

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 19

Pass the Salt, Please

"Pass the salt, please." We've all said it. It's a common occurrence at mealtime. I like salt on certain foods. I don't like it because it's pretty, or because it looks good in fancy saltshakers. I like it because it makes my food taste better. It seasons my food. That's why I like salt on some foods. Wouldn't it be a shame to have lots of salt and not be able to get it out of the shaker?

I've been to restaurants where the holes in the saltshaker were too small. This is a common situation in many restaurants. Anyway, it is frustrating to shake and shake and shake and only get a little bit of salt out. I usually just remove the top and get at it that way. And we've all had saltshakers that were clogged because of the humidity. It's frustrating to have salt trapped in the saltshaker.

But that's where many Christians are today - trapped in the saltshaker. Now that you have that image in your mind's eye, let me cut to the heart of what this means. The saltshaker to which I refer is, of course, the Churches and Christian communities to which we belong. If you bring someone to Christ and give that person about two years, they will probably have so thoroughly disassociated themselves from non-Christians that they literally have no real non-Christian friends.

The sad thing about that situation is that many Christians think it is good. Indeed, there are those who would have you believe that to have no non-Christian friends is to fulfil the biblical command to not be "of the world." But the practical result is that we isolate ourselves from opportunities to share Jesus Christ. We become salt trapped in the saltshaker. It may be a stained-glass saltshaker, but we are trapped, nonetheless.

In our text today, we see the process by which God greatly expanded the ministry of the early Church. It is the process by which God literally shook the salt from the saltshaker. The central truth of this passage is that the primary business of Church ought to be sharing the Gospel with everyone.

This passage begins with crisis and ends with communication. It begins with the disciples in Jerusalem and ends with them scattered all over Judea and Samaria. It begins with a few preaching the Word and ends with a multitude sharing Christ. I pray that God will allow us to see the heartbeat of the Holy Spirit when it comes to our own commitment to witness. If we are going to live biblical Christianity in a secular society, we must seriously evaluate that commitment in light of the example we see in the Word of God.

As this text begins, we find the Church still located only in Jerusalem. God had indeed done a great work there and many thousands had come to know Christ. There was nothing wrong with this Church. In fact, it was a great Church. It was doing what God had called it to do, and that is, to share the Gospel of Christ and to see souls born into the Kingdom of God. But it was still in Jerusalem.

The salt of Gospel truth had not spread to Judea and Samaria. Initially, the salt had spread out over Jerusalem, but Jerusalem was now becoming a saltshaker in itself. They were in danger of becoming trapped in the saltshaker. How would God move them out? I believe God decided to do something to shake them from the saltshaker. He sent a divinely appointed crisis.

Great persecution came upon the Church in Jerusalem and, as a result, they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

Acts 8:1-4 *"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."*

I'd like for us to look at three things about this divinely appointed crisis of persecution. First, we need to see that this crisis of persecution was God-ordained. It was all a part of His plan to enable the Church to fulfil the Great Commission. You recall, in Acts 1:8, that Jesus said, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* Jesus had said they would begin in Jerusalem, move on to Judea and Samaria, and finally, preach the Gospel to the remotest corner of this earth. But the Church was still stuck in Jerusalem. God wanted them everywhere. So, God sent this crisis to move them out into the regions of Judea and Samaria.

Just like this crisis situation, things happen in our lives providentially. Sometimes God has to nudge us in very strong ways in order to move us into that place of service where He wants us. Don't ever look on the hard situations in your life as having no purpose. I have found that many times God is in the difficult situation, seeking to speak to me about something in my life. Sometimes we have to remember that God is not interested in our comfort. He is interested in us doing His will and in us being conformed to the image of Christ. God leads us in that way individually and corporately. And here we see the providential timing of this crisis of persecution in the life of the early Church.

The second thing we need to see about this persecution is that God had a purpose in allowing the crisis to come upon the Church in Jerusalem. The purpose was to scatter these individuals throughout the region around Jerusalem. It says in the first verse that they were all scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. God's purpose was not simply to get them out of Jerusalem. God's purpose was to get them into other places where lost people needed to hear the gospel.

God had a purpose for these Christians, and that purpose was to reach people throughout the entire world. Salt is no good in the saltshaker. Salt is only good whenever you use it, whenever it's placed on food to season and to add flavour. This was all a part of the purposeful plan of God to use the Church to reach people for Jesus. He couldn't leave them in Jerusalem while there were lost people right next door.

Third, we see that this persecution was preparatory. God had called His Church to do a great work that could not be done by the leaders alone. Notice, in this passage of Scripture, just who was scattered abroad. It says all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Not everyone was scattered. In other words, the apostles stayed in Jerusalem.

God's purpose was for the Church in Jerusalem to share the Good News and see people come to know Him. The scattering of that Church was preparatory to that work being done. But the point he's making here is that the work would not be done by the apostles alone. For the world to be reached, the ministry of the apostles must be multiplied. It would be multiplied not necessarily by creating more apostles, but by all the people becoming proclaimers of the Word.

