

# The Scattered Church

**ACTS 8:1-4**

**Baxter T. Exum (#1546)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
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**\*\*COVID-19 LIVESTREAM\*\***

Good morning! It is good to be with you again today. As we have been doing over the past few weeks, I want to start with some good and encouraging news. First of all, I went to our church building just over a week ago, and I saw an actual human being! I signed up for lawnmowing in May, and when I got there to mow, Patsy was already there, working on the Bible correspondence course program. I wanted to share this as a reminder that good things are still happening. Even though we have not been meeting together, the work of the church continues, and this is one of a number of very good things that are happening. Several are involved in this, but throughout the month of April, we as a congregation sent out and graded 1265 Bible correspondence courses, primarily to inmates in Wisconsin's prisons, and we have had some good comments come in from a number of those students. They are extremely thankful for the opportunity to study. So, let us continue remembering this good work in our prayers.

We are also thankful, this morning, that someone was baptized here in Madison this past Friday! She's actually from a different city, and was here to be with a loved one in one of our local hospitals, but she made the call, we studied together, and she was ready to obey the gospel. I did not get her permission to share her name publicly like this, but I did happen to take a picture as we were filling the baptistery. So, I'm sharing this picture as a reminder: If you have not yet obeyed the gospel, we would be glad to help in any way possible. The Son of God came to this earth in human form and lived a perfect life. He died, he was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the first day of the week. We obey the gospel by reenacting the good news in our own lives. We believe and understand the message, we turn away from sin, we confess Jesus as being the Son of God, and we obey the Lord's command to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you have any questions, please get in touch. We can study together online or on the phone, we can meet at the church building and fill up the baptistery with warm, clean water in about 20 minutes, we can meet at a lake, or river, or pool, and you can obey the gospel today.

Just a few updates to our schedule over the coming weeks: We are hoping to have a guest speaker in the near future, perhaps as early as this coming Wednesday evening. For years, I have been trying to figure out a way to have Brett Rutherford speak to us online, but I couldn't quite figure out a good way to do that at the church building. But now, with all of us being online like this, Brett is planning on recording a Bible class for us. Brett

preached here in Madison from 1997 until January 2000. So, if you tune in on Wednesday and hear somebody with an Australian accent, that is not me! If you do see me on Wednesday, we will be looking at Luke 4. Otherwise, we'll be hearing from Brett.

Also, we are working on plans to get back together in person. We aren't there yet. We do have some things to figure out. One of the biggest concerns is singing. We'll also need to limit our numbers and encourage those who are sick and at risk to continue with the livestream and the phone. But as soon as we firm up some plans, we will be in touch. So, stay tuned for that.

As we head toward our lesson this morning, I'm sharing a picture from a bike ride to Farm & Fleet in Verona last week. It was just over 7 miles round-trip, and this is along the Military Ridge State Trail between Madison and Verona. It's not really tied to the lesson, and I'm explaining that now so you are not distracted trying to figure out the connection. We are just using this as a background. And for those of you who are interested, we are trying something a bit different this morning. We are doing the PowerPoint in a 4:3 ratio instead of the usual widescreen that we use at the building, mainly because I think we can fill the real estate on our livestream screen a little better. So, it might look a little different today. Let me know how it works.

As we get ready to study a passage from God's word with some special relevance for us today, I want us to keep in mind that we are worshiping under some less than ideal circumstances these days, to say the least. We are spread out among at least four (maybe five) counties. We are not able to be together. We can't greet each other face to face. We aren't able to sing together. We can't partake of the Lord's Supper together. It's hard to communicate. And even when we are together, one thing I've noticed lately is that even when speaking face to face, when everybody is wearing a mask, communication is much more difficult. As I mentioned earlier, I had the privilege of baptizing somebody this week. Both of us were wearing masks. A mask can be a real barrier to communication. I started to realize this as an election official back in April: A mask has a way of really disrupting interpersonal communication. So many times, we rely on seeing somebody's face to interpret what is said. At the election back in April, we had to repeat ourselves quite a bit, we had to ask for clarification on some rather technical issues. So much is lost without being able to see somebody's face. And the gospel is all about communication. We are communicating the good news of Jesus. And as we do this, we are obviously dealing with some less than ideal circumstances.

