

## Discipleship in a Pandemic

Jonathan K. Dodson | Acts 7:59-8:1 | March 21, 2021

The Church is experiencing a *cocoon effect*. When a caterpillar spins a silk cocoon, it withdraws from its natural habitat, forming a cocoon under a leaf or branch, out of sight, *where it slowly dies*. And so it is with some of us. A slow, unrecognizable withdraw from others, an indifference to service, fellowship, witness, giving, and corporate worship. Coddled by our cocoons, we choose the path of least resistance. In the cocoon, some things die but it's also possible for things *to be reborn*. Good news!—a new creation emerges from the cocoon, something transformed, beautiful. Something that takes flight. But the question is how will you emerge? More or less like Christ? More or less committed to his Church? More or less engaged in his mission? Friends, God wants a transformed version of you, the church, to live as his new creation in this tired old world, *so* a fresh gospel movement can take flight. How can we be sure? It's what he's been doing throughout history. Let's take a look at a snapshot from Acts: Death in Jerusalem, Life in Samaria, Joy in the City.

### Death in Jerusalem

Our passage begins in Jerusalem, a city divided between Jews and Christians, the geographical center of both Judaism and Christianity, where Saul the religious zealot leads a persecution against the church. Our passage begins, “**And Saul approved of his execution** (Ac 8:1). Whose execution? Stephen, the newly appointed deacon in the Jer church, a man described as full of grace and the Holy Spirit. His preaching caused such a stir that he was mobbed, stoned, and thrown out of the city. His executors laid their garments at the feet of Saul. Why? Practically, probably due to the heat, but theologically, Luke includes this detail for a reason. Under Jewish law the condemned were to be stripped before stoning to indicate their guilt. In an ironic twist, it's the executors who strip as they guiltily murder the innocent. This week eight Asian-Americans were murdered. Their lives taken by a zealot. This past year 354,000 people died from covid. The anniversary of both the onset of covid and George Floyd's murder are upon us. All of this warrants grief. It may ooze out in funk or leap out in anger, but it's important give voice to it, to recognize we've been through a lot these past fourteen months. Grief is sadness because it's not supposed to be this way, all the death and hate. Lord, hear our cry! Now, notice **the devout men, the word is godly not zealot, didn't just grieve the death of Stephen but made great lament** (2). Luke uses the word great three times to make a point. First, great lament. Lament is different from grief. Grief is unto ourselves but lament is unto God. It has a greater audience, a Being capable of helping us through loss, a God intimately acquainted with death. *Lament is grief stuffed with hope. If grief is sadness because it's not the way things are supposed to be, lament is sadness with hope that things won't always be this way.* Stephen's response demonstrates this. He doesn't decry his persecutors as stones crush his bones. He falls to his knees and cries out **with a great voice** saying, “**Lord, do not hold this sin against them**” (7:60). There is great lament *and the second great, great forgiveness*. He responds like his Lord: mobbed, led out of the city, slain essentially saying, **Father, forgive them for they know not what they do**” (Lk 23:34). *He does not hold enemies in contempt but releases them in forgiveness.* This is what our society needs: radical forgiveness in a cancel culture. Not holding people hostage to our judgments but bringing them to Jesus. Justice is important, don't get me wrong, but when true justice shows up, without forgiveness, no one will stand. Will the church be

known for judgment or forgiveness, a society of Sauls or Stephens? When hurt, scorned, and sinned against will you *forgive*? You say I'm no Stephen. Well, how did Stephen do it? Full of grace and the Holy Spirit—the same grace and Spirit he has given to us. Why did he do it? Because of *Jesus*: He forgave as he was forgiven. He drew from Jesus example and Jesus' fountain of undeserved forgiveness. Death in Jerusalem invites great lament *but also* provokes counter-cultural, Christ-adorning forgiveness.

