

THE SCATTERED CHURCH

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The church experiences persecution (Acts 8:1-3).
2. The church continues proclaiming Jesus (Acts 8:4-8).
3. The church grows by the Spirit's power (Acts 8:26-35).

Background Passage: Acts 8

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

Persecution did not stifle the gospel but rather served to spread the gospel as the church advanced its mission of proclaiming the gospel to all people.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Persecution led to the scattering of the church and the gospel going forward. Philip encountered an Ethiopian eunuch who was familiar with the Old Testament prophets but was unable to understand how their message was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Philip, led by the Spirit, helped the eunuch understand how Jesus fulfilled Scripture by dying on the cross for our sins and rising from the dead.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have received new life in Christ and have committed to following Him, we seek to be available and obedient to the Spirit's prompting, able and willing to show Christ in all the Scriptures.

GROUP TIME

Group content found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in the shaded areas throughout the session.



SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.

INTRODUCTION

ASK: As participants arrive, ask: **How do you think many of us in the church would respond to the type of persecution the early Christians experienced?** (with boldness and faithfulness; with fear; some may go into hiding; some may fall away from their faith; some may stop meeting together)

TRANSITION: As persecution rose, the early church would be forced out of Jerusalem. This persecution would be used for good as the gospel expanded to new locations. Those opposing the early church were actually being used by God to further advance the gospel.

SUMMARIZE: Help your group understand the **setting** for this session.

- Back in Acts 7, Luke recorded the account of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Saul was there to witness the execution, and persecution would only increase as the early church grew. But the Lord was not shocked by this persecution; He was still ruling and reigning over all. He had a plan and a mission to spread the gospel beyond the borders of Jerusalem. The Lord would use this persecution to further the gospel as the church continued to spread to the ends of the earth.



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POINT 1

THE CHURCH EXPERIENCES PERSECUTION (ACTS 8:1-3).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 8:1-3** from his or her Bible.

1 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. **2** Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. **3** But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

DIG: Pass out **PACK ITEM 4: PROMISE OF ACTS**, highlighting how after the gospel was preached in Jerusalem and Stephen was martyred, the scattering of the church led to the gospel being spread to Judea and Samaria as Jesus had proclaimed.

EXPLAIN: Use **verse 1** and the points below to explain the following idea (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 46):

God can use anything, even persecution against His people, to advance the gospel outward.

- Saul was not only there, but he “approved of” Stephen’s execution. Luke set the stage for the great change that would eventually take place in the life of Saul. Saul would go from persecuting the church to encountering Jesus and being radically transformed later in Acts.
- One would think that persecution would cause the church to shrink or disband. The Lord, however, used this persecution to spread the gospel farther. The word used for “scattered” also means “dispersed.” This word is an agricultural term, similar to when a farmer scatters seed on the ground. In Acts 8, believers were scattered so that they could take the gospel all over the world that some may come to know Christ.
- Verse 1 mentions how all “except the apostles” were scattered. Since the apostles stayed, some scholars speculate that the majority of the persecution was directed at the Hellenistic Christians due to their connection to Stephen. However, the text does not explicitly state this. Another possibility is that the apostles stayed in Jerusalem as a sign of their commitment to withstand the persecution the church faced.

ASK: (DDG p. 46)

How do we see the gospel spreading around the world today? (friends and family members telling others about Jesus; known missionaries spreading the gospel; people coming to Christ in dreams; you may look up some specific stories of the gospel spreading worldwide ahead of time)



ILLUSTRATE: Bring a rock and a big bowl. Ask, “What happens when a rock is dropped into water?” (ripples spread out over the water) Drop the rock as an illustration. The book of Acts describes the ripples of the gospel spreading out in the world. The gospel message started in Jerusalem and then spread into the surrounding regions. Eventually the message of the gospel would “ripple out” to the ends of the earth.

TEACH: Discuss **verses 2-3** with the following (DDG p. 46):

Passionate devotion must be directed in the right place, and that place is in Christ Jesus.

