

Acts 8:8

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[0:00] I have a question for you to begin this morning, or begin the sermon this morning. A question that only you can answer. I'm not equipped to answer this question.

I did, as Sandy mentioned, have four years living in Aberdeen, very enjoyable four years, but that was longer ago than I care to remember.

So this question is one that only you can answer, you who live here. And the question is, what is Aberdeen full of? If you had to answer that question, just pause for a moment.

What is Aberdeen full of? You might think, well, what does he mean by that question? It's a fair question if you've got it. Just to maybe illustrate where I live in Moyabamba, and you ask me what it's full of, I could say, well, it's full of orchids.

I've got to be careful here, because there's one or two folk here, I think, have been there, so I've got to tell the truth. So it's called the city of orchids. And so it's full of orchids, more or less, if you know where to look for them.

[1:03] It's also full, and this would be something you would see just every day and all day, full of motorized rickshaws. You can picture a rickshaw, well, instead of a bike, put a motorbike. That's what it's full of, just all over the place.

Well, what's Aberdeen full of? One thing I did notice as I drove from the Smiths into church this morning, and sort of veered past one or two streets I was very familiar with in my student days. One thing that struck me was all these hundreds of satellite dishes staring down at me. It was kind of spooky, actually. Now, you've probably got so used to it. But it's full of satellite dishes, and I don't know what else it's full of.

But more than things, what I'm really wanting to get to is, what would you say is a dominant characteristic of this city? The city that you live in.

The city where God has placed you to serve Him. For example, would you say that it's a city full of optimism? Or is it a city full of pessimism? Is it a city full of hope?

[2:05] Or a city full of hopelessness? A city full of sadness? Or a city full of joy? As I drove up from the train station yesterday, there was a bumper sticker that caught my eye.

I don't know if there's lots of these bumper stickers, but it said, if I remember rightly, Smile, you're in Aberdeen. Happiest city in Britain? Is that right? Have you seen that bumper sticker?

Happiest city in Britain? Is that true? I don't know. I'm just passing through. Is it the happiest city in Britain? Is it full of happiness? I don't know.

I could give my thoughts of what I imagine is the answer to that question. What about Scotland as a nation? Again, I don't feel that equipped to speak that intelligently about a place I haven't lived in for many years.

But in as much as I can get a feel for the place on occasional visits, one conclusion I would come to, you don't have to share my conclusion, but, and this may sound contradictory, I think of Scotland as a nation full of emptiness.

[3:13] I don't know if that makes any sense to you. It kind of makes sense to me. If you want to ask me what I think or what I mean by that, we can have a chat afterwards. Full of emptiness.

Let's ask another question. What would you like Aberdeen to be full of as a city? What would you like to be its dominant characteristic? How about a city full of joy?

How does that picture captivate you? How does that vision captivate you? A city full of joy.

Brimming over with joy. I would suggest that it's in your hands.

It's in the hands of God's people in this city to transform this city into a city full of joy. And what I want to do this morning is to think of a city that was so transformed.

A city that is described as a city full of joy. A city where there was great joy. And to consider how that happened. How did this city become a city full of joy?

[4 : 16] If you just turn with me to the passage that we've read there in Acts chapter 8 and verse 8. We're going to talk about or talk around what we read there in verse 8.

It says there in chapter 8, verse 8, So there was great joy in that city. So there was great joy in that city.

There had not been always great joy, but at the point at which this is written, that is how the city is described. A city full of joy.

Of deep joy. Of rich joy. Of exuberant joy. Of joy that doesn't disappear the following day. I imagine if things had gone differently yesterday evening, and I don't need to specify more, if that final minute goal had been in the other goal and not in our goal, that would have produced a lot of joy.

I would have been very happy. I would have celebrated. I probably would still have a bit of the glow this morning. But, if we're very honest, it's not really a joy that satisfies profoundly how many goals go in one net as opposed to the other net.

[5 : 30] Well, maybe not everybody agrees with me on how much joy that can produce. But the joy that has been spoken of here is a deep and a rich joy that was experienced by the inhabitants of the city, by the city in general.

So, what strikes me is it doesn't say that there was a family full of joy or a church full of joy. It says, so there was great joy in that city.

The city, the whole town, the whole community was characterized by this experience of joy. Now, what we want to do is ask, how did that happen?

