

SCATTERED

**SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.**



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Acts 6-7
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Acts 6-7

It was one of the loudest sounds I'd ever heard in our home. That's saying a lot since we have five children and sixteen animals. I thought a gunshot had gone off. The noise was deafening.

I was reaching up to slide a glass casserole dish into a high cabinet when I lost my grip on it. I saw everything happening in slow motion. The casserole dish falling slowly to the countertop. The moment of impact. The huge crashing sound. Pieces of glass going everywhere. And I mean everywhere. Tiny shards of glass all over the kitchen. Little pieces spread out everywhere you looked. It was like a beach of glass shards. We were finding them for months.

That was such a bad day. There was so much work to clean up all the pieces that had scattered everywhere.

Today we're continuing our series that we've called *SENT: Living the Mission of the Church*. We are following the book of Acts as it tells the story of the first group of Jesus followers trying to figure out what it looks like to be the church. We're hoping that this book gives us guidance as we try to understand what it looks like for us to be sent into our local community.

So far we haven't really seen anyone be sent. We started off by watching Jesus leave his followers with a huge mission: to establish his kingdom on earth. We've seen that community grow and increase with the preaching of the apostles. Over the last several weeks, we've seen several problems that they faced: the internal challenges of betrayal and unfair treatment, and the external challenge of opposition.

Last week we saw the horrific but inspiring story of Stephen who was stoned, but saw the glory of God as he died.

Today, we're going to see that this cataclysmic event has major implications. It unleashes persecution against this community so that it becomes shattered. Pieces of

it are flung everywhere. We expected this community of Jesus followers to be sent, but instead we see something a bit different. They will be scattered.

It's a bit surprising. There isn't a master plan to reach the world. There isn't a brilliant strategy to carry the Gospel back to the followers' homelands. We'll see a bit more of that later in the book of Acts. But for now, this action, this scattering, just happens. The church in Jerusalem encounters the persecution of the Jewish leaders and it shatters, sending people everywhere.

As we watch the followers scatter, we'll be introduced to two new individuals. Their stories will help us to understand what it means to be sent. One of them will be an example to follow. The other will be a warning to avoid. One will be affirmed by the apostles. One will be rejected.

This dichotomy will make us ask the question of what makes them different. Why do they have such different responses? And of course, our natural instinct will be to compare ourselves to them. We'll wonder which one we are more similar to. And we'll ask what we can do if, or maybe when we discover that we're more like the guy who doesn't get it right.

What do we do when God scatters us? Let's begin our story to find out.

Accidental Sending

The last chapter ended with the graphic death of Stephen. The Jewish leaders of Jerusalem, along with an angry mob, "were enraged and they ground their teeth" (Acts 7:54). They "cast him out of the city and stoned him" (Acts 7:58). Witnesses gave homage to a rabbi named Saul who seems to have led the charge.

Chapter 8 opens at the immediate aftermath of this grisly death.

Acts 8:1:

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.

We are told of Saul's approval. And we are told that a "great persecution" has arisen against the church. This is the word used in Mark 4 in the parable of the sower. Jesus explains that some seed falls on the rocky path where they spring up quickly, but "when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away" (Mark 4:17).

Just like those seeds, we see the church in Jerusalem scattered. It doesn't sound like a good thing. Are the followers falling away? Has this persecution destroyed their faith?

Acts 8:2-4:

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.

On the one hand, the persecution is worse than we imagined. Saul wasn't just punishing people who acted on their faith. He was entering houses, looking for believers and throwing them in prison. But at the same time, we see a kind of persistence about these Jesus followers.

Normally when someone was stoned, they were not allowed to have an honorable burial. But devout men insisted on giving Stephen a proper burial to honor his sacrifice. He died as a martyr, not as a criminal.

And even though the persecution caused them to scatter, it doesn't seem to have destroyed their faith. They run away in order to escape. We can imagine the fear that they felt. But they kept preaching: "those who were scattered went about preaching the word."

We might have expected to see bold bravery from this community. We don't. What we see instead is fearful faithfulness. They run away, but they continue preaching. Not quite bold bravery, but fearful faithfulness.

This is how we first see the followers of Jesus sent out into the world. If you've been reading the story up to this point, this turn of events is a bit disappointing. These people had been given a mission from Jesus to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The Spirit had come to empower them to do this. But they stay in Jerusalem and only leave out of fear of persecution.

