

Turn to Acts 8

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While you're turning to that

Let me show you a couple pictures

From our Israel trip a few months ago

This is a picture of:

Caesarea

Amy & I traveled there

Back in December

The city was built by Herod the Great

As a way to honor Caesar

"Caesarea" means "Caesar City"

It is on the Mediterranean coast

And had a huge port

That Herod constructed there

This is a picture I took of the site of the ancient palace

Built out into the water

Herod would have lived here

Also, Felix & Festus from the book of Acts would have lived there

If you zoom in

You can even see the ancient tile work

Still surviving

Construction today lasts about 15 minutes

This is 2000-year-old tile

Pilate also would have lived here

This is a stone found

With Pilate's name on it

He also built an amphitheater

That we visited

This would have been the

Emotional centerpiece of the city

4,000 people could attend events here

Even when it was new

There was no roof on this structure

But they had sails that covered it

Kind of like people have sunshades today

These large sails would have covered the seats

From the sun

OK – we'll get back to this in a minute

I had you turn to Acts 8:1

The church had been growing and surging

Filling Jerusalem with the teaching of Jesus

But everything changes in Acts 8

The end of Acts 6

Introduces us to Stephen

Then in Acts 7

Stephen summarizes the Hebrew Scriptures

If you are not super familiar with the Bible

Acts 7 is like cliff-notes for the Old Testament

Acts 7 ends with them killing Stephen

And Saul – later to be named the Apostle Paul

Approves of his death

Acts 8:1 continues

Read Acts 8:1b-3

A little not-so-insignificant trivia here

In Acts 1:8, Jesus tells His followers

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (NLT)

But they didn't leave Jerusalem

They were having a ball in Jerusalem

People were coming to faith in Christ

People were getting healed

Lives were being changed

But they didn't obey God

And He was still concerned about the whole world

Not just Jerusalem

That was Acts 1:8

So, in Acts 8:1

Persecution breaks out

And they *finally* leave Jerusalem

Did God cause that?

Did He allow it?

We don't know

But it seems like it

He certainly used it

Let me ask you a question:

What do you think church services were like

In Acts 8?

People were being arrested and tortured for their faith

Everyone was scattered away from the leaders

Out on their own

What do you think church services were like

In Acts 8?

Secretive?

Leaderless?

Or rather, new leaders

Because they were no longer with the Apostles

Fearful, maybe?

It's so hard for us to imagine

Because we have such freedom to move and worship

The closest we've come

Was the Covid lockdowns

Where churches couldn't meet

Some Christians

Really struggled

Because they were leaderless

And it was scary

But this group

Handled the struggle differently

Look at verse 4

Read Acts 8:4

I'm sure this group

Didn't enjoy the struggle

Don't misunderstand

But this group embraced it

This group turned into God

Not away

And because of that

God did amazing things

In their life

I've titled this message

Struggle

Because we all face struggle

They faced struggle

But what we do with that struggle

Makes all the difference

We don't have all their stories

But we have Peter's
And Peter's story will help us a lot

And to help us keep track

I'm going to put this map on the screen

Peter is in Jerusalem

Along with the other Apostles
While everyone else is scattered

So, if you have your Bible there in Acts 8

Turn over to Acts 9

And look with me in verse 32

Read Acts 9:32-35

Peter has gone from Jerusalem

To Lydda

Meets Aeneas who had been bedridden for 8 years

And heals him on the spot

Lydda was a commercial center

Situated on a highway running

From Egypt to Syria (north & south)

And a highway

From Joppa on the coast

To Jerusalem

Lots of people lived there

And even more people traveled thru there

Read Acts 9:36-43

Because Peter embraced the struggle

Because Peter didn't turn away from God

But turned to Him

People all over Lydda

People all over Joppa

Had come to faith in God

And Tabitha and Aeneas

Along with their families

Would never be the same

Look at chapter 10

Read Acts 10:1-8

OK, this is cool

God sees Cornelius

He sees you, by the way

He sees Cornelius

All the way up in Caesarea

Not a religious center by any means

But He sees Cornelius

In Caesar City

And He has him send for Peter

A religious man down in the religious city of Joppa

It's like 40 miles away

And they get there

Right as Peter's having a vision

About expanding his diet

Beyond kosher food

First of all, the timing of that is really cool

That they make a 40-mile journey on foot

And God gives him the vision right as they arrive

But secondly

They go back to Caesarea

Caesar City

A town that good Jewish folks would never go to

"What happens in Caesar City"

"Stays in Caesar City"

And he goes to not just a Roman

But a Roman soldier

They're the worst

And not just any Roman soldier

But a leader in the Roman army

As a Jew

Going to Caesarea to meet with a leader in the Roman army

Is unthinkable

He's unholy

Just like eating non-kosher food

Is unholy

But God commanded

So, they travel back to Caesar City

And as they enter this den of iniquity

What's one of the first things they would have seen?

An amphitheater

Potentially with thousands of people in it

Covered by a white sheet

He goes to Cornelius' house

A large home

Where Cornelius had gathered all his friends and relatives

To be fair to Cornelius

If an angel shows up in my living room

And tells me to send for a preacher

I'm gonna have him a congregation when he arrives

So, Peter begins to share the Gospel

With this large crowd at Cornelius' house

Look at verse 44

Read Acts 10:44-48

This is really, profoundly cool

For three reasons

First – that God uses the imagery of the sheet

In order to send Peter to this pagan city

That's just cool

Second, this is when the Gospel

Became available to us

This is when Christianity

Became more than a Jewish sect

If it hadn't been for Acts 10

We couldn't have been saved

And if it hadn't been for Acts 10

We couldn't eat bacon

That's two terrific things

About Acts 10

But third

I want us to trace the roots of this event

In Caesarea

To the struggle that began in Jerusalem

Peter never would have gone to Caesarea

If he hadn't been in Joppa

And he never would have gone to Joppa

If he hadn't been in Lydda

And he never would have gone to Lydda

If he hadn't faced persecution in Jerusalem

If the struggle hadn't come

If Peter had turned away from God during the struggle

Think of all that would have been lost (3 slides)

But Peter didn't know any of that
Back in the struggle

And neither do we

Does God cause the struggle?

Sometimes.

Does God allow the struggle?

Sometimes.

Does God use the struggle?

Always.

One of the best ways to grow in your faith

Is to change the way you embrace struggle

Sometimes the struggles we face are caused by God

Embrace them

Sometimes the struggles we face are allowed by God

Turn to Him

But the struggles we face are always used by God

Let Him comfort you

And grieve with you

And birth in you a vision to change the world
To give your struggle meaning & purpose

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV) - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

I'm not asking you to enjoy the struggle
Don't misunderstand
I'm not asking you to act like you enjoy the struggle
That's hypocrisy
But I am asking you to embrace it

Turn TO God
Not away
Don't become bitter for what you've lost
But strive to be grateful for what you have
And as you get down the road a bit
Allow God to redeem your struggle
Allow God to give your struggle meaning & purpose
Allow God to comfort you
And then allow Him to comfort others *through* you