

20a ACTS

Let's begin our study of the Word of God this evening in the Book of Acts by taking a moment at the outset to go to the Lord in prayer. Father, thank you for another week, another day, and another measure of your grace that has been bestowed on us. We thank you for all of the things that have come our way in our personal lives and in our lives here in this community and in this country.

We thank you for the freedom and the opportunity that we have in spite of our various tribulations that we encounter during the course of circumstances. We know that we are in your hands, we have a great destination in front of us, and we have opportunities to learn and to grow in what time remains to us here on earth. We pray for the leadership of our country at this time.

There are decisions that weigh in the balance that will make a significant difference in the way lives will be lived and what opportunities are available in our schools and in our nation and the way court cases are decided will have a profound effect on us. Our foreign policy is being weighed and being pushed to and fro by those who have their own interests at heart, but we ask your blessing on those who are seeking to uphold the values that our country was founded on. We pray that any action that we need to take as citizens will be clear to us.

We thank you most of all for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the opportunity to learn about him and learn about our life in him through your word. We ask that you would give us insight and understanding as we study these passages tonight. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. We resume our study tonight beginning a fresh chapter in Acts, Acts chapter 8. Acts chapter 8. I'd like to begin by reading the first few verses of this chapter. I sometimes plunge in without doing that.

It's good to get the context. We just saw the episode where Stephen gives his great speech and then goes to glory. The last thing I want to say about that is, and if you have a different view of death than I do, why just think about something else for a couple of minutes and then you can come back when I get back to chapter 8. But I had a thought this week as I was musing on the scene in verse 55 of chapter 7. Stephen, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

I believe that this is not only a look up, I think it is a look forward in time. I think Stephen at the point of his death, and it is possible, although I reserve judgment until I have more information, but I think that people often seem to see things at the point of their death that relate to the life to come. I don't know what to make of that.

There is not clear scripture that says you can or you can't, but there is an example here of Stephen who sees things that we don't ordinarily see. You can look up into the sky all day long and you will not see Jesus standing on the right hand of the God. Stephen did.

I believe, I hypothesize, this is my own personal opinion, that the transition from present to future took place before Stephen left this life in the sense that he is seeing the first increment of the rapture. This has always been presented to me and I presented it to you as sort of an honor that was paid to Stephen in that Jesus is standing rather than sitting at the right hand of the Father. But the time when Jesus is going to stand up and leave His Father's side is when He is ready to return.

I believe that Stephen got a preview, sort of a future look, as they were in the process of stoning Him. While they proceeded to finish stoning His earthly body, He jumped ahead of us and is at the rapture. The Lord Jesus that He saw, He has an uninterrupted view.

When He looks up and sees Him at the right hand of the Father, His eyes will be on the Lord Jesus as He ascends up to meet Him in the air and the rest who are alive and remain will be caught up. So I just thought I would toss that out as an observation or as a thought on my part. I can't give you a lot of substantiation in terms of Scripture for that, but we've talked in the past about the possibility that what Scripture really teaches us is that we are wasting our time trying to come up with a formula for the intermediate state.

Are there disembodied souls or inter-embodied souls who fulfill the Scripture that says absent from the body is to be face-to-face with the Lord? I think we are asking the wrong question. I think that because we are time-bound and we think in linear terms, we think that if someone dies and their soul is eternal and is saved, then they have to be somewhere. Because I'm somewhere, they have to be somewhere in my universe.

And death is the exit from this universe. Probably the easiest example I can give of this is, I worked in a building one time that was a client downtown here in Dallas. They had two different offices.

They were a merged company. So I would do work for one part of the company, and then I would leave that office and walk down this hallway and go down by the drinking fountain and past the restrooms and turn right and go into this other office and walk all the way back to the back of their office. So it was kind of like a U shape.

I started at one end of the U. This was at Trinity, by the way. I went all the way down and went back up to the other end. I did this for years.

