

Gathered to be Scattered Acts 8:1-8

Intro: Huddle and Play

What would you think of a football game where the players spent an hour in huddle and only three minutes playing the game? It would not be very inspiring. Would you pay \$20 to watch a series of huddles? I doubt it. When 20,000 fans sit in the bleachers, they want to see their team demonstrate the power of their skill, their lessons from the coaches and their practice. They want to see them prove their stuff. Now, they can appreciate a 30 second huddle because they know it is a necessary part of the game. But what is the point of huddling, if the team isn't snapping the ball and moving it down the field to score? You gather in huddle so that you know *how* to scatter in play.

I. The gathering of the church in Jerusalem was to gain power (Acts 1:8)

And the same was true of the church in Jerusalem. Christ had gathered the disciples in Jerusalem to huddle in chapter 1:8. He said, **But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.** Earlier he had commanded them, “**wait in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high**” (Luke 24:49). He didn't want them going out and playing until they had gathered to receive power. But that was not the end of the game, and unfortunately the church was acting as if it was the end of the game. God had commanded them to wait in Jerusalem *until* they were endued from on high. That was five years ago, and now, in 35 AD, they were still quite content to remain in Jerusalem and continue their practice season.

But Acts 1:8 had two sides to the game plan. The practice and huddles are described in the first half of the verse, and the scattering to play is described in the second half, where Christ says, **and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.** And it's interesting that God uses exactly the same language in chapter 8 of going from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and in verse 4 – everywhere – that's the end of the earth. What Luke is trying to show is that God had to force them to scatter to the places He had commanded them to go.

I believe that the real effectiveness of the church is measured by what its members do in the marketplace of the world. Now that is not to say that practice and huddles are unimportant. We have seen in past sermons that they are incredibly important. Anybody who knows football knows that is a false dilemma. Worship is important, but it seems as if many Christians get all their highs from huddling in worship, but never seem to get the ball of God's Word *out there* on the field. When they get out on the field, they drop the ball completely. In fact, they

are embarrassed to carry the ball. And their excuse is that *preachers* preach the Word. But I want you to notice verse 4. It says, **Therefore, those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.** Who were scattered? Verse 1 tells us **they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.** It wasn't the officers who were scattered on the ball field, it was the people. The preachers were simply coaches who were equipping the saints for the work of the ministry, but it was truly the people who ministered God's Word wherever they went. It was the Christians in the pew who were expected to play ball.

And so, both aspects are important. It is important to get disciplined in the church, and to learn to worship, and to find your strength through union and communion with Christ. Without Christ we can't get our first down on the football field. But at the same time, those who focus all their time on worship, prayer, study, reading and discipleship but never take the ball onto the field of the world are demonstrating that their huddles are pointless. And when that happens, as happened to the church in Jerusalem, God often has to use pressure and pain to force us to scatter and to force us to play ball. The church in America has been great at getting high on worship. They are great at huddles, but they have been an utter failure at being salt and light in the world. Year by year the Lord has been increasing the pressure on the church to play, through mild forms of persecution. But rather than playing, the church has been further retreating into their ghettos. Pietism is on the rise, not on the wane.

Do we need frequent worship and frequent prayer? Yes, we do. I am a strong believer in worship and prayer. But prayer is an offense to God if we are not out there seeking to affect the world. Think of yourselves as spiritual salt and peppershakers. We huddle in church to fill up the shakers, but as soon as you get salt in your shakers, you need to start sprinkling it liberally in every aspect of home life, civic life, entertainment and work. Have you ever been in restaurants where the salt and peppershakers are all clogged up? That's from the steam of food putting moisture on the shaker and making the salt and pepper stick. If we only sprinkle salt over the lovely steamy fragrance of the church, and never sprinkle it over the dry world, our shakers will eventually get clogged up too. Point number 1 shows that we need God's power, but each of the subpoints shows how God intended the power to immediately result in action on the field.