- Verses 2 and 3 are meant to be set in contrast to each other. In verse 2, “devout men” buried Stephen and mourned his death. Stephen himself is an example of devoutness. In verse 3, Saul was contrasted to these devout men. These devout men were burying Stephen who was a witness for Christ until the very end, whereas Saul sought to destroy the witness of the church.
- The word used for “ravaging” has a destructive meaning. In some cases, it could be translated as “laid waste to.” Saul did not just persecute the church: he attempted to destroy it. Saul’s destruction of the church was not just a one-time event. The word used here has an ongoing meaning. Saul kept on ravaging the church. In fact, he was still ravaging the church and planning on doing more harm to the church up to the day Christ met him on the road to Damascus (9:1).
- Note that the text says Saul would enter “house after house” to arrest the Christians. Many believers met together in houses for prayer, worship, and fellowship. Saul would break in and drag them off. Can you imagine the fear that many would have felt as they gathered together? Saul believed that he was being zealous for God while he was actually persecuting the church. This is a warning for believers today to be sure our passionate devotion or zeal must be in Christ and resemble that of Christ’s.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 46)

What are some examples of those today with misguided zeal for the Lord? (Christians slandering non-Christians for their lack of faith; an extreme focus on hell rather than forgiveness; mocking and ridiculing lifestyles that are contrary to Scripture; rebuking without love)

TRANSITION: What Saul meant for destruction; God would use for good. While Saul thought he was destroying the church, God was doing a greater work than Saul could imagine.

POINT 2

THE CHURCH CONTINUES PROCLAIMING JESUS (ACTS 8:4-8).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 8:4-8** from his or her Bible.

4 Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. **5** Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. **6** And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. **7** For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. **8** So there was much joy in that city.

FOCUS: Even as Saul and others persecuted the church, God's plan could not be thwarted. Call attention to **PACK ITEM 6: PREACHING THE WORD**. As we see in **verses 4-5**, the gospel was still spreading. Invite a volunteer to read the key doctrine below (DDG p. 46).

Key Doctrine #29: God's Plan and Human Action: God's sovereignty over all of life encompasses the free actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand." In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord's plan goes forward through the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God's overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28), we trust in His promise to fulfill His plan, even when we do not understand our present circumstances.

- The great persecution of the church led to gospel expansion. The early church had filled Jerusalem with teaching about Jesus (Acts 5:28). Now starting in Acts 8, the early Christians carried the gospel with them wherever they went.
- The word "scattered" appeared again in verse 4. Luke emphasized the work of the gospel spreading. Saul sought to scatter the church to weaken it; God used this scattering to strengthen and grow the church.
- Persecution led to gospel growth not because the church at Jerusalem put together some great missions plan. No, the gospel spread because the faithful believers took the gospel with them where they went. The early church did not see persecution as an excuse to stay quiet about Jesus. They continued to declare and preach and teach the gospel.
- Philip went to Samaria, which was a huge deal, because Jews and Samaritans did not get along. The Samaritans were racially mixed; they were half-Jew, half-Gentile. Philip preached the Messiah to the Samaritans. He pointed them to the hope of eternal life and salvation found in Jesus alone.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"The voice of the gospel, which was being heard only in one place, is now resounding everywhere."¹

—John Calvin
(1509–1564)

ASK: (DDG p. 47)

When in our own lives do we find it hard to believe that God’s plan will prevail? (in trials and hardships; in circumstances beyond our control; in circumstances where we think we are in control; in the murkiness of a broken and sinful world)

ILLUSTRATE: Bring out **PACK ITEM 5: WORLD MAP** and ask people to locate where they know missionaries or where the church’s missionaries reside. Be cautious of discussing locations of missionaries in high-risk areas. Place in a prominent place where the group can be reminded to pray for missions and missionaries around the world.



HIGHLIGHT: Look at **verses 6-8** and highlight (DDG p. 47):

The persecuted church pushed the gospel into new areas, resulting in growth and joy.