These people were clients of ours for five or six years. Any time I had to go from one side to the other, I went out, went down the hallway, passed the drinking fountain, passed the restrooms, went up the other side. And one day, I was getting ready to go there and the lady who had called me happened to be with me.

I said, well, I need to go over and check this other computer. I'll be back in a minute. I started to leave.

She said, where are you going? I said, well, I've got to go out the door and go all the way down the U and come up the other side and go in that other office. She said, well, you see this door right here? She opened the door and I walked right into the room that I had for years been making this quarter mile trip to get to. I just didn't know about the door.

Well, it's a rough analogy, but if you think about us in time, for us, let's say the Lord Jesus comes in our lifetime, we've got to walk down the hallway around the bend and come up the other side. People who die just open the door and walk right to that point. But we're all going to get there at the same time.

So that's sort of how I think of it. At any rate, this is an interesting peek into the death of a believer. I think that faithful believers, it has been called dying grace.

But you notice that Stephen does not seem to be aware of suffering. He doesn't seem to be in distress. And I think that one of the gifts of God, you can base this over in the Psalms where it says precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of one of his saints.

And I think that God's blessing extends to and through the point of our death so that it is not horrifying. It is not fearful. You can read about the death of many great believers.

Stonewall Jackson always comes to my mind. Let us cross over the river and rest in the shade of the trees. I can't think of any last words that are more fitting than those.

At any rate, he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this into their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And of course, from our point of view, the body ceases to function and people who are dead look asleep, but they're not waking up anytime soon.

Then we proceed to chapter 8. And Saul was consenting unto his death. Saul was introduced to us as the man who is keeping the coats. But this goes beyond just standing there as an impassive observer.

The Greek word that is used here for consenting is an active word that means approving, means he was rooting for this. He did not participate because he probably had a Pharisaic idea that this might render him unclean in some way. And he's a little bit above actually picking up rocks and throwing them.

But he is actively approving and cheering on the action of killing Stephen. At this time, there was a great persecution against the church, which was at Jerusalem, and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. When's the last time we saw these three words in such close proximity, Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria? You remember Matthew 28, 19.

You remember Acts 1.8, you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem and Judea and in Samaria. Notice you don't have any uttermost parts of the earth here, because as we pointed out, that last portion of Acts 1.8 says, until the end of the age. And it is a time reference, not a spatial reference to the ends of the earth.

Because the apostles were designated by God to minister in Jerusalem, in Judea and in Samaria. The 11 who remain after the death of Judas, that is their area of ministry. They were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

The apostles are where? In Jerusalem. They have not been scattered. And devout men carried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.

You will notice to his burial is in italics. It's not in the Greek. The implication is that they buried him.

But it says devout men were pallbearers for him. Devout men bore him away is the idea to his place of burial. But the burial is not specifically mentioned.

Why? Because the emphasis is on the life that Stephen lived. The emphasis is on the testimony that he gave. The emphasis is on the vision that he saw of the Lord Jesus and being united with the Lord Jesus.

And the Bible does not even deign to mention the disposition of his mortal remains. Devout men paid attention to him. It just says they carried him, they bore him.

But there's no mention of preparation or burial or any of that because, and there's a reason, it is not mentioned because it is an unimportant detail. The Holy Spirit wants us to look at his life and look at his being united with Christ at the point of his death. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house and hailing men and women, committing them to prison.

Therefore, they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. The word preaching there is the same word that we get evangelism or evangelizing from it. It's a participle, it's a noun form of a verb.

It says they are good messaging ones. Angelos is a messenger. Angelizamai is one who gives a message and eu in the front of it means it's a good message.

So they are ones who give the good message of the word. Let's take a look now at these first four verses. Your New King James breaks the paragraph there between three and four, but I would have broken it between four and five.

So we'll look at one through four. Saul was approving of his death and at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem. Now what exactly

did this entail? In other words, what was the nature of Saul's persecution of the church? We have quite a bit of information about this actually.

