around too many people. She also had had five husbands and was living with a man. But Jesus met with her right where she was at. He, though a Jew, asked her for some water. This got her attention, for she could see he was a Jew. He shouldn't even be talking with her. Instead they got into quite a conversation. By the end of it Jesus revealed to her that he was the One she and everyone else was expecting to come "some day." He was the Messiah. This Samaritan woman was the first person he explicitly told this to.

After being impressed with him and his conversation, she believed him. She believed him with such excitement she left her water jar at the well and ran off to tell the very people she had previously been trying to avoid. Again, there's that scattering of more seed by the Spirit of God. That event wouldn't have been all that long ago. And now Philip is preaching the sacrificial death and resurrection of the Messiah, not in the same city, but in the same region. He was also healing and casting out demons in the name of Jesus Christ. I wonder if that woman came to hear Philip there (even though twenty miles away). I wonder if some of those people expressing their joy at Philip's ministry were previously influenced by the witness of that woman at the well. We don't know.

But we do know God is an amazing scatterer of seeds.

One obvious message here is for believers to take heart in the face of hardship and even persecution. I often wondered why Jesus included persecution to be amongst those wonderful Beatitudes. In fact, he speaks at length on it there. Blessed are the poor in spirit; ...blessed are the peacemakers;

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//Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.// (Matt. 5:10-12)

There really is a source of joy there. Our finding that joy is helped by our having our hearts and minds, our hands and feet in agreement with Jesus and his parable of the scattered seed.

There's also a communion to be found there in persecution, provided it's for the sake of righteousness, even on account of bearing the name of Jesus.

People are persecuted for all kinds of things in this world. Sometimes the cause is noble, sometimes it's not. But there is no better reason to have someone hate you and hold a vendetta against you than for the name of Jesus Christ. Not because we are as noble, pure and righteous as God's Son. Hardly. But simply because Jesus himself is in the midst of it. And so it's something of a privilege to be there with him. It started with him. It will end with him. And in between he has invited you to be with him. This is not the kind of invitation you can give to yourself. No one should be seeking out persecution. But if it comes your way on account of Christ, you need not see it as a curse. For it's actually a blessing at the very peak of the Beatitudes! Hard as the persecutors may try to make it out to be the very wrath of God, truth is, it is a form of communion *with* God.

This should not shock us. After all, we follow a crucified Savior, who gave up his very life so it might be the Seed for the saving of sinners and the greatest harvest for the glory of God.

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