

The Book of Acts could also be called the “Book of **FACTS**.” It is an historical document. It is not a book about philosophy, psychology, sociology, theology, politics (Roman tyranny & oppression is never mentioned in the Bible), or economic theory. It’s not mythological like the Greek and Roman gods; it is totally rooted in history.

Sir William Ramsey was a 19th century Scotsman who set out to disprove the book of Acts. He thought the Bible was a “Book of Fables.” His skepticism led him to actually go to the places where Dr. Luke had written about Paul’s missionary journeys. Ramsey’s studies led him not only to believe in the historicity of Acts, but actually led to Ramsey’s conversion.

C.S. Lewis, the noted English author, was an agnostic. His conversion to Christianity was set up when an unbelieving Oxford professor said that the New Testament was indeed historically accurate.

8:1 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.

v1) On that day a **great persecution** broke out against **the church** at **Jerusalem**, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

“On that day,” when Stephen was martyred, a **great persecution** began. A spark turned into a raging fire. The Jerusalem believers bore the brunt of it. As a result, Christians dispersed from Jerusalem. The Apostles did NOT leave Jerusalem. We shouldn’t criticize the Apostles for remaining in the city. If anything, we should commend them for their courage and devotion to duty. After all, somebody had to remain there to care for the church.

Because of the witness and death of Stephen, it is possible that the focus of the persecution was against the Hellenistic Jews rather than the “native” Jews. It would be easier for Saul and his helpers to identify the Hellenistic believers since many of the native Jews were still very Jewish and very much attached to the temple. Peter was still keeping a “kosher home” when he was sent to evangelize the household of Cornelius

So far, all of the Book of Acts has occurred in **Jerusalem**. That will change. The perception of it changes, too. Christianity is not merely a Jewish cult. It’s also not merely a local, Jerusalem event. It’s going worldwide. Regardless of what anyone says about it, Christianity has been the most influential movement in the history of the world. We even delineate time by “B.C.” (“before Christ”) and “Anno Domini” (the year of our Lord). The book, What Has Christianity Ever Done For Us?, shows the impact that the world’s largest religion has had upon our planet. Culture and thought, the arts, education, the importance of the individual, societal norms, etc. have all been greatly shaped by the

Christian faith. America, likewise, has been incredibly impacted by the faith of those who came to this country.

The seeds of the Christian movement going out from Jerusalem were derived from persecution. One of the “Church Fathers,” Tertullian, made a famous quote: *“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”* The early Christians scattered because if they didn’t, they might be killed if they stayed in Jerusalem. They did not bravely line up and die, they ran. Undoubtedly, they were afraid. Sometimes fear is a good and wise thing!

v2) *Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.* Note the grief. I think this is an important point! They didn’t just blow it off. They loved Stephen and they mourned deeply for him.

One of my favorite books is Philip Yancey’s Prayer. On page 220: *“When I hear a person describe a remarkable escape from an airplane crash, I cannot help thinking about the people who died in the same crash, many of them praying just as fervently. And although I rejoice over reports of miraculous healings, I also remember with a pang the file drawer in my office bulging with stories of those who have not been healed. I do not doubt that God answers prayer. Rather, I struggle with the inconsistency of those apparent answers.”*

The question of “**Why?**” is a very prevalent one today. Why do people, especially children, have sickness? Why is there injustice? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there cancer, divorce, abuse, AIDS, & war?

What happened to the early church is the same thing that happened to Jesus! Remember how He lived. He was absolutely perfect. He went about doing good! And what happened to him for his godly life? He was nailed to the cross. The same thing now begins to happen to His followers. Stephen hadn’t hurt anybody. He was a good man. But they stoned him. And the one holding the coats of the stoners was Saul of Tarsus. History is replete with examples of such persecutors.

Why does evil come? Scripture gives us 2 explanations of evil.

- 1.) James 4:1-3 *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*
- 2.) Ephesians 6:12-13 *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

A third explanation is that we simply do not know or understand. It is a mystery. So, we must be very careful in trying to figure everything out. The answers often escape us.

v3) But **Saul** began to destroy the church. Going from **house to house**, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. A systematic raid started on Christians. Saul is filled/blinded with rage.