And if you will just flip the page to Acts chapter nine and verse one, you'll see the first of several notices that give us the details of this persecution. Acts chapter nine verse one tells us that Saul was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord and went to the high priest for permission to attack them by going down to Damascus. In verse 13 of that same verse, Ananias says, Lord, I've heard from many about this man how much harm he did to your saints at Jerusalem.

Well, what kind of harm is that? Go down to verse 21 of chapter nine. This of course is after Saul's conversion. Those hearing him continued to be amazed and were saying, is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests? So he didn't just stand and hold coats.

He got them arrested. He got them imprisoned. He had them brought up on charges before the Sanhedrin.

In Acts chapter 22 and verse four, we find out Saul himself by Paul called Paul now, I persecuted this way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons. So he was the arrestor. He would identify, charge, arrest and bring to trial Christians, both men and women.

Not only that, look at verse 19 of that same chapter. Paul says, I said, Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another, I used to imprison and beat those who believed on you. So he inflicted punishment of a corporal kind.

Chapter 26, verse 10 and following. This is just what I did in Jerusalem, Paul says. Not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death, I cast my vote against them.

Now this tells us that Saul had a vote. Was he a member of the Sanhedrin? I would think because it is the 70 who gave the thumbs up and thumbs down when it came to trial and the fact that he had a vote, unless there's some other mechanism that I'm unaware of. But this was a majority type decision and he always voted the thumbs down for Christians.

Verse 11 goes on to say, I punished them often in all the synagogues. I tried to force them to blaspheme and being furiously enraged at them. I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

I am seemingly always mentioning the fact that our subjects seem to interweave in our different studies, but we just saw Saul in first Samuel prosecuting the battle against the Philistines. You remember it comes to the end of the day and he doesn't let anyone eat

and then all of his men are eating raw meat and there's blood dripping out of their mouths and he still wants to go and stab the Philistines in their sleep and pursue them all night long. And we talked about how you can get so obsessed with something and so consumed by something that your balance and your judgment just goes out the window.

And this seems to be the way Saul was. He was so violently anti-Christian that there was just no stopping him. It didn't matter if it was a woman.

It didn't matter what their family situation was. He put them in prison. He had them beat.

He voted against them. He did everything he possibly could to stamp them out and exterminate them, even to the point of pursuing them to foreign cities. If he heard that somebody had packed up and left before he got to their house, he'd jump on a donkey and go down the road and try to find them and bring them back for imprisonment and trial and execution.

This is why he's eventually going to go to Damascus and we'll see that in the next verse. But this is just a little bit. There are also notices in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 9, Galatians 1.13, Philippians 3.6 and 1 Timothy 1.13. All of these tell us about Saul's persecution of the church.

Why? Why is there so much notice, so much emphasis given in the word of God about Saul's persecution of the church before his conversion? Well, I would submit to you as we go back to Acts chapter 8 and look at these first few verses that God could have done the Damascus road thing a little earlier. Could he not? What if you're living in Jerusalem and you've seen these mighty acts and you've seen the healings and the signs and you go down and you hear Peter preach on Solomon's porch and you come to faith and you say, you know, this really makes sense. As I think about my Old Testament scriptures, it all kind of falls into place.

Jesus was the Messiah. This really is a work of God. I'm going to place my faith in him.

I'm going to accept him as the king of Israel and as the promised one. When they do that, here comes Saul of Tarsus and locks him up. Mothers, children, votes against them, hounds them unto death.

And I'm thinking, why doesn't God send Jesus to blind Saul and stop him before a lot of these people got killed? God knew that he was going to do this, but family after family, person after person, they probably ranged into the dozens or the scores, perhaps hundreds of people in Jerusalem lost their freedom, lost their property, probably lost their lives because of Saul's prosecution. And persecution against Christians. And God did not stop it.

And my question is, God chose to stop it before he went to Damascus. Wouldn't you like to be the people that fled to Damascus and God stopped him before he went to

Damascus and brought them back and hailed them into prison and had them executed and all their property confiscated? You know, there wasn't even an inheritance. It didn't matter what will you had written or anything else.

