

I. Introduction

Good morning! The Christian faith is all about Jesus. Jesus is God, come from heaven to provide salvation for us through His death on the cross. How much does God love you? God loves you this much. The cross is the ultimate expression of God's love. When we believe in Jesus and accept Him as our Lord and Savior, our sins are forgiven and we receive the free gift of eternal life. All of this is made possible by the love of God and His grace and mercy freely given at the cross where Jesus died so that we might live.



Salvation is given as a free gift. As Paul proclaims in **Ephesians 2:8**, **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”** This is Good News. It is wonderful, blessed, Good News. We need to get a hold of this in our hearts. Salvation is simple. God has made it simple, because He loves all people. That is why God asks us to pray for everyone. **1 Timothy 2:3-4** says, **“This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”** Good News! Wonderful news of love and blessings!

But sometimes we misunderstand the Good News by thinking that the love of God means that we will always have a comfortable life and no serious problems. But that is not what the Bible says. It is not what Jesus taught. Jesus told His disciples, in **John 16:33b**, **“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”** Trouble? That doesn't sound good. But it is because God uses the troubles of this world to bring many people to faith and salvation. And, as this Scripture tells us, Jesus has already overcome the world. We do not need to be fearful or dismayed when trouble comes, because the final victory has already been won by our Lord. In Christ, we have victory. This truth fills us with hope.

In Acts 7, we read about the stoning of Stephen. Being stoned to death sounds like very bad news. But we also read of how heaven was opened and how Stephen saw the Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of God to welcome him into heaven. This was Good News of eternal blessing for Stephen. And in today's Scripture we will see how the stoning of Stephen resulted in the Good News spreading to new places. It is a clear example of how God uses the troubles of this world to bring salvation to more and more people.



Let's read with Acts 8:1-13. This passage follows directly after Stephen's death in chapter seven.

II. Scripture Reading Acts 8:1-13, (NIV, 1984)

1 And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. 5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city. 9 Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, 10 and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." 11 They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. 13 Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

III. Teaching

Acts 8:1 tells us, “**Saul was there, giving approval of his death.**” This is the second reference to Saul. In Acts 7:58, we were told that the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. In this painting, you can see Saul sitting in the background with the coats. Stephen was martyred, but he was welcomed into heaven, and buried with honor. (**Acts 8:2**), “**Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.**” It was a time of sorrow for the church and things were about to get even worse. The stoning was blatantly illegal. But the Roman authorities apparently failed to take any action, and this must have encouraged the enemies of the church.



The Scripture tells us that (**Acts 8:1b**), “**On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.**” Until this point in time, the apostles and disciples had been preaching Jesus and the resurrection in Jerusalem. But the Lord had told them in **Acts 1:8b**, “**you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**” And now the time had come for the gospel to spread beyond Jerusalem.



And, in the plan of God, this was accomplished through the persecution which had begun with Stephen’s death. We might wonder why this had to happen through persecution. We might ask, wasn’t there an easier way? But only God is able to see the complete picture. It is possible that the persecution of the disciples was necessary because it made their message far more convincing than it would have been without the persecution. When Christians living in comfort testify to the goodness of the Lord Jesus, some people will always doubt their motives. But when Christians boldly proclaim the Good News in times of persecution, even skeptics know that the message is sincere, because there is no earthly benefit to preaching Christ in such times.

This phenomenon of the effectiveness of the gospel preached under persecution can still be seen today in many countries. Those who boldly proclaim Jesus in times of suffering are often very effective witnesses for Jesus. Sometimes they also have peace and joy, and even a remarkable sense of humor in the midst of persecution. Take a look at this quote from Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian pastor who was imprisoned for preaching Jesus after the Soviet Union took over his country in 1948. This is what Richard said about life in the communist prison:

“It was strictly forbidden to preach to other prisoners. It was understood that whoever was caught doing this received a severe beating. A number of us decided to pay the price for the privilege of preaching, so we accepted the communists’ terms. It was a deal; we preached and they beat us. We were happy preaching. They were happy beating us, so everyone was happy.”

How about us? Would we boldly proclaim Jesus in such circumstances? Would we find humor and joy in the experience? We may imagine that it would be difficult to maintain our faith if we were being beaten regularly for speaking the name of Jesus. But when we consider the history of the church, we find that the church often flourishes under persecution. In contrast, when the church is comfortable and things are easy, that is when many brothers and sisters fall out of fellowship. For this reason we should take joy in difficulties. Take a look at what James says in **James 1:2-3**, “**Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.**”

Trouble, difficult trials, and persecutions need not discourage us. If we fix our eyes on Jesus we will find that trials and troubles are opportunities to grow in faith as we experience the blessed presence of Christ with us. Jesus is always with us, but we seek His face and feel His presence more when we suffer, and His presence helps us to persevere. And with every trial or trouble, there is a gift. Very often the gift is a new opportunity to share the love of Jesus with others by telling them the Good News.

Today’s Bible passage speaks of a time of great sorrow for the church. **Acts 8:3** says, “**But Saul**

began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” It was a time of severe persecution and many believers were imprisoned or worse even though they had done nothing wrong. They were sent to jail simply for following Jesus. But God brings good even out of times of persecution. For example, in this case, we already know that in chapter nine, Saul the persecutor will meet Jesus and he will be changed to become Paul the apostle, the great evangelist whose letters form a major portion of our Bibles.