- The Samaritans paid close attention to Philip’s message, possibly for two reasons. First, Jesus already had spoken with the woman at the well about the Messiah, whom the Samaritans believed was coming (John 4:25) and many believed in Jesus at the time (John 4:39-41). Here, Philip proclaimed to them the resurrected Christ—that Jesus died and rose again. Philip then performed miracles in conjunction with the preaching of the gospel. In Scripture, signs and wonders established the credibility of a prophet and the prophet’s message. In Acts, signs and wonders established the credentials of the one preaching.
- The preaching of the gospel produced “much joy” in the city as people were healed spiritually and physically. The same gospel that brought about persecution was now producing blessing and joy in this city. The Word of God brings joy, even in the midst of horrific tragedy. Chapter 8 began with great tragedy but ended with great joy.
- In our lives, we must understand that God is working even when events in our lives seem awful or tragic. God works out all things for His glory and our good.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 47)

What are some examples in your life where God brought about joy in the midst of suffering? (answers may vary but be prepared with your own answer to jump-start the discussion)

TRANSITION: Great persecution in Jerusalem ultimately led to the spread of the gospel. Through persecution, God was working to bring eternal life and joy to the Samaritans and the church continued proclaiming Jesus.

POINT 3

THE CHURCH GROWS BY THE SPIRIT'S POWER (ACTS 8:26-35).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 8:26-35** from his or her Bible.

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. **27** And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship **28** and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. **29** And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” **30** So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” **31** And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. **32** Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. **33** In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” **34** And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” **35** Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.

TEACH: Call attention to **PACK ITEM 2: EARLY CHURCH EXPANSION MAP** to locate approximately where Philip was called to. Then refer back to **PACK ITEM 4: PROMISE OF ACTS** again and share that Philip had faithfully preached the gospel to the Samaritans, now he would share the gospel with an official from Ethiopia. This account demonstrates how the gospel would go out to ends of the earth. Discuss the following point in reference to **verses 26-31** (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 47):

God will always lead us to opportunities to share the gospel. We just need to obey.

- An angel told Philip to “go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza” (v. 26). This may have seemed strange, but Philip faithfully obeyed. In Philip’s obedience to do what the Lord asked, he discovered that the Lord had a divine appointment for him.
- While Philip traveled, another man was on that road—a court official from Ethiopia, the keeper of the treasury for the queen. This man was also described as a eunuch, who had gone to Jerusalem to worship (v. 27). The text does not say explicitly that he was a God-fearer or a proselyte. However, he traveled around 500 miles from Ethiopia to worship in Jerusalem.



EUNUCH

A trustworthy, male servant or a male servant deprived of his genitals, seen as especially trustworthy. The Greek word “*eunochos*” referred to both. Here, the eunuch was in charge of the treasury.

- If this man arrived to worship at the temple in Jerusalem (if he was a true eunuch without genitals), he would have not been allowed into the inner courts of the temple (Deut. 23:1). Despite his standing and his expensive journey, he would have only reached the Court of Gentiles. Whether he was given adequate teaching or not in Jerusalem, on his way home, while reading Isaiah, he needed help understanding it.

ASK: (DDG p. 47)

Where do you have opportunities to share the gospel that you haven't yet? (with neighbors; with coworkers; with kids' teachers or coaches; with strangers at a coffee shop; with close and distant relatives; invite the group to get specific and spend time praying for these people)

INSTRUCT: Use **verses 32-35** to explain the following (DDG p. 47):

When confronted with an opportunity to share the gospel, begin with where people are at and focus on Jesus.

- The Ethiopian man was reading aloud from Isaiah 53 in his chariot. The Ethiopian man had purchased at great expense a scroll from the book of Isaiah. Scripture was not as accessible back then as it is today, when most families have one or several personal Bibles at home.
- The angel told Philip to join with that chariot, and as Philip approached it, he heard the Ethiopian official reading a Messianic prophecy that he could not understand. You cannot ask for a better opportunity to evangelize than what Philip experienced!
- Philip started sharing the gospel where the Ethiopian eunuch was at. Starting with Isaiah 53:7-8, Philip told him about Jesus, who was bruised, humiliated, and killed to take away our sins. From there, we read in Acts 8:36-39 that the Ethiopian found the answer, or rather he found the One for whom he had been searching, immediately getting baptized by Philip. Philip pointed him to Jesus Christ, who alone could make this man whole. This eunuch rejoiced because of the suffering of the Man of Sorrows!