### **Life in Samaria**

A life from death moment sparked gospel movement. Death in Jerusalem led to life in Samaria. As persecution broke out against the church, Christians *were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria* (8:1). But look at v. 4, "*Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.*" *The scattered preached the word.* The passage zooms in on **Philip**, another recently appointed deacon who *went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ* (5). God used the pain of persecution to force the church into its mission. How so? Well, up to this point the church had effectively been quarantined in Jerusalem and the gospel with it. The apostles hadn't quite caught onto the fact that the gospel is for all peoples. Historically, Jews viewed Samaritans with disdain since they were essentially half Jewish and elected not to worship at the temple in Jerusalem but on their own sacred mountain. But now Philip is preaching Christ in the chief city of Samaria! The gospel is spreading, and as it does it overturns racial prejudice. This, in fact, was Christ's plan all along. He charged the apostles to be his *witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth* (1:8)! This isn't just geographic expansion of the gospel; it's an ethnicity-affirming expression of the gospel. Jesus' vision for making disciples always included *all* the nations. So, let's not squander the sufferings of the last year. Let's use our pain for the promotion of a gospel for all peoples. Let's be his witnesses in north and south Austin, downtown and on the eastside, in barrios and condos, coffeeshops and street corners. Ivan Valdez has been working at Ashely's furniture, where a coworker was giving him a hard time about being a Christian. He mocked his faith. Tried to stump him with hard questions. But he embraced persecution, shared the gospel with him, and last Tuesday he put his faith in Jesus. He's discipling the coworker who mocked him! *Who could you reach with the gospel if you took a step out of quarantine? What neighbor or coworker will come to know the life-changing forgiveness of Jesus as you emerge from the cocoon?* Well, entire crowds pressed in to know Jesus as Philip preached; they paid attention with one mind to what he said (6). And this was before he did miracles! The preached Word is the main event. *But* the crowds also saw the gospel in action: the lame were healed and unclean spirits were delivered. They heard and saw *new creation*. The life out of death Jesus brought life to their morbid existence. And with it the third occurrence of a **great voice**. Remember the great voice of lament?—sadness with hope that things will not always be this way? Here the hope of new creation breaks in, erupts out of the unclean, as Jesus overthrows their demons to give them new life! *God is always at work in the darkness*. Painter Mako Fujimara collaborated in a project called QU4RTETS in which he prepared four canvases with black gesso. Then, he added pulverized minerals of color to signify boundaries of light. [SLIDES 5-8] He comments, *Jesus is the light that shines and places limits on the evil and injustice on the earth*. And so it should be with the church where people hear and see the gospel, in stereo, the power of new creation flowing through us in radical acts of forgiveness, racial justice, and Christ-proclaiming mission. Boundaries of light in the darkness.

## Joy of the City

That [brings joy to the city](#) (8). Why was the city full of joy? Not because a couple spiritual elites preached with great rhetorical skill and made disciples. Look at verse four and verse one. It was *the church* that was scattered and went about preaching the Word. Stephen and Philip are examples of everyday people who preached the word. The city rejoiced because *the church* preached Christ, set boundaries of light in the darkness, and promoted the gospel amidst their pain, suffering, and lament. Because they were filled with grace and the Spirit, not fear and flesh. Church, God is calling us out of the cocoon to take flight into his mission of making disciples of all nations. How do we do it? Last week Tory described discipleship as intentional friendship that helps us know, love, obey, and worship Jesus. One way we encourage this at City Life is through discipleship groups/FCs. These are communities of friendship that help one another *repent of sin, rejoice in Christ, and reproduce disciples*. You can form a mentor group, where you lead out, or a peer group, where you're more side by side. Meet together regularly to **repent of sin**. Genesis tells us sin is crouching at our door. We must learn to master it through turning away from it. Owen: Be killing sin less it be killing you. One of my DGs we recently went around and talked about the sins that are most tempting and dangerous for us. We resolved to pray for one another, check in on one another, and encourage one another to flee from sin. But its not just about repenting from sin; it's also about rejoicing in Christ. As sinners heard the gospel in Samaria, they **rejoiced**. Why? Verse 5: *Christ* was proclaimed to them. In Christ, forgiveness is deep and new creation is real. We all need encouragement to enjoy the presence of Christ, to live into our new creation identity not our old humanity. To enjoy the presence and love of Christ. My DGs do this through reading the same passage of Scripture together and looking for Christ. Finally, **reproduce disciples**. If all of this is true, we'd be miserly fools to keep it to ourselves. We'd also be disobedient. Jesus sent us to make disciples of all nations. There are countless people still to reach. Neighbors, friends, coworkers who have not heard the gospel from our lips. I do a class at the Y several times a week. I like to get in, do my thing, and get out. But the Spirit convicted me that I needed to befriend a guy in the class. Then, one day he asked me for a ride. It was out of the way, but I'd be a fool not to take the opportunity. Since then I've had the privilege of taking him out for coffee to celebrate his birthday, working out with him, and sharing the gospel with him. Reproduce disciples. Let's be the new creation version of ourselves and bring joy to the city by repenting of sin, rejoicing in Christ, and reproducing disciples.