This morning, then, I want us to study a situation in the book of Acts, where God's people also dealt with some less than ideal circumstances, to say the least. That would be putting it mildly. The passage is found in Acts 8:1-4. I'll try to share the words on the screen in just a moment, but you might also want to find the passage in your own copy of the scriptures – Acts 8:1-4. But as we make our way there, let's just briefly bring ourselves up to speed here. The book of Acts is written by Luke. It's a history of the early church, and it basically picks up with the ascension of Jesus back into heaven in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, the apostles are filled with the Spirit, and Peter tells a huge crowd that they are guilty of murdering the Son of God. They interrupt the lesson and ask what they need to do, and Peter explains that they all need to repent and be immersed for the forgiveness of sins. 3,000 people respond to that message and are baptized. And from this point on, the early church grows by leaps and bounds. Over the next several weeks, thousands are added to their number, but they are pretty much limited to Jerusalem. They face some opposition here and there, but it is primarily limited to the leadership of the church – starting with the apostles, and then continuing with Stephen. In Chapter 6, Stephen is arrested for preaching the gospel, in Chapter 7, Stephen preaches to the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling body), and the sermon ends with Stephen being stoned to death, the first martyr of the church. Toward the end of Acts 7, we find that those who threw the stones at Stephen laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. This is the same

Saul who would go on to obey the gospel himself, not too long after this. At this time, though, Saul seems to take a leading role in persecuting the church. And this brings us to Acts 8. Let's look together at Acts 8:1-4. With reference to Stephen, the Bible says that,

***Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 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. Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.***

In the rest of the time we have together this morning, I want us to notice the circumstances the early Christians faced, and then I want us to try to learn something based on how they handled those circumstances.

- I. **But first of all, as we look at the text itself, let's realize that the early church faced some LESS THAN IDEAL CIRCUMSTANCES, and again, this is a serious understatement, because the church was being PERSECUTED.**

Up to this point, the early Christians had been meeting openly – in the temple, in various homes, publicly and from house to house, sharing meals, worshiping together, teaching and preaching all about Jesus as the Messiah. But now, on the day Stephen is put to death, everything suddenly changes, because on that day a **“great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem.”** Some of the leaders had faced some persecution here and there. Peter and John had been thrown in jail a time or two, but now the persecution is **“great,”** and this is against everybody. This persecution is against the **“church.”** As we know, the church is the people, and this involves everybody. If you claimed Jesus as the Messiah, this was against you. The apostles stay behind, but everybody else leaves. They scatter. They run.

Just a brief note on this: Sometimes, if somebody attacks us for our Christian faith, we might assume that we only have two choices: 1.) We can suffer, or 2.) We can deny the Lord. However, I would point out that we might also have the option of scattering. We can move. We can leave the room. We can get out of town. We can run. And as far as I can tell, there is no criticism of these people here. They are not condemned for scattering.

I had never noticed this before, but we might have a reason for all of this in verse 2, and it's tied to the death of Stephen. This is a turning point. Before this, the Jewish rulers were only going after the leaders; now they're going after everybody, and here is why, **“Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him.”** I've read that it was illegal under Jewish law to mourn for criminals who had been put to death by stoning. And we understand why. If the ruling body decides that somebody needs to die, any mourning would be seen as disagreeing with that decision. And that is pretty much what we see here. Not only do they mourn publicly, but Luke tells us that this group of **“devout men...made LOUD lamentation over him.”** I'm thinking, then, this is why Luke puts this here. This **“loud lamentation”** instigated or led to the persecution. And that would make sense, especially when we consider that it is Saul who leads this effort. Saul is the same one who seems to have perhaps played some role the stoning of Stephen. He didn't throw the stones, but he held the coats of those who did. Saul made it possible. Saul gave his approval. And so, when these people mourn loudly and publicly, Saul makes it personal.

And notice what he does. In verse 3, we find that, ***“...Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.”*** So, again, he’s not just going after the leaders at this point. Saul is going after everybody, men and women. Also, he’s not just going after public assemblies, but he’s tracking people down, he’s going house to house, he is dragging people out of their homes, and he is putting them in prison. This is aggressive and violent. Families are torn apart. Children are perhaps left behind. Husbands and wives are separated. And here, at least, as this is happening, God is nowhere to be seen. God doesn’t stop this, but he allows it to happen. The church is ***“ravaged,”*** and God is silent. At least that’s the way it looks. However, before we move on, I want us to realize that Jesus predicted this. The Lord could see this coming, and he warned the apostles about it. Back in John 16, on the night before he died, Jesus said to his disciples, ***“These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling.”*** And then he says, ***“They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me. But these things I have spoken to you, so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them”*** (John 16:1-4). So, the Lord had predicted this.

