

# Using Setbacks to Spring Forward (Acts 8:1-4)

What are you going to do when the consequences of keeping company with Christ come home? We cannot be so naive as to think that periods of peace will last always. Indeed, it is not wise to ignore the advisories and admonitions of Scripture regarding persecution:

- *Positive Perspectives on Persecution* (Matthew 5:11-12 - part of the profile of a prize winner)<sup>11</sup>  
“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.<sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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*Persecution is an indicator of imminent great reward.*

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- *Promises of Persecution* (2 Timothy 3:12 - more than a high probability) Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

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*Persecution is an indispensable part of godly living.*

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- *Purposes of Persecution* (1 Peter 4:14-16 - promotion of God's glory; Romans 5:1-5; James 1:1-2 - purifying of character)<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters.<sup>16</sup> Yet if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.

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*Persecution is an instigation of glory for God.*

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All of these words from Scripture are helpful insofar as they keep me from falling into despair. But what are we to do when it is our day to pay for following Jesus? If you think this question is little more than the rhetoric required for opening this message consider the following:

- Sang-chul: North Korea - *The Story of Pastor Han*, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGqEgkF7I8>)
- BBC News, Christian Persecution at Near Genocide Levels (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48146305>)
- The Guardian, *In China, They're Closing Churches, Jailing Pastors, and Event Rewriting Scriptures* (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/13/china-christians-religious-persecution-translation-bible>)
- Persecution, *Pastor Left Hospitalized After Attack by Religious Fanatics in Northern India* (<https://www.persecution.org/2020/10/08/pastor-left-hospitalized-attack-religious-fanatics-northern-india/>)
- The Gospel Coalition, *Is There Really Anti-Christian Discrimination in America?* (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/anti-christian-discrimination-america/>)

Do not be deceived into thinking that modern persecution of Jesus followers is fiction, or that it is random, or that it is seldom, or that it is remote. The opposition to following Christ is real, it is frequent, it is progressing, and it is local. What should we do? Thank God for the Bible! His word is telling us not only the perspective to have but the plan to execute when adversity arrives; the precedents and guidance are found in the history of our faith. Specifically we need to study the writings of Luke in Acts; there are principles for us in this book. Concerning the situation in Jerusalem, J. B. Polhill writes

The opposition to the Christians had been gaining momentum throughout chaps. 4–6. It came first from the Jewish officials in the arrest of the apostles and the two hearings before the Sanhedrin. The first resulted in a warning (4:21); the second, in a flogging (5:40). With the Hellenist Stephen came a third Sanhedrin trial, and this one resulted in death for the Christian witness (7:58–60). The new factor was that this time the officials had the backing of the people (6:12)  
Polhill, J. B. (1992). *Acts* (Vol. 26, p. 211). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

In Acts 8 we are reading about the intolerance that was heaped on the early Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews) because of their grand view of God and their promotion of Jesus. They insist that God is global and that the true temple of God is not a location on earth but the moving body of Christ. They have the audacity to say that the purpose of the law in preparing for the coming of the Christ has been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth and that now the relationship between Jew (or Gentile) and God will not be based on the law of Moses. Oh snap!

The Hellenist vision of an “unbounded God” was intolerable, particularly for the “Zionists” of the Diaspora-Jewish synagogues; and they unleashed their fury on these Greek-speaking Christian “radicals” in their midst.  
Polhill, J. B. (1992). *Acts* (Vol. 26, p. 211). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

These views were too much for the Zionists of Jerusalem. They saw no choice but to rid their communities of the new sect of Jesus followers.

