

scattered

LIVING AS A COMMUNITY OF HOPE AT A TIME OF DISPERSAL

Gathered and Scattered - Acts 8.1-3 (persecuted church scatters)

The church has many purposes or functions. These purposes hang on a two-fold mission: the gathering of the Community for worship and the scattering of the Community in order to fulfil both our cultural and missions mandate. The church scattering in Acts is a key moment in the growth of the new faith and central to God's plans.

Read: Acts 8:1-3 The Church Persecuted and Scattered

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

Introduction

- We continue in our theme of being scattered and gathered
- We read a story of radical transformation from humble beginnings
- We read about a metamorphosis of the church from difficulty to discipleship; from persecution to potential
- God rules over our suffering no matter how big or how small it may externally appear to others, or how it internally appears to us
- In recent months, I've found myself praying three simple promises and this story reminds me of the need to keep doing this – areas that I know I struggle with.

Disciple me through difficulty

Reflect: Take 60-seconds to come up with a list of issues, challenges or difficulties that you have encountered in recent weeks as a result of lockdown. What are the most common or demanding do you think?

Whilst we may have not been persecuted in recent weeks; we have no doubt encountered difficulty. The very first verse shows us that God enables persecution and difficulty to serve our mission to spread God's love to others. Whilst God may have not caused said suffering, we have a God in the business of using difficulty to mobilise and motivate his people. Up until this point, the message sharing had mainly taken place in Jerusalem. But remember, Christ had said that the HS would enable them to take the message beyond Jerusalem (Acts 1:8) God used persecution to mobilise his people into the mission he had given them

- Look in Acts 11 – why do you think the message spread so quickly to these areas?
- In what ways do you think the difficulties of persecution would have made this mission difficulty or more straightforward following Stephen's death?

- Revisit the list of difficulties you identified a moment ago. What new opportunities are presented to you because of these hardships? (e.g. more contact with a neighbour, more time on the telephone with family, supporting colleagues through anxious times)
- Pray – Lord, disciple me through difficulty.

Help me to bless and not blame

Read: ² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

- In Acts 11:19, Luke writes ‘the persecution that arose over Stephen’. To what extent did Stephen’s actions lead to this persecution felt by the early church?
- How do you think you would have responded to this difficult period as a member of the early church? How might you feel about Stephen and his actions towards the priests?
- In what way does the passage suggest that Stephen is honoured and blessed by the early church? Why?

Perhaps some would accuse Stephen of being un-PC or being a rebel. Yet, Luke describes him as a man full of grace (Acts 6:8) he says he was filled with God’s spirit when he spoke (Acts 7:55) Note how Godly men bury Stephen rather than simply dispose of him. He is honoured, held in high esteem - not blamed.

- Who are the Stephen’s in our modern world?
- How do we honour them – by our words, actions, letters of support and encouragement. Whilst we may not have the confidence or power ourselves to speak with such authority, can we bless those that do?
- God’s people don’t blame, they bless it. We are challenged to be opened up and opened out; scattered yet gathered.
- Pray - Lord help me to bless rather than to blame

Help me win rather than whine

Activity: Take 60-seconds to rant or moan about a problem that is causing you frustration currently. After 1-minute, find something to talk positively about. Which was easier and why?

Did you know? Research shows that it is easier for people to talk about (1) negative emotions and discuss issues that irritate them than for them to accentuate the positive. It would appear that many like to have a good moan. Over time, our (2) neurology is hard-wired to focus on negativity bias than to think about the positive.

Sources

Cacioppo JT, Cacioppo S, Gollan JK. The negativity bias: Conceptualization, quantification, and individual differences. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences.* 2014;37(3):309-310.
 Goldsmith K, Ravi D. Negativity bias and task motivation: Testing the effectiveness of positively versus negatively framed incentives. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied.* 2013;19(4):358-366.

- Re-read verse 3 "But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison." . What image does this conjure up of Saul? How do you think early Christians would have felt about him and why does Luke go about naming him here?

This Saul is the one who would be dramatically converted and become the best friend and advocate Christianity ever had. It would have been easy to write him off. To see him as outside of the reach of God's kingdom or God's story, Yet, in this radical transformation of the church even enemies can become members; adversaries become advocates.

- What does it take for us to look on adversaries with the eyes of faith—that someday, by the power of God they could experience a u-turn as great as Saul's?
- When somebody causes you difficulty or painful frustration, what is your immediate or emotional response? How do you manage this?
- What are the steps we can take to share a Godly response to these individuals? How do we help bridge a gap between their actions and the love or story of God?
- Remember, Jesus used Judas to help him make the journey to the cross. Who are those unexpected enemies in our world that God may choose to be using in unexpected ways?
- Take a moment to pray for them. What might this prayer look like?

Helpful links in responding to difficult times and looking after wellbeing of yourself and others

- Visit the NSPCC website and [Childline website](#) for advice on talking to a child worried about coronavirus (COVID-19): What's going on? Explaining Covid-19 to younger children
- [Young Minds](#) is really helpful – it has sections on maintaining routines and communication, and even thoughts on handling arguments within the home
- The [NSPCC](#) has provided some guidance for parents.
- [Samaritans](#) advice on mental health.
- [Mental Health Foundation](#) - Looking after your mental health.
- Dealing with loneliness and isolation: [five top tips from the Church of England](#)
- Reminder of the pages on the Diocese website to support clergy wellbeing - [click here](#)
- [Guidance on mental health and wellbeing and Coronavirus - A Church of England document](#) (found in the 'Document' section on this link)
- [Coronavirus and your wellbeing - guidance from the Charity Mind](#)
- Sean Harris, a member of Holy Trinity, penned an [article here](#) championing North East school teachers; celebrating some recent successes from schools countering the challenges of the covid climate. Rather than spread negative or political news, consider sharing the article or writing to your local school in support of them and to applaud them for responding in a time of crisis.