

# SCATTERED!

## *SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD*

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“Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don’t see many of ‘the brightest and the best’ among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn’t it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these ‘nobodies’ to expose the hollow pretensions of the ‘somebodies’? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything we have--right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start--comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. That is why we have the saying, ‘If you’re going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God.’” *The Message*

Paul wrote those words to the Corinthian church. Behind his need to write them was the recognition that people don’t think right about the ways of God. Danny Hall just finished a wonderful series of messages on Jesus’ farewell discourse in John 14-16 (Discovery Papers 4729-4740), and one of the things that we repeatedly saw in that text was that the disciples believed the wrong thing about the Messiah. They had expectations of outcomes that were not at all in the plan of God. Jesus had to persuade them that his leaving was good and that the Spirit’s coming would be better, and that they would represent him in the world in ways that would surprise them and everyone else. As Paul observes in writing to the Corinthians, we think God will use the high-profile and impressive and powerful to do his work, because that’s what we would do if we were God; yet his aim is otherwise. He magnifies the weak.

The book of Acts is about how the Spirit comes, the church is born, and the world is changed. As we encounter each new lesson, it ought to have a category-breaking, paradigm-shifting, worldview-unmaking effect on us. We should assume that our natural sensibilities are going to aim at the wrong thing, and these words of God can correct us.

We’re picking up the thread of the story in Acts 8, where a new section begins. There are four scenes in chapter 8, of which we’ll look at three in this message. (We’ll save the story of Simon the magician in 8:9-24 for the next message.)

First, though, I want to review a bit of the preceding chapters to reacquaint us with this book. The descent of the Spirit and the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost in chapter 2 is one of the most remarkable scenes in the Bible. It’s the story of 120 ragtag souls who trusted Jesus, met with one another not knowing what was about to happen, and became the very vessels of God. The Spirit descended in thunder and wind and fire and tongues, and Peter stood and preached to a crowd that had gathered. He spoke incisive words from God with extraordinary boldness and clarity. A holy conviction fell on the gathered crowd, and 3,000 of them gave their lives to the Savior that day. Thus the church was born.

The end of chapter 2 is a place I return to often when I want to be encouraged about the whole idea of ourselves as a church and what God might want to do with us. The church, without any effort at all in its earliest days, was committed from the heart to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to worship and prayer. We read in 2:43-47:

“And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

That is a marvelous picture of what God might do. It’s filled with light, encouragement, and beauty.

The church in Jerusalem continued to grow. There was opposition, but the opposition was overcome by the power of the gospel and the courage of the believers. But at the end of chapter 7 we find that the season of growth in Jerusalem is followed by a very dark day—with Stephen martyred and persecution unleashed. So the question we will begin our study with is this: We know the Spirit was present on the bright day of courage and conversion. Is he there on the dark

day when the church is persecuted and dispersed?

Let's read of the new way of things in 7:57-8:3:

**But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears, and they rushed upon him [Stephen] with one impulse. And when they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him, and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And having said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.**

## Suffering for Christ

We hear voices cry aloud in these verses. First there is the cry of violent persecutors who cannot stand to hear Stephen tell them the truth. They rush on him like ferocious animals, pick up big, jagged rocks, and murder him. Then the loud cry of his attackers is replaced by the loud cry of those who love him. They cry out in sorrow to God because this good, beautiful child of God who had so much to offer has lost his life at a young age.

Chapter 8 begins by telling of a great persecution. The word "great" is *me-gas* in Greek: it is a mega-persecution, vicious, widespread, thorough, and aggressive. Men and women are torn from their homes. Friendships are destroyed. Parents are dragged off to jail, their children orphaned. And God doesn't protect the church from descending into this dark experience of persecution and loss and violence. He doesn't restrain the hate-filled persecutors.

What shall we learn from this first scene, the dark night opposite of the bright morning of chapter 2? Is God in this? Or has he withdrawn? What conclusion do we draw from observing these hardships?

God has not withdrawn. Even this persecution and chaos will serve his purposes. The blood of the martyrs will be the seed of the church. God will answer Stephen's prayer: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Saul, who approves of Stephen's death, will someday change the world as the apostle Paul. The suffering of these believers is not without purpose. Because this church is scattered abroad, the gospel will go places it wouldn't have gone otherwise. It is the clear teaching of Scripture that suffering is evidence of neither God's disfavor nor his withdrawal. He knows what he is doing. He is reshaping us to serve him better, he is changing our direction, and he is giving evidence of the reality of his presence by the way we face hardship. The night is ruled by God just as the morning was.

Another lesson to take from this scene is that we need to see suffering as it really is. Wouldn't it be great if we could just affirm that suffering leads to good outcomes without having to actually experience it? Couldn't we just agree with the premise and avoid having to get sick and lose jobs and be depressed and persecuted and misunderstood and isolated? But there is no way to grow without actually going through the surgery, so to speak. It does make us different people. We grow by having to hold the Shepherd's hand and walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

The second of the three scenes that we are going to consider is in verses 4-8:

**Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. And Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was much rejoicing in that city.**

## Proclaiming Christ

The new wave of God's servants who are described in these verses are ordinary people (the apostles stayed in Jerusalem), folks without degrees in theology or credentials from human institutions. But they went forward telling the gospel message.

Philip arrives in Samaria proclaiming Christ, and the crowds with one accord give attention to what he says. He preaches a message that needs to be understood and believed in order for new life to begin. There is a truth about what God has done in Christ that we cannot minimize. There are statements we need to make with authority so that people can hear them clearly, believe them, and be changed. Reading on, we see that the result is much rejoicing.