### Acts 8:1, The Outbreak of Persecution

**<sup>1</sup> 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.**

**Saul** (Σαῦλος) was **consenting** to the death of Stephen (7:60). The word translated **consenting** comes from the verbs *συνευδοκέω*; it can mean either approval and support (Luke 11:48; Romans 1:32) or merely a willingness to accept (1 Corinthians 7:12, 13). When **Saul**, year later, recounts this event to his Jewish brethren he sheds additional light on what consenting means:

<sup>19</sup> So I said, ‘Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You.  
<sup>20</sup> And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’ (Acts 22:19-20, NKJV)

In his own words Saul says that consenting was more than a passive acceptance of what was being done to Stephen. His approving attitude toward the martyrdom of Stephen was accompanied by the action of helping those throwing the stones. While the Sanhedrin murdered a godly man Saul made sure that they were able to do so without fear of someone stealing the clothing that they had taken off; elaborate robes and costly religious garb would interfere with stone casting. Again, in order to be unhindered in stoning Stephen they disrobed. Some of those expensive items would have been stolen if not for the role that Saul played. In this way, working as a guard over the clothes, the young Saul aided in the execution (7:58).

The martyrdom of Stephen was the beginning of an outbreak: **At that time a great persecuion arose against the church which was a Jerusalem.** Literally the text reads, "There, also, arose in that day a great persecution came upon the church" (Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ διωγμὸς μέγας ἐπὶ τὴν ἐκκλησίαν). The conjunction after the verb (δὲ) shows either contrast or continuation. In this case it is continuation; what began with Stephen expands into an all out assault on the church in Jerusalem. Hell broke loose!

Am I being crass by saying "Hell broke loose?" No. The church, empowered by Jesus and led by an ignorant and untrained fisherman, has been assaulting the gates of hell... and winning.

<sup>18</sup> And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18, NKJV)

Indeed, it is more appropriate to say that the Savior has been using surrendered souls as soldiers in a siege on dead religion, hypocrisy, and in His mission to set captives free. Crucifixion did not stop Jesus; he was just One. Threatening Peter and John did not stop Jesus; they were two. Arresting and beating the apostles did not stop Jesus; they were twelve. This persecution could have been predicted as the anxious response to growing number of Jesus followers; there are thousands of them.

On account of this great persecution on the church the believers **were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.** Yes! Once again the enemy is exploited to execute the plan.

<sup>8</sup> But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and **in all Judea and Samaria**, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8, NKJV)

### Acts 8:2, Making Time for a Good Mourning

<sup>2</sup> **And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.**

Acts 8:2-3 The vile and violent victory of the liars and haters that killed Stephen was the start of an uprising against Greek-speaking Jesus followers in Jerusalem. In the midst of all the growing hate toward the first Christians some people took time to feel. Although it was inconvenient and more than a little dangerous, devout men took time to say "I love you, Stephen" and saw to the burial of his broken body. And they wept greatly for their fallen brother.

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*The decision to mourn our martyrs matters. In the time intentionally set aside to be sorrowful we should recognize the loss, reflect on their light, and thereby also be reinforced in our resolve to live more like them (Ecclesiastes 7:2-4).*

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It was an act of real courage to take time to lament the loss of Stephen. Jewish law forbade funeral observances for a condemned criminals; Stephen had been the victim of mob violence and those who stoned him surely viewed him as a blasphemer and law breaker. They will look for his friends, associates, and family. The courage of these devout men is a reminder of the similar valor shown by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in the burial of Jesus (Matthew 27:57-60; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-54; John 19:38).

### Acts 8:3, This Little Light of Mine

<sup>3</sup> **As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing *them* to prison.**

Saul, is at work fanning this flame into a fire. He leads the charge against the Jesus followers by going methodically from home to home, and from synagogue to synagogue to persecute Jesus followers. The description of his activities is called **havoc** in Acts 8:3. It carries the meaning of the damage caused by a wild animal. He reflects on his violence later in life:

<sup>11</sup> And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled *them* to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted *them* even to foreign cities. (Acts 26:11, NKJV)

Why does the Lord allow this? For the same reason he allowed it with Peter and John. For the same reason he allowed it with the apostles. For the same reason he allowed it with Stephen. It is an occasion for testimony. Saul's work against the church is working for Jesus. It gives His saints an opportunity to let their light shine:

<sup>12</sup> But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute *you*, delivering *you* up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake. <sup>13</sup> But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. (Luke 21:12–13, NKJV)

### Acts 8:4, Persistent Preaching

<sup>4</sup> **Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.**

The consequence of the persecution is a scattering of the believers (Acts 8:2, 4). With their scattering the word of God goes with them. Specifically, the gospel of Jesus Christ is now being preached **everywhere**. In particular it is now being proclaimed in those places (Judea and Samaria) that Jesus wanted to reach (Acts 1:8).