Something else I need to point out here is: When they scattered, they left Jerusalem. Think for just a moment how significant that is. Jerusalem itself is not only home, but Jerusalem is an important place in the history of God’s people. This is where Abraham offered Isaac. This is where King David ruled. This is the place where Jesus lived, and taught, and suffered, and died, and came back from the dead. This is where the church was established. But in response to persecution, God’s people scatter. They leave. They run.

So, we have these Christians who were accustomed to being together, suddenly separated, suddenly disconnected, even as they are going through something very difficult. Does that sound just a tiny bit familiar? In some small way, perhaps we can in some way empathize. So, we have a terrible circumstance: Persecution.

**II. But as we go back to the text, let’s notice the GOOD RESULT – yes, they were going through something terrible, but the GOOD RESULT is: As they scattered, they went out PREACHING THE WORD.**

First of all, let’s notice where they scattered. They pretty much go everywhere, everywhere but Jerusalem. Verse 1 tells us that ***“...they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.”*** Judea is the area around Jerusalem, and Samaria is the area just north of Jerusalem. We think about Jesus meeting with the woman at the well in John 4, that was in Samaria. Samaria was a place most Jewish people didn’t really go. But when they are persecuted, the early Christians went north to Samaria. Several chapters later, in Acts 11, we have another passing reference where Luke says that, ***“...those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone.”*** Phoenicia is basically modern-day Lebanon, along the coast on the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea. Cyprus is an island in the Mediterranean. Antioch is about 15 miles inland from the northeast corner of the Mediterranean, in modern-day Syria, I believe. So, not only did they scatter throughout Judea and Samaria, but they kept on going! They continued to scatter!

And this is where we might start to realize that this movement is what God intended. We’re not saying that God caused the persecution, but God did want them to move. When we go back to Acts 1:8, we find some of the Lord’s last words before he ascended back into heaven, where he said to his disciples, ***“...you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”*** How interesting! Jesus said that his disciples would be his witnesses in Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest

parts of the earth. And here in Acts 8, his disciples are persecuted, and they scatter to ***“Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth.”*** And isn't this what Jesus commanded at the end of Matthew when he said, ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you”***? As they are going, they are to make disciples. And isn't this what happens?

And this leads us back to what these people DO when they scatter. They ***“went about preaching the word.”*** They don't just run and hide, but they run and they preach. They preach the word. They go, and they take the word with them, preaching it as they go. They are fulfilling the Great Commission. We can imagine these men and women scattering in all directions. They are heading out, on the run, on roads and trails, and when they stop to find something to eat, what do we think they say to those they meet along the way? Do they talk about the weather? Do they complain? No. Do they mention the Lord? Absolutely! They talk about Jesus – his life, and death, and burial, and resurrection. They teach the word of God. They explain the importance of faith, and repentance, and baptism. They don't have a building to meet in. They don't have programs, and bulletins, and printed material, and websites, but they talk about Jesus wherever they go. And the church continues to grow. The church continues to multiply.

They are persecuted for teaching and preaching, and as they are on the run, they keep on teaching and preaching. Someone has compared this to somebody who is allergic to poison ivy running out rolling around in a patch of poison ivy! They continue to do exactly what got them in trouble in the first place! These men and women are carpenters, cooks, doctors, lawyers, fishermen, tentmakers, or whatever, but above all, they are God's people sharing the word. They are not religious professionals, but they are common everyday unpretentious people with a message. And people listened to the message.

But what I hope we notice in this passage is that God takes something terrible (the persecution), and he uses it to do what needs to be done (the preaching of his word throughout the Mediterranean world). God doesn't cause the hate and the violence here, but he uses it. He takes it and does something good with it. We might think of what Paul would go on to write later in Romans 8:28, ***“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”*** God does not cause all things, but he causes all things to work together for good for his people. And in hindsight, we see this in Acts 8. Obviously, it is terrible at the time, but as the people scatter, they preach the word of God as they go.