The followers end up fulfilling the mission that Jesus gave them. In Acts 1:8 Jesus tells them to "be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The author here is clear to point out that they were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. We are reading about the second wave of fulfillment of this mission. The "ends of the earth" part will begin in chapter 13.

So they are fulfilling Jesus' mission. But not because they were bold and brave. They suffered persecution and ran away. But as they did so, they were faithful to their calling. In fact, it was their fear that made them faithful to their calling. Without their fear, they might never have been scattered. It turns out that their fear becomes instrumental to them actually being sent.

That may not be all that inspiring, but I find it very encouraging. I have a hard time being bold and brave. But in the midst of my fear, I can try to be faithful. That sounds a bit more attainable. Even when I'm afraid and maybe even because I'm afraid, I can choose to be faithful to God.

Can you do that? Can you be faithful in your fear?

Here's the secret that almost anyone who has done anything significant will tell you: You don't have to know what you're doing. You don't have to have a grand plan. If you're trying to fund a startup, you need to have a slick business plan that convinces investors to give you their cash. But if you're trying to take part in the work of God's kingdom, it's okay to be scared. It's okay to feel uncertain and unprepared. It's okay to be fearful. What you want to aim for is to be faithful.

Over the last few years, I've been getting more involved in what is happening around our community and in collaboration with other churches. On one hand, it's been fun and exciting to see what God has been doing.

It has also involved a lot of being stretched outside of what comes naturally to me. I'm very comfortable studying the Bible. I'm very comfortable counseling with you, trying to discern God's will together. I'm very comfortable leading small groups. Lately I've been thinking about how much easier it would be if I just stopped there and only did those things.

But I can't do that. God has been calling me out. This week I was invited to a meeting with the Chief of Police in Palo Alto. He wanted to talk about connecting the faith communities in our city together so that we would be better prepared if some kind of a tragedy happened in Palo Alto. It was a privilege to be there, but it was also a bit outside of my comfort zone. I'm not used to interacting with police chiefs.

It wasn't something that I made happen. My good friend who pastors the church next door invited me. And it's all part of what I've seen God doing in my life and in our life as a church. I was nervous about how it would all go. But all I could do was to be faithful. I just reminded myself: God brought me to that point. He'll bring me to whatever point is next.

Is there some area in your life that you're afraid? Some way that God has stretched you outside of your comfort zone—a kind of scattering? How can you be faithful? This is an attainable goal. You don't have to be brilliant or remarkable or innovative or funny or creative. All you need to aim for is faithfulness.

That doesn't make it easy. It's easier to shrink back. It's easier to stay where it's warm and safe. It's easier to keep your life simple. Stay in your lane. But if God scatters you, don't fight it. Be faithful. Be faithful in your fear.

Philip and Simon

The first individual does just that. We initially met Philip in Acts 6. He was selected as one of the people to help ensure that widows in the new community of faith were properly cared for. He seems to be from a Greek background, which would have helped him to advocate for those Hellenistic widows who were being overlooked.

But now Philip is not distributing food, but distributing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Acts 8:5-8:

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.

This was among the best receptions of any city has to the preaching of the Gospel. It is universally positive. The crowds paid attention "with one accord." Their sick were healed. They had "much joy" because of the news that Philip proclaimed. Being a Greek, Philip was an unlikely voice. Samaria was an unlikely place to start with the Gospel. This accidental sending leads to an unlikely voice with a surprising reaction.

But the big win comes next. Philip manages to convert the local celebrity.

Acts 8:9-13:

But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. 10 They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." 11 And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. 13 Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Everyone knew Simon the magician. He claimed to be somebody great and people believed him. He "amazed the people of Samaria." They all "paid attention to [Simon] because for a long time he had amazed them." His community even suspected that he might be divine.

Think of Simon the magician like Steph Curry. An amazing person that everyone paid attention to. Or if you're not a sports fan, maybe Oprah. Or Kim Kardashian. Simon was famous for being famous.

But then the people paid attention to Philip instead of to Simon. They believed and they were baptized. Even Simon himself became amazed at Philip's words. The one who amazed others is now amazed at Christ. Finally, "even Simon himself believed."

This sounds like a huge win for the Gospel. Imagine if Steph Curry walked in here and wanted to worship with us. Or Oprah. Or Kim Kardashian. American Christians love it when celebrities follow Jesus. We get so excited when someone famous, who is obviously more important than any of us because he or she is known by everyone, joins our club. That's why we love talking about football players and movie actors or business executives who follow Christ.