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 47)

From Day 5 in the DDG: **What are some other tips to help share the gospel effectively?** (ask questions; find the underlying need; keep the conversation open; know that you don't have to always have an answer right away; be open to saying you don't know and finding answers for them later)

TRANSITION: Like Philip, when presented with an opportunity to preach the gospel of Jesus, we should obey that we may see God at work.

MY RESPONSE

SAY: Persecution led to the scattering of the church and the gospel going forward. Philip encountered an Ethiopian eunuch who was familiar with the Old Testament prophets but was unable to understand how their message was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Philip, led by the Spirit, helped the eunuch understand how Jesus fulfilled Scripture by dying on the cross for our sins and rising from the dead. Because we have received new life in Christ and have committed to following Him, we seek to be available and obedient to the Spirit's prompting, able and willing to show Christ in all the Scriptures.

HEAD:

Acts 8 gives us a beautiful glimpse of God's desire for the gospel to go to the nations. This is seen in the gospel being preached by Philip to the Samaritans and shared with an Ethiopian official. The gospel is not bound to one people group or nation. The beauty of God's people is seen in their being united in faith through Jesus Christ.

How can I reflect God's desire to reach the nations in my own life?

HEART:

No amount of human effort can ever bring salvation in our life or in the lives of others. God graces the sinner with saving faith for them to come to know the joy of salvation. This should give us great confidence when we share the gospel—that the person coming to saving faith is not dependent on our skill, but on the work of the Spirit in their lives. May Philip's witness to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian official give us great courage to share the gospel with those around us.

How can I praise God for His love for the world and how He brings the gospel to all people?

HANDS:

Philip had no idea what the Lord had planned for him when he was told to go to the desert. Yet Philip was obedient. Every day, we encounter people who do not know Jesus. Our hearts should break for those who do not know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. We should look for opportunities to share the good news of the gospel with those the Lord places in our lives.

How can I be more aware of the work the Lord is doing in the lives of those around me?

PRAY: Father, we praise You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to save us from our sins. Help us be faithful in sharing the good news with others.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Here you witness the obedience of Philip. He does not ask, 'What am I supposed to do in the wilderness? Should I preach to birds or thieves or murderers?' Instead, according to the example of Abraham, he is obedient to God."²

—Johann Spangenberg
(1484–1550)

POINT 1: THE CHURCH EXPERIENCES PERSECUTION (ACTS 8:1-3).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“Paul’s original name was Saul. He was a full-blooded Jew, born in Tarsus in south-east Asia Minor (Acts 9:11; 22:3; Phil 3:5). He inherited from birth the privilege of Roman citizenship (Acts 16:37; 22:26–28; see Rome), and he grew up to speak, read and write Greek and Hebrew fluently (Acts 21:37, 40). The Greek influence in his education gave him the ability to think clearly and systematically, and the Hebrew influence helped to create in him a character of moral uprightness (Phil 3:6). As a religiously zealous young man, Paul moved to Jerusalem, where he received instruction in the Jewish law according to the strict traditions of the Pharisees. His teacher was the prominent rabbi, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; 23:6; 26:5). Like all Jewish young men he learnt a trade, in his case, tent-making (Acts 18:3). Zeal for the Jewish law stirred up Paul against the Christians. He considered that Stephen was a rebel against the law and that therefore he deserved execution (Acts 6:13; 7:58; 8:1; Phil 3:6).”³