And what lessons can we learn for today and for us where we are, wherever we are? There's a crucial little word at the beginning of verse 8 which I want to draw your attention to.

It says, so there was great joy in that city. That little word, so, speaks of causes. It didn't just happen. There are reasons, there are causes why Samaria, the city called Samaria, was full of great joy.

[6 : 35] And let's think about the causes. And in order to identify the causes, we have to rewind a bit and go backwards to the beginning which is never a bad thing.

So, let's go back to the beginning. And really, the way I'm going to present the thoughts that I have or the message that I have this morning is under three general ideas.

First of all, as we think of this process that results in a city full of joy, we begin with seeing that it starts with something bad.

It starts with something bad, it continues with something good, and it concludes with something wonderful. I think that's easy to remember. It starts with something bad, continues with something good, and concludes with something wonderful.

The wonderful thing is a city full of joy. But let's just think of each of these in turn. First of all, it starts with something bad, something very bad.

[7 : 34] We read from verse 54 of the previous chapter, and there at the beginning of chapter 8, that section concludes with these words, and Saul was there giving approval to his death, the death of Stephen.

Now, this was a horrendous event. This was a horrendous experience, not just for Stephen. But for this nascent, young church in Jerusalem.

If we could just try and imagine for a moment what that experience would have been like for the church. The death of Stephen is so familiar to us. We all know the first martyr of the Christian church, and the story is, as I say and as I repeat, very familiar to us.

But this is a horrendous, violent, bloody occasion. We have this man being dragged by people filled with hate and filled with a desire to do him harm, and they drag him out of the city, and they stone him.

And it's cruel, it's violent, it's vicious. These aren't little pebbles that are being thrown. I was just thinking about how Saul had the task of looking after the coats and the jackets.

[8 : 45] And I was just thinking, you know, if I'm going to throw a few pebbles, I don't really need to get my jacket off. I can do that very well with a big coat on. But if I'm going to be picking up big rocks and throwing them at the sky, that's when I have to start getting off the jacket and the coat.

This is what happened. It's a horrendous thing that happens. And though there is great victory and triumph in the manner of Stephen's death, just imagine for a moment how it must have impacted on

the church there.

Those people who had been loved by Stephen, who were friends with Stephen, who had shared fellowship with Stephen, who thought so highly of Stephen. How did they feel?

Well, we don't need to speculate because the Scriptures tell us. We read that in verse 2. Godly man buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. And mourned deeply for him.

They were hurting. They were confused. They didn't know why this had happened. It's the first time it had happened. I wonder if some of them were asking very big questions of God.

[9 : 43] And were saying, well, what's going on, God? Why did You allow this to happen? You know, we sing psalms that speak of angels encamping round about us and protecting us. Well, where were the angels when the stones were flying?

Where were the angels when Stephen's head was smashed open by that rock? I wonder if some of the Christians weren't understandably asking those kind of questions of God.

They were hurting deeply. Something very, very bad and tragic was happening, had happened to them. But that's only the beginning.

That's only the beginning. We read there in verse 1 that on that day, that very day, a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem.

There is a wave of brutal, satanic fury to which the church is exposed. And in all of this, one very clear, systematic, well-thought-out goal, which we find in verse 3.

[10 : 48] But Paul began to destroy the church. The intention is very clear. The intention is total destruction of this young church.

Saul and those who were with him would stop it no less. This was their objective. This was their goal. To destroy the church. And they began about it with, it would seem, considerable success.

And it is true today that the devil has that as his goal. It is to destroy the church. He wants to destroy this congregation. He wants to destroy the church of Christ in Aberdeen and in Scotland.

And some might say he's doing quite a good job of getting there. I don't know what your perspective is, but some might come to that conclusion. That is his objective. That is what he is about.

And very bad and tragic and sad things happen. in that battle. And he wants to destroy you also as a Christian. That's what he wants to do.

[11 : 54] He wants to muter you. He wants to silence you. He wants to discourage you. He wants to paralyze you. He wants you to fall away. He wants you to leave the church and to leave the things of God and to no longer serve God.

That's what he wants. And he seeks all sorts of ways and means to achieve that objection to destroy. And how do you respond?

How do I respond? How do we respond to these bad things that often happen to us? It's not a very profound thing to say, but it's a very true thing to say that bad things happen to good people.

And how do we respond when that happens to us? Maybe even today bad things are happening in your life. And maybe bad things are happening in your family and to people you love.