Why are we so impressed with Simon at first? What does it reveal about our hearts? Maybe it tells us something about what really drives us. Perhaps it leads us to ask the question why we are interested in being sent in the first place. What are we hoping for? Why be sent?

I think it makes us feel better about ourselves when famous people believe in Jesus. We want them to come to faith because we think fame somehow makes someone more valuable. When important people believe in Jesus, maybe our own doubts are eased because it makes our faith legitimate. Maybe there is a part of us that wants to reach our city for the name of Jesus so that people would know the name of PBC.

Why be sent? What are we really excited about? These are fair questions.

I had a friend in college who was very interested in spiritual things. I ended up studying the Bible with her on a regular basis. So many times I thought she was close to believing in Jesus. I wanted her to believe, but there was a part of me that needed to convince her for the wrong reasons.

I was struggling with my own doubts. And I think part of me felt if I could convince her that Jesus was real, then maybe I could be convinced myself. Maybe I wanted to be sent for my own sake.

What is it that drives us? Why be sent?

Affirmation and Rejection

The conclusion of the story helps us to work through these questions. Our two characters, Philip and Simon receive very different responses from the apostles.

Acts 8:14-17:

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

When Peter and John get to town, they realized something curious. The people in Samaria had apparently been baptized but hadn't yet received the Holy Spirit. Their response is to lay hands on them. Only at that point do these new believers receive the Holy Spirit.

This has raised a lot of questions over the years about the nature of baptism and the Holy Spirit and how they are related. Some take this passage to be a description of the normal course of events. First, you get baptized as a Christian. Then you need what is often called a "second work of grace" where you receive the Holy Spirit. This is often accompanied by specific signs, such as speaking in tongues.

The problem with this line of thinking is that if you look through Acts, you find all sorts of examples of baptism and the Holy Spirit coming in different ways at different times. Sometimes the Holy Spirit comes before baptism (Acts 9:17, 10:44-48). Sometimes it comes at the same time as baptism (stated in Acts 2:38; possible in 8:38). Sometimes after, as it does here (also Acts 19:1-6). Sometimes the apostles are present. Sometimes they aren't.

We like systems. We want to understand exactly how the Spirit works. But it seems that one of the most predictable things about the Spirit of God is that he is unpredictable. Perhaps we aren't meant to understand a particular system.

The scholar Ben Witherington puts it this way, "The book of Acts suggests God's sovereignty over the whole matter, not that the matter is in the control of the clerics, not even apostles." (Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 288) ¹

What happens with the whole Spirit is God's work. It's his decision. We can't always predict how it will happen. That leaves the question: why did God do it this way?

I'm convinced that it was for the sake of both Philip and the apostles. This was the first time a non-apostle has successfully preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Philip needed the encouragement that what he had done was real. The apostles' involvement validated his efforts. The apostles needed to see that others could preach the Gospel. By requiring their participation, they got to see for themselves that this was legitimate.

Philip is proof that anyone can be sent. Being sent isn't just limited to the apostles. Even Simon, the famous magician came to faith. But here the story takes a turn. Simon wants to be able to give others the gift of the Holy Spirit. He wants to be sent. He wants to participate in God's work. But he's got some odd ideas about how that works.

Acts 8:18-24:

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." 20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! 21 You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. 22 Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." 24 And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

This is a sad story. Simon just doesn't get it. The problem wasn't that he wanted to be able to give others the Holy Spirit. The problem is that he wanted to buy that power. The irony is that he would have gotten that power if he had become an authentic follower of Jesus.

But by offering to buy the power, we can assume that he wanted to use that power to make money. He probably wanted to use that power in the same way that he used to use magic to amaze the people around him.

Simon is probably thinking something like this: Jesus is great. What a cool new way of life. Now I can use this new power of God like I used to use magic. I can add God to my old way of life. In fact, he can make it better. I can do what I used to do, but God will increase it. God can be a new tool in my tool belt.

We face a similar temptation. We want to use the power of God to accomplish the kinds of things that would be important to us apart from God. We want to use God to feel good about ourselves. To become popular. To make a profit. To build our own reputation. Build our brand. The list goes on and on.

So what do we do? Does that ruin our desire to be sent?

