

## **“Scattered and Growing”**

Dear Friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we're in chapters eight and nine, working our way through the Book of Acts. This is now week number five in a series that's going to take us into the first weeks of August.

What we're finding in this series already (and we're not that far into it) is that the book of Acts gives us not only the storyline of what happened (back then) when the church first started, but also the storyline of what God wants to (continue to see happen) in the church today. As we read the stories and begin to see (the things that happened), how the church began, we also begin to see what (needs to happen) for it to continue.

In fact, I think one of the mistakes people make when they read these stories (in the book of Acts) is to think that's all they are, they're stories of (what happened) in the book of Acts.

They read them and they think, “Isn't that great! It's amazing what God did back then!” But they never make the connection. (They never put it together.) What they fail to see is that how the church grew back then is the same way the church continues to grow today.

Just think about it. Why would God give us the book of Acts to show us what's no longer possible? It makes no sense. (He wouldn't do that). God gave us the book of Acts to help us see and understand what is. If it happened back then, it can happen today. If it was possible (for them) in the first century, it's still possible (for us) in the twenty-first century.

Our hope is that we'll make those connections; that as we work our way through these chapters, read the stories of what happened, we'll also begin to see what might happen, and what can happen, and what will happen as we learn (just as they did) to put our faith in Jesus and work together to make an impact in this world for Christ.

Let's turn to our chapters. The stories we read today are set in the context of what appears to be, at least (at first glance), a not-so-receptive setting for the advancement of the gospel. The opening verse in chapter eight, after the stoning of Stephen, “to which Saul was there (it says), giving his approval”, (it then says) “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”

That's how chapter eight begins. That's where the storyline for today starts. It says the church was beginning to grow, the numbers were on the rise, it was starting to look like things were falling into place, and then along comes this man named Saul, he starts locking up the Christians for their faith, and almost overnight, for the sake of their own safety and wellbeing, they end up scattering all over the region of Judea and Samaria.

Now, if I were drawing up a blueprint for “How to Grow the Church”, I don't think my mind would even go there. I'd think about all kinds of things, ways to make it happen, things that would be helpful; whatever. What I wouldn't think of, include in that list, is what actually happened.

I mean, really? How could the persecution of the church help with the advancement of the church? How could the Christians in Jerusalem who were gathering and beginning to be productive become even more productive as a result of being scattered?

Now, before answering that question, let's not lose sight of what Jesus said right before he was to go back into heaven. He died. He was raised from the dead. Forty days he was with them, and then he ascended. Do you remember what he said, right before he went back? Do you remember what he promised?

He said, “It's not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority... (And then he promised), 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.” “You will be my witnesses (he said) in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

That was his promise. That's what Jesus said would happen. It wasn't a command. It wasn't a calling. It wasn't something they were to figure out and decide. It was a promise. It's what Jesus said would take place, what would happen.

And so, what happens in the early chapters? (Think back for a moment.) Pentecost in chapter two, about three thousand come to faith. Peter and John (on trial), in chapters three and four, and the church keeps on growing. In chapter five, it's Ananias and Sapphira and it continues to happen. In chapter six, the church is still growing. They even choose seven elders to help with some of the work, Stephen being one of them, and it says (in verse seven), "So the word of God spread." It says, "The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."

In other words, the promise was coming true. It was actually happening. Jesus knew it. He promised it. He told his disciples to expect it. Don't ever doubt.

And then what happens? Along comes chapter seven, Stephen is put to death, The beginning of chapter eight and the followers of Jesus are scattered all over the region of Judea and Samaria. What's going on? What's happening?

What's happening is that the promise of Jesus is being fulfilled. What's going on is that the Word of God is getting out. Chapter one, Jesus makes a promise. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Chapter eight, (it says), "A great persecution broke out at Jerusalem...and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria." It keeps on expanding. It keeps on growing. And it never stops.

Now, (let's stop for a moment) and take a step back. I want to be a bit careful here, because what we don't want to conclude (from these chapters) is that God brought about the persecution of the church so the early believers would be scattered. We get ourselves into deep theological waters if we think we can read into the mind of God and know what he's doing and why. I don't know that. We don't know that. We need to be careful about how we think.

What we do know and what we must think is that whatever God was doing, he was doing for the sake of Christ. Whatever was happening and whatever brought it about, what it brought about was an opportunity for the church to grow.

Chapter eight, verse four (and I realize we haven't gone very far), look at what happens. Look what the people did. It says, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."

Do you know what I think? The persecution of the church; Saul is out doing his thing. Do you know what I think? I don't think these chapters are about persecution at all. (I really don't.)

Now, that's what was happening. That's the context in which the stories take place. There was persecution. There's no doubt. It was not easy to be a follower of Jesus in the early church. Whatever "romanticized ideas" we might have about what it was like (and how easy it happened), we need to get beyond them. It was not easy. It was tough. In many places (in the world today) it's still not easy.

But that's not what these chapters are about, the persecution of the church. What they're about is the faithfulness of the church and what happens when, however it happens and whatever causes it to happen, the church is scattered.

I don't want to make this too simplistic, because there's a lot going on; but it's not that hard to follow. The church grew because the people weren't afraid to live out their faith. The church grew because wherever they went, whatever they did, (no matter what the circumstances), they saw it as an opportunity to use their lives for Christ.

Now, do you think that still happens? Do you think that's still how it works? Of course it is. Absolutely! And it doesn't have to be persecution that's behind. (That's not what these chapters are about.) Whatever's behind it, it doesn't matter. What matters is what happens when it happens, and whether the church (when it's scattered) remains faithful to Christ.