I don't know. And how do we respond? This is how this story begins. It begins with something very, very bad. But it continues.

[12 : 55] And it continues with something good. And the good thing that it continues with is a response of faith. The church responds to this bad situation, to this sad and tragic situation.

They respond in all their hurt and confusion. They respond in faith. They respond trusting, holding on to their trust in the Savior, holding on to their trust in God, holding on to that assurance that God has not lost control and that He is working out His purposes, even if they don't understand them as they go through that bad moment.

Their response is a response of faith. Well, what do they do? What do they do? Well, we've read the passage. What do the Christians do? Well, they respond, first of all, you might say quite intelligently.

In the face of persecution, in the face of folk coming from house to house, dragging them out, they run. And it's not out of cowardice, as we'll notice in a moment, but it's simply a very prudent and intelligent thing to do.

If somebody's going to knock on your door and take you off to prison, it's not a bad idea not to be there. And so what they do is they run, and they're scattered. We're told there that a great scattering takes place.

[14:14] There in verse 1 of chapter 8, on that day, a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

So they run. But that's not all they do. That's not all they do. In verse 4, we read of what those scattered did. And there we read, those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

They were scattered. They do take precautionary measures to not be the next victim of this persecution. But they certainly don't keep quiet. They certainly don't decide out of fear to do nothing.

They run and they preach and they talk and they share. Now, if we read there in verse 4 that those who had been scattered preached the word, it might raise a question for us as to who were scattered.

Who were the ones who were scattered if they're preaching? Some might say, well, they must have been ministers. Because ministers preach. Is that not the way it is? So, if they're preaching the word, they must have been ministers.

[15:24] But that's exactly what they weren't. There's a phrase that some of you will, I'm sure, have picked up on about who were scattered and we're told that in verse 1.

We're told actually who weren't scattered. And then we can deduce. There we read, on that day a great persecution broke out against the church of Jerusalem and all, and what does it say there? You're following the reading with me, I'm sure, all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Who were scattered? Ordinary Christians. Ordinary hurting Christians. Ordinary suffering Christians. Ordinary, I'm sure, confused Christians at all the things that are going on. They were the ones who were scattered and they were the ones who preached. They were the ones who announced the good news everywhere they went in towns and villages.

They're the ones who preached the word. They're the ones who share the gospel. These Christians, when bad things were happening to them, they don't give up and they don't shut up.

[16:32] They don't give up and they don't shut up. And I ask myself the question, how often when bad things happen, maybe I don't give up, but I shut up. You know, the low profile?

Let's just keep a low profile for a while. And maybe that while just lasts a little bit longer than it should. But these Christians facing bad things, they don't give up and they don't shut up.

They persevere. And there is that lesson there about who they were. Ordinary Christians preaching the good news. Ordinary Christians talking about Jesus.

What is their subject? What is their sermon? What is their message? Well, when we read of one of the many a little further on, we're told the content of their preaching.

Then in verse 5, when the account focuses in on Philip, we read Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. That was their message.

[17:34] Their message was Jesus, the eternal Son of God. Their message was of the one who came and lived and died for sinners and rose again triumphant on the third day.

They spoke of Jesus, the one who can forgive sins and give a new life and a new start. They spoke of the one who is enthroned at the right hand of the Father.

That is their message. That is what they speak about. That is their sermon. That is their message. And they're all doing it. As I say, ordinary, confused Christians, new Christians, new believers who know very little, but they know who Jesus is.

And they know what Jesus has done for them. And they have a story to tell and they tell the story to all who will hear. And if we long to see, as I'm sure we do, churches up and down our land growing and new people being brought to faith, that will happen in the measure that ordinary Christians like you preach the gospel.

In the flock, we had a minister who came to preach in Moivamba. I think it was last year, and he gave an illustration which I don't think was original, and perhaps some of you have heard this.

[18:49] But it got me thinking, and I could see that the coin was dropping in a few folks round about me as we listened to this fellow preach. He was saying, when you have a flock of sheep and a shepherd, who are responsible for producing new sheep?

Think about that for a moment. Can shepherds produce new sheep? Or do sheep produce new sheep? Well, I don't think you need to be a rocket scientist to get the answer to that question.

But it illustrates and it reinforces what we find here. Ordinary Christians are scattered, are facing bad times and difficult times and violent times, but where they go, they don't give up and they don't

shut up.
They preach the good news.