But there is more than preaching alone described here. The power of God to heal gives authority to the message preached. Verse 6: "And the multitudes with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed." It remains true today that God heals, and that gives the message authority. The evidence of God's presence in the lives of people may be the instantaneous undoing of a paralysis or a satanic influence (evil thoughts and oppressions). Or the evidence may be an undoing of these things over time, as lives change and character develops. Regardless, there needs to be evidence that healing is taking place, that restoration is occurring. When there is evidence, people listen to what is spoken.

Last Wednesday afternoon the auditorium of this church was filled with people. Al Ciardella had died, and we were gathering to remember him. It astonished me how many people came, because Al was a quiet, understated guy. He had a big family, which partly accounted for it. But there were hundreds of people who were unrelated to him: business associates, neighbors, old friends, and other folks who had known the Ciardellas in various settings. Everyone who spoke made wonderful, touching, tender, and funny comments about how this man's life had affected them. At age fifty-seven Al came to Christ, and he died at age seventy. Over those thirteen years there were rough edges smoothed, broken things made whole, and estrangements that he humbled himself to go and repair. Al was a fountain of Christian joy overflowing into the lives of those around him.

So I read the words of Jesus to the memorial gathering, and people listened. The majority didn't know me at all. I'm sure they would not have listened absent the evidence of Al's changed life. When there is evidence of bondage broken, joy discovered, love offered, and growth, when demons are banished and paralysis is undone and healing occurs and people are different, then the message of Jesus is welcome.

The world hasn't changed in the years since Philip spoke in Samaria. The combination of proclamation and powerfully changed lives is always going to lead to new faith.

The third scene we'll consider may be one of the strangest in the Bible. (There are a lot of contenders for the title of the strangest scene in the Bible, and I can't go so far as to say this is the winner, but this description of events is indeed odd and totally unexpected.) Verses 25-40:

**And so, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) And he arose and went; and behold, there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship. And he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." And when Philip had run up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:**

**"He was led as a sheep to slaughter;  
And as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
So He does not open His mouth.  
In humiliation His judgment was taken away;  
Who shall relate His generation?  
For His life is removed from the earth."**

**And the eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?" And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" [And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip**

as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch saw him no more, but went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus; and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities, until he came to Caesarea.

## Being available for surprising assignments

We observe a journey by Philip to meet one man for one lengthy conversation. The man is baptized, Philip is snatched away, and the man proceeds on. This incident is not connected to anything larger. So what is God telling us? Let me make a couple of observations.

First of all, there is as much rejoicing in the life of this Ethiopian as there was in the cities of Samaria. New life brings joy.

But consider the peculiarities of this account. The Ethiopian eunuch is surrounded by a retinue including soldiers; he is a very important person. He is dressed in rich clothes as a representative of a foreign court. The region called Ethiopia in this text is effectively the modern country of Sudan, just south of Egypt. The Romans and the Jews both considered Ethiopia, or Cush, the rim of the Earth, the farthest-away place. And now Philip encounters an individual from that region. He is a powerful, wealthy, and important man, but he has been castrated. When Philip hears him read, he sounds like a boy, because his voice has never been permitted to change by the ordinary physiology of masculine maturing. His black cheek is smooth and unwhiskered. His appearance is probably softer than that of a man who has had testosterone shape him as he grew. His purpose in coming to Jerusalem is first to represent his queen, but also to worship--indicating a hunger for the God of Israel. He is reading Isaiah, probably in Greek.

The angel and later the Spirit himself direct Philip, leaving him wondering what he will find on a desert road out in the middle of nowhere. But in his imagination he would never have drawn the picture that is presented to him here. What can we learn from this?

For one thing, we need to ask ourselves, are we willing to let God place us with odd, unfamiliar people? Do we believe he is attracting people of a peculiar sort to himself? Are we willing to let the Spirit use our witness to bring such folks into God's kingdom?

Out of all the text of the Old Testament, this court official is reading Isaiah, and in particular the passage that talks about One who suffers unjustly under the hand of God. Why does God cause this One to suffer? Who is he, and what does it mean? The official is anxious to know the God who speaks of a sin-bearing Sufferer. Hearing that text and Philip's explanation, he realizes his heart has been changed and he has fallen in love with the suffering Savior.

He asks an interesting question: "Is there anything that prevents me from being baptized?" Notice the question assumes the negative. A eunuch would never have been permitted in the temple, and certainly someone from the farthest ends of the earth would always be regarded as suspect. All his life he has encountered barriers in his search for God, and so he's asking almost poignantly, "Is there anything I can do to get past the last barrier so that I can belong to Christ?" Of course there is no barrier, and Philip invites him into the water. He makes public proclamation of his faith and goes away singing God's praises in his boy's voice, perhaps using the text of Isaiah.

The world hasn't changed. God is attracting folks to himself who will surprise every one of us. There aren't fewer angels in the world than there used to be--and angels will send you on missions if you let them. The Spirit will give you opportunity. The question that remains for us is, are we willing to be used in ways like this? God's ways are not our ways. We so often limit what is possible because we assume God's plan is predictable.

There may be a day when we are sent to a desert road to do something that has nothing to do with anything else in our life. God will remind us that he loves people, touches them, reaches them, and woos them. Our categories are too small. Let's be available to let angels send us where they will.

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Catalog No. 4750

Acts 8:1-8, 25-40

Tenth Message

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October 6, 2002

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