Let me give you an example, and this isn't the same as (in the chapters), but it ties in. I don't know how many of you remember Dennis and Connie Berg. They joined St. Timothy's in 1995 and became active members. Connie was our treasurer. Dennis served on Church Council, chaired one of our Call Committees. A couple of years ago, they moved to Grass Valley.

I'll be honest. I was bummed when I heard they were moving. I really was. Now, there are some of you (if you moved), I wouldn't be so bummed. When they moved, I was. They were active. They were involved. They filled some good roles.

Do you know what happened when they moved? Two things happened. One, (almost overnight) a couple of people stepped up to fill their roles. Those positions that were held (and vacated) when they left were almost immediately filled by someone else. The church was scattered, but God used it to involve others. That's the first thing that happened.

The second, do you know what happened on the other end? They thought they would slip in, sit back, go under the radar. Do you know what happened? They ended up on God's radar, joined a church with some significant needs, and are being used in some tremendous ways. Dennis is now the Church Council Chair. Connie just finished heading up a Call Committee. And this is all in a congregation where there were some gaps. I was bummed; hated to see them leave. God was not. He used it to help grow the kingdom.

Now, that's a simple way to think about it; a simple example. It was certainly not persecution that caused it to happen. But when it happened, the church was scattered, God used it to grow the church.

If you read through the stories in chapters eight and nine, that's exactly what's happening. Wherever the church went (and the gospel was shared) lives were changed. Whatever caused it (or brought it about), as people were willing for their lives to be used, what it brought about was the growth of the church.

Philip goes down to Samaria and begins to preach. Verse eight, (it says), "there was great joy in that city." Then it's the story of Simon the Sorcerer, and of how God worked to expand the kingdom as a result of this one who was not even a believer.

From there it's the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. He had no idea about Jesus. He was a seeker, wanted to know the truth. Philip told him the truth, he was baptized, and the kingdom continued to grow.

In chapter nine, it's the same thing. We read the story of Saul and his conversion. Struck down on the road and blinded for three days; God tells Ananias to go talk to him, tell him he has been chosen by God to be his witness. He regains his sight, it happens, and he is.

Finally (at the end of chapter nine), it's the story of Peter (in Lydda) and what happens with Aeneas and Tabitha. Different stories, different needs; they're both healed and (it says) as a result, "many people came to faith."

What's the point? The point is that the specifics of the stories don't matter. Everyone was different. Each of the situations was unique. What was not unique was that the people were scattered; and whenever they were scattered, wherever they went, they were not afraid to speak the name of Christ.

Just think for a moment, what happens to us (every week) when we leave this place. Every week, when we go out, we go out in a number of different directions. Some to our homes. Some to our work. Some to different parts of the valley; others all throughout the world. If we were to map out (for only one week) where our lives actually take us, I think we'd all be surprised how scattered we really are.

The lesson is simple. Wherever you go, live out your faith. Whatever you do, do it in the name of Christ. We gather on Sunday. We scatter throughout the week. We come together to be strengthened in what we're doing. We go out to live it out wherever we go. That's how the church grows. That's how the kingdom is built. That's how it happened then, and it's how God continues to grow his church today.

Let me close with one final thought and a request for prayer. At our Tuesday morning staff meetings, we take turns (as a staff) leading devotions. This past week, it was Beth's turn and she shared a reading that focused on what we "get" to do instead of what we've "got" to do. We get to go to worship. We get to read our Bibles. We get to have time with God in prayer. They're not things we've "got" to do, but things we "get" to do. One little letter (in that word) makes all the difference. It was a good reminder.

What I want to share, however, is not what she shared in her devotion, but the title of the book from which she read. The book was titled "The One Thing You Cannot Do In Heaven." The One Thing You Cannot Do In Heaven."

Do you know what it is? Do you know what the author had in mind? The one thing you cannot do in heaven is share your faith with an unbeliever. Once you get to heaven, you'll never have that opportunity again to share your faith with someone who does not know Jesus.

I think you get the point. We're not there yet. We're still here. What we won't be able to do then, we still have the chance to do today. Our job is not to change the world. Your job is not to convert anyone to the faith. (Let's leave those tasks to God.) Our job is to be faithful. Your job is to live your life for Christ.

Scattered as we are, every one of us, going our separate ways; before we come back, let's not miss the chances we have, to do the one thing (when we're in heaven) we won't be able to do. (That's the thought.)

And now the prayer request. I don't know how many of you would be following this story or not, but for the past 1,000 days (as of this coming Tuesday), Pastor Saeed Abedini has been held in an Iranian prison as a result of his Christian faith. He has a wife and two young children. His is one of the many stories of Christian people throughout the world whose lives are on the line each day for following Christ.

He's been in my prayers for quite some time. This past week, the U. S. Congress unanimously demanded his freedom. I'd ask for you to join me in praying, not only for him and for his family, but for the many scattered Christians throughout the world whose lives are in danger each day for following Christ. They need our prayers...Let's pray.

Gracious God, we thank you for the chance we have to come together as we are and to be encouraged by your word. We thank you that we have a message to share and that in sharing it you have promised to grow your church. We pray for your Holy Spirit to help us in our witness, to give us the right words, to give us the right thoughts, to lead us to speak the name of Jesus.

We pray, for Pastor Saeed Abedini and his family, asking for you to bring about his release in these next days, as well as for the many others whose lives are in danger because of their faith. Walk with them, keep them safe, and grant them their freedom.

Lord, as we read through the book of Acts, help us to make the connection. Help us to trust in your promise. Help us to truly believe that what you did back then (in the early church), you can and you will continue to do today in us...all for the sake of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.