II. The scattering of the church was to win ground (Acts 8)

So let's concentrate on verses 1-8 where we see the scattering of the church for the purpose of winning ground. Verse 1 says, **Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at**

Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. I think this is such a fabulous way of introducing Saul, who later changed his name to Paul. It immediately gives a proper perspective to this persecution. Saul was the worst example of persecution that you could get. He's not satisfied with persecuting people in Jerusalem. He's not satisfied with keeping Christians out of the public arena. He goes everywhere, and verse 4 says that he enters every house. He tramples on rights to privacy. He is willing to offend pagans and Christians alike in order to achieve his goal, and his goal is to exterminate the church. He's the worst persecutor. Now think about that: if God can stop the worse persecutor in his tracks in chapter 9, it shows two things: 1) first, it shows that no heart is too tough for God's grace to conquer. 2) Second, it shows that God is allowing this persecution. Isn't that a necessary logical deduction? He could stop the persecution any time that HE chose to. If He could stop Saul, He could stop anybody. But He didn't stop the persecution until the church was just where He wanted it to be. God used Saul as a tool before he was converted, and He continued to use Saul, now Paul, after he was converted. God is sovereign; persecution is not outside His control. In fact, He uses persecution to advance His cause. And that is such an encouragement to me.

Some people wish that the Chinese Christians could have the pluralism of America. But the Chinese do not see American pluralism as being any less dangerous than what they are experiencing. You may remember how Luke places quite a different kind of unbeliever into the spotlight in chapter 5. Gamaliel in that chapter doesn't want conflict. He's a pluralist and wants to let various groups have their beliefs. He's too kind hearted to persecute, and he just doesn't understand why they are so upset. He's willing to compromise a bit so long as Christians compromise a bit. It is quite a different strategy, but it had the potential of being quite effective in its own right. But the difference between Gamaliel and Saul is that Gamaliel really doesn't understand the issue at stake – one side will win and the other will lose. He couldn't see that there could be no compromising with genuine Christianity. Saul did, and that's why Saul was unwilling to compromise. One writer describes it this way:

“Saul (Paul) was always a sharp thinker and understood the issues clearly. Both before his conversion and then afterwards we see that he rejected the idea of compromise. He knew that everyone's way of thinking was a complete system and to break it at one point would be to break the whole system. Saul realized that there could be no peace between the old order and this new teaching... this was a struggle unto death. These two different worldviews could not tolerate one another. Jesus claimed absolute obedience to His every Word and complete commitment to His cause – thus if you are not totally for Him then you are against Him (Lk. 11:23). Saul's

teacher, Gamaliel had failed to realize the seriousness of Christ's claims and thus was prepared to compromise with the new faith (Acts 5:34-39), stating that it might just be true...

“Rebellion against God touches every area of life because His Word touches every area of life, thus there can be no uniting between those who obey Christ and those who reject Him.”

And this writer goes on to explain how the gentle answer of Gamaliel was just as dangerous as the harsh answer of Saul. The pluralism of America can be just as dangerous as the persecution of closed countries. And then he says,

Saul clearly understood that if he didn't destroy Christianity, then his system of belief would be destroyed. Christ's goal is nothing less than total conquest of all hearts and minds. Unbelieving systems use violence in order to bring about total conformity, whereas Christ, through the power of the Spirit, changes people's hearts and in this way their minds and actions are brought into willing submission.

I think that is a wonderful insight into why the Chinese communists cannot stop persecuting the Christians. They know that Christianity is at complete odds with the core of Communism. One or the other has got to give. And they know they can't compete in the free market of ideas. So all they are left with is force. The book of Acts is a marvelous commentary on social issues.

So, there was a reason for the persecution. Paul could see the writing on the wall. And the more Judaism lost ground, the more violent they became in their reactions. Violence against the church worldwide today is almost always because of the incredible growth that the church is experiencing. Now you will always find some unbelievers like Gamaliel who appear to be friends, but who just don't understand the issues. The violence against us is a sign that we are winning the battle, and that our message is a non-compromising, Biblical message. One author wrote:

Noah's message from the steps going up to the Ark was not, "Something good is going to happen to you!" Amos was not confronted by the high priest of Israel for proclaiming, "Confession is possession!" Jeremiah was not put into the pit for preaching, "I'm O.K., you're O.K.!" Daniel was not put into the lion's den for telling people, "Possibility thinking will move mountains!" John the Baptist was not forced to preach in the wilderness and eventually beheaded because he preached, "Smile, God loves you!" The two prophets of the tribulation will not be killed for preaching, "God is in his heaven and all is right with the world!" Instead, what was the message of all these men of God? Simple, one word: "Repent!"

They were making it clear that all was not well with the world, and that if people wanted the joy of verse 8, they would have to repent and find salvation in Jesus

Christ. When you have the boldness of a Stephen, there will eventually be backlash.

I do want you to notice one other thing though – Luke makes no derogatory remarks about those who fled. In fact, it appears that they were encouraged by the apostles to flee – probably because Christ had commanded them in Matthew 10:23. But here, everybody leaves, except the apostles. Not everyone is called to stay and fight. Though everyone is called to play ball, there are some who are called to run with the ball away from the persecution. And so don't think poorly of people who feel led to leave an area and flee from city to city in Indonesia or in other countries. This verse illustrates two quite appropriate responses to persecution.