+ **COMMENTARY**

“Stephen’s martyrdom affords an introduction to Saul, a young law student from Tarsus in Cilicia (21:39) who approvingly witnesses his death. He is introduced in the narrative so abruptly that Luke must assume that his audience already knows who he is. They would know that through the transformative power of the Spirit, he would turn into a great missionary spreading the gospel far and wide. Ironically, he will face the same bitter hostility from a mob in Jerusalem that Stephen faced (21:26–30). Before that occurs, his fanatic loyalty to the law leads him to try to destroy what he regards to be an insidious blasphemy that proclaims a crucified man as the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God. Perhaps he belongs to those from Cilicia along with those from Cyrene, Alexandria, and Asia who stood up to argue with Stephen but could not ‘stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke’ (6:9–10). This new movement undermines the distinctive features of Jewish national and religious identity that make Jews God’s most-favored people. They cannot beat him with arguments, so they overpower him with this violent attack.”⁴

EXTRA

POINT 2: THE CHURCH CONTINUES PROCLAIMING JESUS

(ACTS 8:4-8).

+ COMMENTARY

“One of the people who went to Samaria (8:1) was Philip, who is clearly the member of the Seven named in 6:5. His preaching about the Messiah would certainly have aroused at least the interest of his hearers, since the expectation of the coming of a future deliverer (known as the ta’eb or ‘restorer’) was a firm part of Samaritan theology (John 4:25); this expectation was based on Deuteronomy 18:15ff., and the expected person had more the character of a teacher and giver of the law than a ruler.”⁵

+ ILLUSTRATION

Farmers and gardeners scatter seed, and sometimes it gets planted and sometimes it doesn’t. Other times the seeds are scattered even more by birds, squirrels, and ants. God will use whatever means to “scatter” and spread the message of the gospel. And He is the one doing the work, but He also allows us to partner with Him in doing so.

Point out the work the early church was doing in “scattering” the good news of the gospel wherever they went. Take some time as a group to talk about people who do not know Jesus. Then spend some time in prayer asking that God would soften their hearts and bring people into their lives to effectively share the gospel. Pray that God would embolden everyone to be a faithful witness.

POINT 3: THE CHURCH GROWS BY THE SPIRIT’S POWER

(ACTS 8:26-35).

+ COMMENTARY

“The British scholar and evangelist Michael Green believes that Luke’s primary reason for including the story of Philip and the Ethiopian was to teach the value of personal, one-on-one evangelism and to give guidelines on how it should be done. This story shows how important personal evangelism is, insofar as a key preacher in the church is taken on a long journey in order to share the gospel with just one person. And note that the episode is given the same amount of space as the record of the conversion of large numbers in Samaria. . . . Much of the evangelism in the early church was done by laypeople who shared their faith wherever they went. This is implied in Acts 8, where Luke says that all except the apostles were scattered (8:1), and that ‘those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went’ (8:4). The public preachers stayed at home while laypeople went out and witnessed for Christ.”⁶

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COMMENTARY

“In ancient Ethiopia, kings did not take care of the royal business of the nation. Ethiopians believed that the kings were descendants of the gods, and being divinely human creatures they were too holy to be charged with taking care of the business of the empire. The king reigned, but he did not rule. Therefore, the business of the empire was put into the hands of the queen mother, and every queen mother for many generations was given the title or the name Candace. The Ethiopian eunuch had great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians; he had charge of all her treasury. The eunuch had come to Jerusalem to worship, which indicates that he might have been a Jew in the dispersion, but it is more likely that he was a Gentile who, somewhere along the line, had embraced the teachings of Judaism and had made the long journey from Ethiopia to Jerusalem for some special occasion from which he was now returning.”⁷

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OPTIONAL DISCUSSION

Invite someone to read Isaiah 52:13–53:12. Divide into groups of two or three, and guide each group to focus on a section and how this text points to the work of Jesus Christ.

References

1. John Calvin, quoted in Esther Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts: New Testament*, vol. VI, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 106.
2. Johann Spangenberg, quoted in Esther Chung-Kim, 114.
3. Don Fleming, “Paul,” *AMG Concise Bible Dictionary* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1990), 326 [Logos].
4. David E. Garland, *Acts*, ed. Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 77.
5. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 163.
6. Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 285-286.
7. R. C. Sproul, *Acts*, St. Andrew’s Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 149.