If you were found guilty, all of your property was forfeit and went to the priests, went to the temple when it was a religious prosecution. So why did God pick this particular point? This is my question. And you think about these unlucky ones.

You look at the Staten Island ferry that crashed this past week. Some people happened to be standing in the front, lost legs and arms and feet and 10 or 11 were killed and others were in the back. How does God decide who's going to make it and who isn't? Who's going to be persecuted and who isn't? Well, this brings us to the subject of afflictions, problems, trials.

There's a great old Southern gospel song that says, trials dark on every hand and we cannot understand the ways that God will lead us to his blessed promised land, but we'll understand it better by and by. It goes on to say, we say, well, we don't know. It's just opaque.

We don't understand why it happens. Well, scripture does give us some idea of why God allows affliction, why God allows pressure and even sorrow and loss to believers. These are people who have believed in Jesus.

You would think that God would send an angel. He let John and Peter out of prison. Why didn't he stop Saul? Why didn't he stop the Sanhedrin? Why didn't he invoke a mighty deliverance? These people died.

Stephen died. Scores of others died just like him at the hands of Saul. Why didn't God stop it? Well, let's look at the scripture and see if we can figure this out.

Number one, I'm going to give you about 15 different reasons why God allows afflictions to faithful believers. You know, we've talked about, well, if you're being afflicted, maybe there's something the matter you need to check and make sure you're not being disciplined and so on. But there are many more reasons than getting our attention to make us change our mind, why we may suffer affliction.

Number one, our afflictions can be used by God to promote the glory of God. The scripture for this is John chapter nine, verses one through three. Jesus passed by and saw a man blind from birth and his disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, it was neither that this man sinned nor his parents.

It was so that the works of God might be displayed in him. This man had to live for years blind because God had a purpose. He was at the right place at the right time so that the Lord Jesus could come and spit on the ground and make some clay, apply it to his eyes

and tell him to go wash in the pool of Siloam.

Each of those details is significant. Jesus heals blindness several different ways and I wish we had time to go back, but you can review that in our miracles study. It's a fascinating procedure that Jesus uses to heal that particular blind man.

You find the same thing two chapters later in John 11, talking about the death of Lazarus. John 11 and verse three, Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus saying, Lord behold, he whom you love is sick. Their brother Lazarus is sick.

When Jesus heard this, he said, this sickness is not to end in death. It is for the glory of God so that the Son of God may be glorified by it. Now, does Lazarus know this? We don't know how long Lazarus was sick or what kind of sickness he had, but it took the normal course and resulted in his death.

So it wasn't a picnic. It wasn't a happy, happy time. And Lazarus is laying there on his sickbed and his sisters are looking at him and he's wasting away and he's getting sicker and sicker and they sent for the Lord and the Lord doesn't come, the Lord doesn't come.

The Lord got the message and he delayed coming. He purposely, he told his disciples it's not time to go yet and he waited until Lazarus died from this illness and people are scratching their head saying, Lord, if you love the man, he's a faithful, you've got so few people who respond to the message. Here's a man that does.

You're letting him waste away and die, which the Lord did. Why is that? God had a mighty act. How many people have been raised from the dead? Not very many.

Lazarus is one of that select few, but he had to go through sickness and he had to go through death to be in that glory reflecting number and he didn't know it at the time. Jesus didn't take him aside and say, Lazarus, you know, a year from now you're going to get sick and die, but don't worry about it. I'm going to come raise you.

I'm going to bring you out of the tomb. Lazarus had to take it completely on faith. He's asking his sisters, has Jesus come yet? No, haven't heard from him, haven't heard from him.

It is totally faith that sustains Lazarus in and through his death. John 21, verses 18 and 19 is our third scripture in this regard. John 21, 18 says, truly, I truly, truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger talking to Peter, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished.

But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you and bring you where you do not wish to go. Now, this he said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. Peter's death, this one is foretold, at least the manner of it is foretold.