Look at verse 2

Acts 8:2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.

One of the things that I found interesting was that this lamentation was illegal. The Talmud records for us the laws of that day that forbade anyone mourning over a criminal that was put to death. And so, this is another example of civil disobedience – and it was rather publicly expressed. It was *great* lamentation. By mourning they were making it clear that they disagreed with the Sanhedrin's decision; they were protesting the Sanhedrin's decision. Some Christians get nervous about that, but it is OK to disagree with your government, and even to protest. Submission to government is not blind submission – it is submission *in the Lord*.

But the second thing that I see in verse 2 is that the Sanhedrin's actions were backfiring. Praise God! Instead of cowering the people into silence, it was raising discontent. And we are seeing the same thing today.

So verses 1-2 were an overview of what was happening. Now in verse 3 he backs up and amplifies on the persecution. **As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.** The New American Commentary says, "The Greek word is *lumaino*, a strong expression that is used in the Septuagint for wild beasts, such as lions, bears, and leopards tearing at raw flesh." (p. 212). Luke is deliberately using this word to portray this religious government as being bestial in its nature. It isn't just pagan governments that can act bestial according to the book of Revelation. Certainly Rome is described as a beast, but Israel is described in Revelation 13 as **another beast... and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon.** Israel looked good – looked like a lamb, but spoke like a ravaging dragon. In the same way, even so-called Christian governments down through history have been tempted from time to time to act in bestial ways – to tear and persecute, and to violate the privacy rights of individuals, and to tear families apart. Unless God's grace is at work in a country to restrain sin, to give wisdom and character, any

country – even a great nation like America that has a reputation of being a lamb, can act like a dragon. And indeed, that is an apt description of America today. We say that we are for peace and defense, and yet we are meddling in almost every conflict in the world. Our founding fathers recognized this and knew that the Constitution will only work if there is a godly people. Our present civil government just seems to ignore most of the Constitution. It has no restraints. And any country that has thrown off the restraints of God’s law (what Psalm 2 calls Christ’s bonds and His cords), is defacto a bestial country in God’s books.

Let’s move on to verse 4. **Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.** The first result that we see from Saul’s attempts to stamp out the fire is that the sparks of the fire were scattered everywhere, and so many fires of Reformation begin to burn in various areas, and no one was able put them out. Amen?

I’ve already mentioned the second thing to notice – that every member except for the apostles were witnessing. Or to use the football metaphor, its not primarily the coaches who played on the field – the football players did. If you have bought into the notion that pastors are paid to do all the work of the ministry, I want you to read with me Ephesians 4:11-12. This passage makes it very clear that every member is a minister, and officers are coaches. The coaches are paid to be coaches. Ephesians 4:11-12. **And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.** The grammar is quite clear that the officers are equippers, and the saints are the ministers. And you need to ask yourself if you have been spreading the word in the marketplace of ideas? Are you playing football or are you simply spectators? All believers are called by God to be on the football field.

The third thing that I want you to notice is that little word “therefore” at the beginning of verse 4. There was persecution; *therefore* they did what God had already commanded them to do. That’s exactly what it is saying. Why did they have to wait for persecution? In Acts 1:8, five years before, Jesus had told them to wait in Jerusalem *until* they were endued from on high with power. They had the power to scatter. And to me this shows that first century saints are no different than we are. How many times do I preach from the Bible on your responsibilities as fathers, as wives and as children, yet it goes in one ear and out the other until God makes the family fall apart and the pain is so bad that you come for counseling. And in counseling Glenn and I insist that you take certain Biblical steps, and when you do, things get better. But why is it that we don’t implement what we hear before the pain? And I believe the reason stated by Christ is that we either don’t have hearing ears or we don’t use them. Oh, yes, we use physical ears that hear, but not spiritual ears. You know, when Jesus said, **He who has ears to hear, let**

him hear, He was implying two things: 1) first, he was implying that not everyone has spiritual ears. “He who has ears to hear” – some don’t and some do. 2) Second, he was implying that even believers who have been given spiritual ears don’t always use them, and that’s why they have to be commanded to use them. We have the capacity to hear as believers, but our flesh hinders our sensitivity. Hebrews 5:11 speaks of it as being dull of hearing. We don’t hear the voice of God speaking through the Scriptures. All we hear is Glenn Durham or Phil Kayser or Rodney Swab rattling on about some interesting subjects. We need to develop a ready ear to hear what God is wanting us to do, always listening to any possible rebuke, encouragement or change in direction. Don’t wait for the pain before you implement the sermons. Take notes, pray what God is having you write down, and immediately make plans to practice it.