As we bring this passage forward nearly 2,000 years, do we see God using circumstances in our lives (even difficult circumstances) to make us stronger, to force us to grow, to give us new opportunities to teach the word of God? From time to time, some of you might be wondering, “What in the world am I doing in Madison, Wisconsin?” Out of all the places you could live, there is a chance that this might not be your first choice. Maybe you are far away from family. Maybe you are not a fan of the 54 inches of snow we had this year. Maybe you miss being part of a church with more programs and opportunities. So let me ask again: What are you doing here in Madison, Wisconsin? Is it possible that God has allowed you to be here because you have something unique to offer? Is it possible you are here to teach the word of God to somebody who would not have otherwise had the opportunity to hear the word without you being here? You might think you landed here because of a new job, or education, or a family connection, or a transfer. But is it possible that God is working behind the scenes to accomplish something with eternal significance?

As I understand it, the Lord's church was first established here in Madison partly due to the influence of some in the military coming up here to serve at Truax Field in the 1940's. In a sense, they were ***“scattered”*** from

wherever they were down south, and they came here, teaching and preaching as they went. By all outward appearances, they were sent by the military, but that's not really what was going on. In reality, they were sent by God, and accomplished something much more eternally significant in the process. I'm suggesting that all of us might also be here for the same reason. And now that we are here, our mission (like theirs) is to preach the word – across the fence in the backyard, at the park, at work, and really, with everybody we meet. Having been scattered, our mission is to preach the word as we go.

As we come near the end, I also want us to notice a contrast between the two men mentioned by name in this passage: Stephen and Saul. At this point in history, you could not find two men more different from each other. On one hand, we have Stephen, a servant of the church, a faithful and fearless preacher of the gospel, the first martyr. And on the other hand, we have Saul, a highly educated religious leader intent on destroying the Lord's church. But in the end, don't these two men actually accomplish the same mission? Because by persecuting the church, Saul is actually responsible for the first major missionary outreach by the church he was trying to destroy. It was certainly not his intent at the time, but by ravaging the church, he caused the church to scatter, and as they scattered, they preached the word of God as they went. And Saul, of course, would soon be converted himself and would go on to be one of the Lord's most successful missionaries.

### **Conclusion:**

So what? What does this passage mean for us today? Here we are in the middle of some less than ideal circumstances, to say the least. We did not choose what's happening to us right now. Is it possible, though, for God to use this and to use us, to accomplish something awesome? Is it possible that we might have some good opportunities for talking about Jesus, opportunities that didn't exist just a few months ago? Right here in Madison or wherever you are right now, there's a good chance that all of us are surrounded by people who are lost and overwhelmed in sin. Romans 3:23 tells us that ***"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*** We also know from Acts 4:12 (referring to Jesus) that, ***"...there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."*** We also know from Matthew 28:18-20 that as we go into all the world, we are to take the good news with us, and the news has to be shared. We are to ***"make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,"*** and we are to teach them to observe all that the Lord has commanded us.

In the times that we're in, share the church's website on social media. Talk to a friend or neighbor about what the Lord has done. Offer to pray for somebody. Tell a friend that your preacher is looking for weird questions to preach on: What questions do you have? Tell a friend or neighbor that our church is looking for ways to serve: How can we help? There is so much we can do!

As we close, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

We praise you as the God of Stephen and Paul, the all-wise and all-powerful God who can take the worst of circumstances and can often use those terrible events to open doors of service. We pray that we might be able to find ways to share your word with those around us today. We pray that we as your people might be able to connect with those in need and that we might be able to do whatever we can to use the resources you have provided to meet those needs.

We continue to pray for those in positions of authority as they navigate and lead through this current crisis. Bless them with wisdom so that we might be able to lead quiet lives in all godliness and dignity.

This morning we pray for open doors and for the courage to step through those doors. We pray for those who are struggling with their own mental health. Bless them with peace. We pray for caregivers. Bless them with strength and patience. We pray for Brett and Joanne Rutherford and for other missionaries who might be facing some special struggles as they are away from their families in far-off places.

We pray for our own congregation as we work on a way to come back together. We also ask for wisdom as we continue to plan for a very uncertain future. Bless those who work in healthcare, and bless our seniors.

We are thankful this morning for your grace and mercy. We are thankful for Jesus and for the forgiveness of sins. We come to you today in His name. Lord, come quickly. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)