They were scattered like one scatters seed. But scattered seeds grow, Christian. See the irony! The persecution and scattering of the Christians only led to the growing of the movement. With the dispersal of the Hellenist Christians, the fulfillment of the second phase of Jesus' commission began—the witness to all Judea and Samaria (8:1b; cf. 1:8).

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*Learn to look at life through the lens of the Lord's program. In that view nothing is wasted and the things that seem like setbacks are actually used to spring forward in doing His will (Romans 5:1-5; 8:28).*

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The nation of Israel had been dispersed among the Gentiles (James 1:1). Through that scattering of God's people other nations came to know about God's plan to bring them salvation through the King of the Jews (Matthew 2:1-2; John 4:19, 25). Now the new people of God must be dispersed among the nations. But what will they do among the nations? Be witnesses, of course!

The church had grown extensively; it was to grow more than ever, but now by being spread abroad. Luke's figures and further notes about the growth make the estimate of 25,000 believers in and near Jerusalem at the time of Stephen's martyrdom seem conservative. The persecution aimed to destroy the infant church; in the providence of God it did the very opposite. It started a great number of new congregations especially in all of Palestine, each becoming a living center from which the gospel radiated into new territory even as Jesus had traced its course by adding after Jerusalem "all Judea and Samaria" (1:8).

Over the nearly two years since Pentecost (33 AD) thousands of Jesus followers have been trained by the apostles to pursue holiness, present the gospel, and mentor others in following Jesus. They have been empowered, equipped, and educated in evangelism and discipleship. It is time for the highly trained church to be deployed. Luke says that the response of the church was logical; **Therefore** (οὕτως) **those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word** (Acts 8:4). What else could they do? Witnessing, for the Christian, is not activity; it is an essential identity (Acts 1:8; Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 43:12; 44:8). When they could not be accepted for who they are they went elsewhere in their new identity.

What if someone tried to get a man, let us call him Joe, to stop being male? Imagine the complaint:

Joe, you have taken this male thing too far. You were male as an infant, in preschool, in elementary, junior high, high school, and college. Enough is enough, Joe.

- It is not sufficient for you to be a child, Joe. No! You insist on being a *son*.
- It is not sufficient for you to be a sibling, Joe. You present yourself as a *brother*.
- It is not sufficient for you to be a spouse, Joe. You describe yourself as a *husband*.
- You cannot be satisfied with being a parent, Joe. In documents and discussions you describe yourself as the *father* of your children and even look forward to Father's Day and being called Dad or Daddy.

You have gone so far as to stop scraping your face in the morning. And now the side effects of testosterone are visible for all to see. Finally, when it suits you, there are times, Joe, when you speak and sing using the lower registers of your voice. This maleness has effected everything you do and is beginning to show up in every aspect of your life. It has to stop!

How would you respond? Before you answer, consider what Jesus means by giving the Holy Spirit. It was not to simply facilitate activity; he baptized the new believers of Jerusalem into Himself to give them a new essential identity:

- <sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17, NKJV)
- <sup>15</sup> For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation. (Galatians 6:15, NKJV)

That identity is not a function of location. And it is supposed to show up in all they do... everywhere they go (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17; 3:23). After all, they are not just new creations in Jerusalem. They are new creations wherever they go. The new creation of God has just been scattered abroad. This is what Jesus wanted (Matthew 10:23). The setback of persecution was a setup to spring forward in the mission of taking the gospel to the world.

### Questions for Missional Community

1. How did God use setbacks to setup a springing forward of His program? (Acts 1:8; 8:1)
2. How has God used setbacks in your personal life to promote His will being done?
3. When you intentionally take time to consider the loss of someone godly it can be a moment to reflect and develop new resolve to live like them? Who comes to your mind? (Acts 8:2)
4. Why does God allow someone like Saul to assault the saints? (Acts 8:3)