The fourth thing that I see in this verse is that they went everywhere. Once they began to get the hang of scattering on the football field, they got it into their bones, and they kept traveling and kept carrying the ball. They couldn’t be stopped. By the time you get to chapter 11:19, it says, **Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenecia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching....** By the time you get to 1 Peter 1:1, these scattered Christians had traveled to Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. And so, what Saul intended for evil, God intended for good. The persecution of Christians in Ethiopia was intended for evil – to close down the church, but God intended it for good, and the church has grown like wildfire. We see the same thing happening in North Korea, China, North Vietnam, Indonesia, Afghanistan and many other places.

The fifth thing to notice about verse 4 is the centrality of the Word of God in the lives of believers. The Bible is not just intended for church, or for pastors. Every believer should be a Bible thumper. Amen? And since the Bible speaks to every area of life, there should be no area of life that the Word is not being carried to. Don’t be ashamed of the Scripture. Carry that ball.

Let’s move on to verse 5. **Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.** This was the capital, and it may show the same strategy that Paul used. If you examine Paul’s methods of planting churches, he went to the largest cities – especially the ones that had lots of trade and travel going through them, and planted churches there. Once a strong church was established in the big city, that could be used as a base for reaching out to the outlying areas. This is the missionary strategy that the PCA uses. They have been criticized for not focusing on country churches, but they are simply using the methods of the New Testament of having established city churches reaching out to the country.

Notice secondly that he preached Christ to them. Christ is the heart of our message because Christ is the heart of the Bible. Now some people have misinterpreted this to mean that we preach only about the bare bones salvation passages and ignore the bulk of the Bible. No. Absolutely not. The whole Bible is the Word of Christ, and we are failing to bring His Word if we fail to preach the whole counsel of God as Paul did. You can explain this both in terms of Christ's Saviorhood and His Lordship. Salvation is not just salvation from the presence of hell; it is also salvation from the presence of sin. Since sin is lawlessness, any point of the law can be a starting point for the Gospel, because Christ and Christ alone enables us to joyfully keep the law. Likewise, since Christ is Lord of all things, preaching Christ means bringing all things into submission to King Jesus. So don't think of preaching Christ as simply preaching the four spiritual laws. Acts is a kingdom document and Philip was confronting people with Christ's universal kingship. And I've included some Scriptures, which show that this is how the Bible uses the phrase, "to preach Christ." Look for example at verse 12 that gives a commentary on what it means that he preached Christ. **But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized.** Preaching Christ means preaching the kingdom of God. And this is the nature of the preaching throughout this book. Look at the last verse of the book of Acts. Paul is in prison in Rome, and verse 31 says, **preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.** It tires me to hear preachers who take such phrases as preaching Christ to mean neglecting the practical subjects of the universal kingdom of Christ. Reject pietism and embrace the kingship of Jesus. According to 2 Corinthians 1:19-20, preaching Christ means preaching every promise of Scripture because every promise of the Old Testament is yes and amen in Jesus. Ephesians 3:8 speaks of preaching Christ as including unsearchable riches. Colossians 1:8 indicates that it includes all wisdom and making every person mature in Christ Jesus. And so, yes, we believe in preaching Christ. That is why we preaching everything that the Bible says.

Let's move on to verse 6. This football game is spectacular. Luke says, **And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.** As Paul said, he did not come in word only, but also in power. The fact that these multitudes heeded was proof positive that the Spirit of God was already at work. The Spirit did not yet touch Paul, so all he could do was oppose. But these multitudes heeded. It had nothing to do with one being better than another. It had to do with God preparing the soil to be receptive to the seed. You can preach your heart out, but if God has not changed the soil through regeneration, the people will not listen. Our role is not to try to

guess who is the elect or not, but simply to bring the message, and it will become obvious when and where God's Spirit is being poured out.

And this verse shows citywide revival. It's not just Nineveh that was a city converted in one day. God did it in Samaria and he has done it many times since then. Philadelphia, Toronto and other cities that were changed cities after revival. Omaha is not too tough to conquer if God wants to. Don't give up on a city.