But already in today’s passage, after we are told of the persecution, the next verse (**Acts 8:4**) says, **“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”** At first this was in Judea and Samaria, but within a short time messengers of the Good News of Jesus began to travel to many lands. The bad news of persecution was used by the Lord to bring the Good News of Jesus to people far from Jerusalem. The Lord redeems all things so that they may be used for blessing and for the spread of His Kingdom.

The rest of Acts 8 focuses on the ministry of Philip. Like Stephen, Philip was one of the seven deacons who were appointed in Acts 6:5. The ministry of Philip provides a specific example of how the Kingdom of God spread after the persecution began. **Acts 8:5-6, “Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said.”** Philip went to Samaria and preached the Good News. The Jewish people were generally prejudiced against the Samaritans, so it is remarkable that Philip chose this place for his ministry.

Like Stephen, Philip performed many miracles, casting out evil spirits and healing the sick and paralyzed. The people listened to Philip and saw the miracles and they began to come to faith in large numbers. Even the man known as Simon the Sorcerer, who was previously believed to be a man of great power, was amazed by the miracles the Lord did through Stephen. **Acts 8:13** tells us, **“Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.”** Next week, we will see that there were still some problems in Simon’s heart, but it is clear that even the man who was thought to be a great magician recognized the power of the Lord in Philip.

The Samaritans had lived in spiritual darkness for a long time, yet in **Acts 8:12**, we read, **“But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.”** The testimony of Philip in word and deed was effective and it brought the first large harvest of believers outside of Jerusalem.

In the history of the church there have been many occasions when a very large number of people came to faith in a short period of time. This gives us hope that we may one day see a great move of God here in Japan as well. In our study of Acts, we have already seen this happen in Jerusalem and now we see that it happened in Samaria as well. In a very short time, a large number of Samaritans came to faith and were baptized through Philip’s preaching and ministry.

Mass movements for Christ still occur today. One that comes to my mind is the Jesus movement of the late 1960’s and 1970’s. Much of the modern praise and worship music that we play has its roots in this movement. The movement began among the hippies in California and spread across the United States and into Europe. These young people who called themselves hippies had left the mainstream of American life because they were disillusioned with American culture and especially with the Vietnam War. But they soon found that a life of drugs and free love was also unsatisfying. Finally they found satisfaction and a life worth living in relationship with Jesus, the living Lord.



Time Magazine is one of the most influential magazines in the USA. If you had happened to pick up the June 21st, 1971 edition of Time magazine, you would have been startled by this cover. The cover features a psychedelic Jesus with the title, *“The Jesus Revolution.”* The Jesus Movement among the hippies was large enough by that time to receive national media attention. The established church did not know what to do with thousands of hippie Christians, but the society could no longer ignore the



so-called Jesus freaks and they became a major topic in the news media.

Most of the established churches had no idea what to do with hippie Christians. But a few churches embraced these enthusiastic young believers and threw the church doors wide open to receive them. One of the first churches to welcome the Jesus freaks was Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa. In 1965, when Pastor Chuck Smith was called to pastor Calvary Chapel, it was a church of 25 people. But then Pastor Chuck's daughter introduced her Christian hippie boyfriend to her family and he was welcomed at the church. Within a few years, the church exploded in size as it became a major center of the Jesus movement.

The Los Angeles Times published a photo showing the May 6th, 1973 Calvary Chapel beach baptism at which hundreds of young believers were baptized. This may seem long ago and far away to some of you. But we have a closer relationship to these events than you might think. I was baptized on Easter Sunday in 1988 by Pastor Ralph Wood of Calvary Chapel of Oceanside. And Pastor Ralph came to faith in 1973 and attended Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa. So, although I don't know for sure, there is a reasonable chance that the pastor who baptized me might be one of the very people getting baptized in this photo.



The Calvary Chapel Movement that arose out of the Jesus Movement among the hippies is just one example of how the Spirit of the Lord has moved in amazing ways in many places to bring thousands of people to faith in a short time period. Here is another example; in this photo 800 people are baptized in a single day in Pemba, Mozambique. Around the world God is always moving in amazing ways in one place or another. Some of these moves of God will start church planting movements and send out missionaries to many lands.



IV. Conclusion

Two thousand years ago, through the ministry of Philip, who is known to church historians as Philip the Evangelist, a major move to follow Jesus started among the people of Samaria. Forty years ago, the Lord did an amazing work through the Jesus Movement that was born out of the hippie culture. Today thousands of churches around the world trace their roots to that movement.

What about Japan? What about Osaka? We need an amazing move of God in this land. Let's join together in praying for the Lord to pour out His Spirit on Japan and on Osaka. This year, we are taking on a special challenge to pray for God to fill this hall for His glory, but our prayers should be much bigger than that. Let's pray for God to pour out His Spirit and bring revival to churches throughout this city and across this land.



V. Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father and loving Lord,

You are Creator God and Lord of all. We praise Your Name and give thanks for the wonders of Your grace and mercy. Forgive us, Lord, for failing to honor You with our lives. We confess that on many occasions we have done wrong. We are sinners, desperately in need of the mercy and grace that You freely give to all who trust in You. Thank You that You have not abandoned us, but instead have prepared a way of salvation through the cross of Jesus. Help us to open our hearts wide to You.

Lord, I pray that each and every one of us would trust in Jesus and His finished work on the cross and be saved. Not only us, but also our families, our friends, our neighbors, the people we work with and go to school with. Pour out Your grace and love. Pour out Your Spirit on this city and in this land. Lord, we boldly ask for an amazing movement in this land. Send forth Your Spirit Lord and show Your glory. May Your Kingdom, may Your will be done, here in Osaka and across Japan. Thank You for hearing our prayers. In Jesus' Name, amen.