Don't miss this point here. If we're going to see people won to Christ - if we're going to reach our world with the Gospel of Christ - it cannot be accomplished by the leaders alone. If we are going to reach people for Christ, it will be because every disciple of Jesus becomes active in sharing their faith and winning people to Christ. They were all scattered except the apostles. The divinely appointed persecution had done its work, and now the Church was poised to reap a very great harvest.

We move now from a divinely appointed crisis to a divinely anointed communication. The crisis was to move them to communication of the Word of God. Let's look at four things about their communication. First, their communication was perceptive. In verse 4 it says, *"Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."* In other words, since they were scattered, they went about preaching the Word. The early Church was perceptive enough to understand that what had happened to them had happened for a purpose.

Like Joseph, they saw that God was in it. In Genesis 50:20, Joseph said to his brothers, *"You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."* The early Church saw the hand of God in their scattering. They understood that the reason they were where they were was to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

That is the same perception we need to have. It's amazing how many Christians think they are where they are for some other reason than serving God. You are not where you are because of your job. You may think you are, but that's not why you're here. No, you're not here because of some financial or professional decision you made, you're here to serve Jesus Christ. Those of you who were not born here were moved here so you could be a witness to Christ in your current community.

You see, in order for Christ to reach the world, He has to put His people in the world, in various positions where He needs a Christian witness. If you are in law, God put you in law to share Christ with others in law. If you are in medicine, God put you there to share Christ with others in medicine. If you are an engineer, God put you there to share Christ with engineers. If you are retired, God has given you a circle of influence among your peers in which you can shine the light of Christ.

Whatever and wherever you are, God put you there to share Christ. We need a Christian witness in every profession, in every occupation and every part of our society. The salt of the Good News needs to be spread over all the world. I remember a Christian tradesman said something many years ago which I have never forgotten. He said, *"I'm not a bricklayer who happens to be a Christian, I am a Christian who happens to be a bricklayer."* Don't ever get those priorities mixed up. The first and foremost priority of every human is to serve God and spread the gospel. The early Church was perceptive enough to understand that. Those who had been scattered, preached the word wherever they went.

The second thing we need to see is that their communication was participatory. By that I mean that everyone was involved in it. You remember that everyone except the apostles were scattered. It says in verse 4 that those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. If the apostles remained in Jerusalem, then who was preaching the Word? It was everyone else. It was Joseph the tentmaker, and Nicholas the silversmith, Parmanus the lawyer, Precilla the seamstress and Prequoris the banker. It was ordinary people with ordinary occupations sharing about an extraordinary Saviour. They were all involved in sharing the Word.

Thirdly, we need to see that their communication was prolific. In the New International Version, it says that they, *"preached the word wherever they went."* In the King James Version, it says they *"went everywhere preaching the word."*

God called them to begin in Jerusalem, extend the proclamation to Judea, further on to Samaria, and finally, to the ends of the world. The Gospel is for everybody everywhere. They understood that it was not enough to share with one person occasionally. They must share the Gospel with every person at every opportunity. The call of the Church is to be prolific as we share the Good News. We must never be satisfied. We must always be reaching out with new ways, new methods to reach people for Christ.

Then finally, their communication was relevant. It says in verse 4 that they preached the word wherever they went. They were sharing a message relevant to the needs of people. And the only message that is pertinent is the gospel of Jesus Christ. When you share with people, don't simply share with them about a book you've read or about the latest fad. You may begin there, but we must at some point move to share with them about Jesus Christ. That's the only thing that will really meet people's needs. It is the old Gospel story about how Jesus Christ loved them in the midst of their sinful condition, came to this earth, lived a perfect life and died on a rugged Cross for their sins. Share with them how He was buried and rose again on the third day and how He now offers them eternal life and the power to turn from their sin and embrace His gift of eternal life by faith.

We have a high and holy calling to share the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is both a command and a privilege. But even more than that, it is the news others desperately need to hear. Their eternal destinies depend on it. Like the Church in Jerusalem many of us are in danger of staying trapped in the saltshaker. But God is speaking to us and saying clearly that we must break out. We must break out of our comfort zone. We must break out of our complacency. We must take the time and make the effort to get to know people all around us with a view of leading them to Christ.

Now, you may not be an evangelist. God has not called everyone to be an evangelist, but He has called everyone - including you - to share the Gospel. How can you fulfil that calling? Well, you may not be comfortable enough with that acquaintance to sit down and share a full gospel presentation with him or her. That's OK. If you can't do that, you certainly can bring him or her to a place where they will have the gospel communicated to them in a clear and compelling way. You can invite them to join you at a service one Sunday. Or perhaps, before then, you can give them a link to our website and let them begin exploring the truth about Jesus in a less threatening way, at their own pace.

This is what Andrew did when he met Jesus. The Bible says that he first went and found his brother Simon Peter and brought him to Jesus. Andrew didn't know how to share, but he knew where to bring his brother. You can participate in an 'Operation Andrew' right here. You can take the time to identify your brothers and sisters in your circle of influence and bring them to a place where they can hear the good news that Jesus can completely change their lives forever.

God desires to shake us out of the saltshaker. Only then can we be the seasoning that makes a difference in the world. Will you allow Him to use you to touch the lives of others? Don't be trapped in the stained-glass saltshaker. Hear the call of God once more, *"Pass the salt, please!"*