This whole passage is a paradigm for citywide revival. What does it look like? Let me give you seven indicators of true citywide revival. Revival begins with the Word in verse 4, and any place where revival breaks forth there is a hunger for the word. A second indication of revival is that there is a focus upon Christ and not only His sufficiency, but of the fact that we can do nothing without Christ. The focus was on Christ in verse 6. The third indication of revival was that there was genuine repentance. Simon Magus had fake repentance according to verse 22, but the multitudes at large grieve over their sins and forsake them. The fourth indication of revival is that they heeded the things being preached in verse 6. People cannot ignore the Word when the Spirit is poured forth. The Spirit rivets our attention on the Word. The fifth indicator of citywide revival was the miracles of verses 6-7. And I don't care which citywide revivals that you want to examine, there are miracles present. The sixth indicator of revival is liberty from bondage to sin and Satan in verse 7. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty, and it is utterly inconsistent to claim revival and yet have a church or a city that is still in bondage to sin and Satan. I have seen churches claim revival because great emotionalism broke forth, but the people are just as carnal as ever. That is a fake revival. The seventh indicator was the joy of verse 8. Many things have been called revival in North America that are simply emotionalism. True revival has substance like this one did. It changes the city. Let's quickly look at those verses.

Verse 7 continues the description by saying, **For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.** There are two types of healing mentioned here: releasing people from demonic bondage and healing people's bodies. God continues to engage in both of these ministries, and I am a strong believer in the ongoing presence of miracles. I have seen many miracles being performed – some so astonishing that I almost wished I had a video camera so that people who doubt could see. It's pretty hard to deny a miracle has taken place when you see a withered hand instantly expanding into a whole hand. But miracles by themselves do not convert. If they did convert, the Sanhedrin would be converted. But Jesus said in Luke 16:31, **If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.** So the order in these verses is heeding the Word and miracles of healing. But when revival breaks out, God frequently graces the church with many accompanying miracles. And these

miracles often get the attention of people so that they consider the claims of Christ. They don't convert, but they are obviously important or Christ and the apostles wouldn't have used them.

But what I find most exciting about these verses is that verse 8 says, **And there was great joy in that city.** This is what Christ purchased for His people – great joy. And it is one of the signs of the presence of God's Spirit. You see, the goal of missions is to restore men, women and children to their role of glorifying God *and enjoying Him* forever. And (as Piper words it), God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. Joyless Christianity does not glorify God. Christ said, **“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.** (John 15:11) His intention was not a joyless Christianity but a Christianity full of joy – where you can't fit any more joy into the cup of life. On another occasion Jesus said, **I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly.** (John 10:10) Well, that purpose for His coming was exemplified in this citywide revival which brought great life and great joy. And so I want to ask you: Is Christ's purpose for coming exemplified in your life? Do you have joy in Christ? Or are you simply playing the football game out of duty?

III. The apostles remained behind to start another team (Acts 8:1), which would be gathered to gain power (12:12) and scattered to win ground (12:1-24). Samaria itself was being turned into a joyful and powerful huddle (8:5-8) that would scatter for ministry (9:31).

If you lack joy, then point III brings us back full circle to God's purpose for the huddle. Just like many of us, the disciples also lacked courage and they lacked joy after the crucifixion. But when Pentecost came, they were given both boldness and joy. If you lack joy in the football game of life, I would urge you to get back into the huddle and spend time with Christ so that you can reemerge charged and ready to scatter. This is a cycle that happens over and over again in the book of Acts. Why did the apostles remain behind in verse 1? It's because they want to start another team, and this new team of believers would gather to gain power. You can see this in the next few chapters until chapter 12:12 shows one last gathering for prayer, and then a scattering for ministry. And that chapter ends by saying, **the word of God grew and multiplied.** We see the same thing happening in Samaria. Samaria is turned into a powerful practice season, a huddle in 8:5-8 and a scattering for ministry in chapter 9:31. And each of those teams was constantly re-gathering for huddles and re-scattering with power.

And I would suggest that this is a paradigm for our lives. We need to constantly regroup for worship and encouragement within the body, and huddles

with Christ in your personal devotions, and then constantly scatter to play ball on the field Monday through Saturday. Are you good at doing both? If not, repent of missing your joyful calling. Huddles are important, and carrying the ball of Scripture into the world is important. Christ has redeemed us to play spiritual football – to gather so that we might scatter. May you do both effectively to His glory and for your joy and satisfaction. Amen.

Children of God, I charge you to learn to gather so that you might scatter. The daily huddle with Christ in the secret place of your devotions is as important for each day as the Sabbath is for the week. But don't neglect either side of the game plan. I charge you to gather to be scattered. Amen.