And he says, this death that you're going to die is going to glorify God. When he had spoken this, he said to him, follow me. If we could just remember that exhortation to trust that God knows what he's doing.

He is working all things together for good to those who love him, those who are called according to his purpose. Remember all of the people in the Bible. Job had no earthly idea when he lost his flocks and he lost his herds and he lost his sons and daughters.

Can you imagine hearing of the death of seven sons and three daughters all in the same day and of being financially wiped out at the same time? It's inconceivable. It's total disaster. It's like being dragged from the water of the Titanic with all your family and all your possessions at the bottom of the ocean.

But Job said, God can slay me. I'm not going to stop trusting him. And we just have to remember that God has a reason and God has a purpose.

And we don't have to understand what it is. We just have to understand who God is. So reason number one, God makes our afflictions beneficial by reflecting his own glory in them.

Number two, our afflictions exhibit the power and faithfulness of God. This is a specific way that God's glory is manifest. Psalm 34, verse 19, many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.

Do not think if you are righteous, you will not be afflicted. Scripture says many are the afflictions of the righteous. And don't assume that if you have many afflictions, you are somehow not righteous.

How to memorize this first. That's a good verse. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.

It goes on to say he keeps all his bones. Not one of them is broken. Evil shall slay the wicked and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.

The Lord redeems the soul of his servants and none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned. We may have to wait for the judgment in the next life to see this take place, but it is a promise of God. You have the same idea in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 and verse 8. 2 Corinthians 4, 8 through 11.

We are afflicted, Paul says, in every way, but we're not crushed. We are perplexed, but not despairing. We are persecuted, but not forsaken.

We are struck down, but we are not destroyed. Always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifest in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also

may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

That's reason number two. Let me give you one more before we take our break. The third reason that God allows affliction in our lives is to teach us the will of God.

You say, Lord, show me your will. This is one of the ways that he does it. Psalm 119, 71.

Psalm 119, 71. It is good for me that I was afflicted so that I may learn your statutes. It is good for me that I was afflicted.

This is not the statement of an immature believer, is it? This is something we come to as we grow and increase our faith. Isaiah 26 and verse nine. At night, my soul longs for you.

Indeed, my spirit within me seeks you diligently. For when the earth experiences your judgments, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness. When the earth experiences judgment, the inhabitants of the earth learn righteousness.

Well, this all sounds fine right now. We're comfortably seated. We're not in any immediate pain.

I don't see any signs of arterial bleeding anywhere. But the time to revisit these principles, the time to try to bring them back to our mind, at least a few of them, I figure if I give you 15 or so, two or three will surface in our minds when the chips are down. God has a purpose.

God will glorify himself. That is why we exist. It's why we are left in this life is so that God's glory can be manifest to us and to others and to the angels.

I like to think that there is a third testament. You got the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Future Testament. And in that third book of the Bible, your life is recorded and my life is recorded, just like Joseph and David and Daniel and Moses and Simon Peter and the Apostle Paul, Titus and the rest of these parties that you find in the Bible.

Think about our lives being recorded in the pages of Scripture. Would it just be day after day after day of unbroken, smooth paths and easy sailing and still waters and green pastures? I can't think of a single Bible character whose life is that way. Just about anybody you look at in the Bible, you're going to find that they were pressed, that they were pressured.

And we learn about God in that way. Well, future generations, myriads of angels, myriads of millennial individuals are going to be looking at what's in God's Word, at the record of what God has done in human history. And I suspect it is going to include a lot more than what we have in our paper Bible right now.

Jews probably thought God wasn't going to add anything to the Old Testament, but he

did. We assume that nothing's going to be added to this book, but we're going to have a lot of room and a lot of time. And I think that if you knew your life was going to be recorded in the Bible, it would give us a perspective, wouldn't it? Well, let's pause here and take our break.

When we come back, we're going to take a quick look at the rest of these points, and then we're going to move forward and see the ministry of Philip up in Samaria.