Imagine standing there watching this happening, smiling & loving it. He's as young as 24 or as old as 40. Paul calls himself "an old man" (over 50's) in Philemon 4 (written in the early 60's AD). Saul "made havoc of the church." The verb here describes a wild animal mangling its prey. When Jesus spoke to Saul on the road to Damascus, He compared Saul to a wild beast! Saul would go to any length to achieve his purpose. There was no ambiguity about him.

Men & Women were imprisoned. If you were part of the Jerusalem church, you were going to be visited by Saul & his goons. The only way to protect yourself and your family was to get out of town.

Galatians 1:13 *For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.* Saul was zealous & sincere. Sometimes people say that sincerity alone is enough. He really believed that if he killed Christians he was obeying God. But how does murder show God's love?

Saul also wasn't alone in his opinions. He could not single-handedly impose persecution upon Christians. He was part of a larger group. It was the "majority opinion." All the religious leaders in Jerusalem believed Stephen deserved his fate. The reason for their opinion was based on Torah. Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law. This was part of their problem. They were operating on the basis of the old; whereas the new had come. It was a new wineskin – the old had served its purpose but was now obsolete. This is why we don't follow Jewish ritual & customs. Jesus put an end to that. This discussion is going to be picked up soon in Acts when the revolutionary idea will come that non-Jewish people do not have to become Jewish before they can become Christians. There had been a voice speaking to Saul – that of Acts 5:38-39 *Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. 39 But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."*

house to house – you destroy the church by going house to house. You can destroy the church by destroying the homes. This seems to be a call to be on guard, on lookout for this attack. What is dragging men & women out of their homes **today** & putting them into bondage?

v4) *Those who had been scattered*... It's ironic that the harder Saul worked, the greater he helped the church grow. It's counterintuitive.

Human nature, by & large, is to stick to the familiar patterns & friendships. We prefer comfort and consistency to novelty. Had the Christians not been persecuted, they would have just stayed in Jerusalem. Sometimes the momma bird has to shove the baby bird out of the nest. Persecution does to the church what wind does to seed: it **scatters** it and only produces a greater harvest. The word translated "scattered" means "to scatter seed." The believers in Jerusalem were God's seed and the persecution was used of God to plant them in new soil so they could bear fruit. Some went throughout Judea and Samaria, and others went to more distant fields. Instead of scattering seed like a farmer, they are scattering "the word." This scattering was part of God's purpose to take the

gospel worldwide. If we fail to scatter, we'll end up just loving each others. We'll become the inward focus.

On the one hand, we as a church (Asbury) are increasingly being perceived as a "sending church." But just as your greatest strength can become your greatest weakness, so our perception that we as a church are growing, individual members can become dismissive and say, "Well – we're sending others all over the world, therefore...I am not needed so I should just do my own thing."

I see this scattering at Asbury as soon as you go out the doors. While we're not going to be persecuted, but we are all scattering into places with incredible missional opportunity.

preached the word *wherever they went.* This is a very familiar term to us. **Jesus** spoke about the word in the "Parable of the Sower." He described the 4 responses of a person who "hears the word." The "word" refers to the "Word of God." John uses it in different context, having "The Word" refer not to the spoken word or the preached word, but to "The Living Word," Jesus.

"The Word" is used **25x** in Acts. Beyond the Gospels it's used **67x** in the New Testament. This is the "kerygma" or the message that they proclaimed. In other words, they had a story to tell. It had something to do with them, undoubtedly, but as we see in Stephen's sermon "The Word" had absolutely nothing, zero, nada, zip, to do about him. It was all about what God had done; how God had acted. They were witnesses to the ministry of the Word. But the Word was connected to Jesus, not to them. This is one of the ways we run off the track – we get too immersed in our dramas, rather than in ministering the Word of God & letting the Word speak to us. And what WAS "The Word?" It was about who Jesus was and what God did in and through Him. Stephen didn't spend an iota of time talking about what had happened to him. Philip isn't going to do that either.

What's the nature of the church? Is it just to feed people & help them feel better? Yes, we do that. Is it just a place to make friends & enjoy their company? Yes, we want that to happen. But there's a greater claim upon us than just meeting people's needs – we are called to go into Mission. We are to be witnesses. We are seeds that God wants to use.

See the reference in Charles Colson's book, [Born Again](#), on pages 324-326