Look again what Peter says to Simon. As harsh as his words are, they end with possibility. He says his heart isn't right, but he gives him a path to correct it. He tells him to repent. He tells him to ask for forgiveness. There is a path forward.

But Simon didn't take it. He didn't pray for forgiveness. He didn't confess his mixed motives. He asked Peter to pray for him. That was his real mistake. His problem wasn't that he thought too highly of himself. His problem was that he didn't think highly enough. He didn't think he could pray to God and ask for forgiveness. He was so caught up in a world where celebrities have power that he didn't get it.

Remember some of the things that Jesus himself said to Peter? They were just as bad. But Peter kept asking for forgiveness. He saw that what Christ offered was redemption.

Simon could have had forgiveness. He could have had exactly what he was trying to buy. But not by giving his money. It would only have come if he gave his heart. He didn't need to become a special member of the elite. He needed forgiveness just like everyone else, including the apostles.

This is the message for us. We take our broken and confused hearts to Christ and he makes us fruitful. When we are scattered, our adequacy is not tied up in whether we are doing it right or have the right motivations. Our adequacy is only and always in Christ. When we are scattered, we can be scattered in Christ.

Most of us aren't going to try to preach the Gospel as a way of making money. There are some in our culture who do, but that's probably not our temptation.

The question that I've heard people ask is this: are you just doing good stuff in the world so you will be liked? Deep down, don't you just want people to like you?

Of course. Of course we want to be liked. I want to be liked. You want to be liked. Anyone who denies that is lying. Does that motivate us? On some level, of course it does. But that desire is mixed with a real desire to see the kingdom of God take root on earth as it is in heaven. We can't parse out our motives and sort through the complications of our own hearts.

But we can do what Simon wouldn't. We can confess. We can pray to God. We can ask God to purify us, even as we are going out. We can throw ourselves on the mercy of Christ with the knowledge that he is the one at work.

Remember that friend of mine in college? My desire to see her come to know Christ wasn't ruined by my mixed motives. God is bigger than that. He can work through anyone when we let him redeem our confused hearts.

No matter where you are, you can be sent. No matter what is going on in your heart, you can be sent in Christ. Instead of the seeds that were choked out by the great persecution, we can be seeds that are scattered and fruitful. Not because of our efforts. Only because Jesus Christ lives in us and works through us.

Conclusion

Remember that glass dish that broke in my kitchen? Remember how the pieces went everywhere? Remember how much of a pain it was for me to clean it up?

The problem is that a glass casserole dish is supposed to stay together. It is meant to be one piece. All the pieces in one place. So when it shattered, the essence of that glass casserole dish was destroyed.

But here's the difference with the church. The people of God were never meant to stay in one place.

Back when Scott Grant preached on Acts 2, when the Spirit gave the apostles the ability to speak in other tongues, he pointed out that it was a reversal of the tower of Babel. At Babel, God confused their language. At Pentecost, God gave them understanding.

As we see these followers of Jesus scatter, there is another parallel to the tower of Babel. The problem of the tower was that the people built an icon to keep them together. They had a gathering point to keep them safe and protected. But that was never what God intended for his people. His first command to the first people was to fill the earth. When he scattered them at Babel, he was helping them to fulfill their original purpose.

The same is true here. When God scatters the followers of Jesus because of persecution, he is helping them to fulfill the purpose that Jesus had given them. Go, be disciples, not just in Jerusalem, but in Judea and Samaria. Don't worry about the ends of the earth yet. We'll get there soon enough.

We were never meant to stay in one place. When you think about the church, this is probably what you imagine. All of us gathered together on Sunday morning. It seems like this is where we are the church in the strongest sense. But what if we have it reversed?

All the pieces of a glass casserole dish are meant to be held together. That when they are really the most like a glass casserole dish. But what if all the little pieces of the church were meant to be scattered? What if we are most "the church" when we are out there? Scattered as engineers, and stay-at-home parents, and students, and neighbors, and professionals, and sales people, blue-collar, white-collar, no-collar, retired, studying, and looking for work. Maybe we are meant to be scattered.

So when God scatters us, let's be faithful. Be aware of your motivations. Don't try to co-opt God's power for your own benefit. But when you do, fall on Christ. He is our hope. He is our forgiveness. He is the one at work. And he is the one who makes our work fruitful.

Be scattered in Christ and be faithful.

Endnotes

¹ Witherington, Ben. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Grand Rapids, MI.1998.