

Acts 8:1–4

Introduction

Last week, we heard Stephen’s Holy Spirit-inspired testimony before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin charged that Stephen’s preaching of Jesus was contrary to God’s revelation of Himself in the **Law** and at the **temple**. In response to this charge, Stephen gave us a carefully curated survey of about 1100 years of redemptive history. In this brief survey, Stephen highlights Joseph and Moses as the two “proto-typical” deliverers of Israel. They were both providentially prepared and raised up by God to save His people; and yet they were also both rejected by their own people, the very people God raised them up to save — just like Jesus has now been rejected by the Sanhedrin. Moses said that God would raise up a prophet *like himself* who would give the people “living oracles”—a new law which would not so much replace the law of Moses as fulfill it. Rather than speaking words against the Law of Moses, in preaching Jesus as the new “Law-Giver” Stephen was upholding and affirming the Law of Moses.

Also, in this brief survey, Stephen carefully situates the temple within the broader sweep of redemptive history—a story that progressed for over a thousand years from Abraham to Solomon (not to mention the thousands of years before Abraham) without any temple and even outside the borders of Canaan (Mesopotamia, Haran, Egypt, Midian, Sinai, Babylon; cf. Shechem). Stephen emphasizes the fact that God was in no hurry to have a permanent house built for Himself. In fact, it was not God who finally asked the people to build Him a house, but David who asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. Even then, it was not David, but Solomon who finally built a house for God. Stephen shows how even the temple itself can become an object of idolatrous worship and then he quotes God’s word through the prophet Isaiah to prove that “the Most High does not dwell (cannot be contained) in houses made by human hands.” Though Stephen doesn’t speak a single word against the temple, he does “unshackle” God—as it were—from the temple, *and therefore also from Jerusalem*. He proves that an earthly temple in Jerusalem cannot be the ultimate and final “place [*topos*]” for that fullest (eschatological) revelation of God’s saving presence.

What we have, then, in Stephen’s testimony [cf. *martyria*] is the biblical-theological preparation for the proclamation of Jesus outside Jerusalem and even outside the borders of Judea. Stephen’s martyrdom, on the other hand, will be used by God in His sovereignty as the “practical” impetus for the proclamation of Jesus outside Jerusalem. So we read in verses 1-4 of chapter eight:

Acts 8:1–4 — Now Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the assembly [*ekklesia*] in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered [*diaspeiro*] throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And some devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the assembly [*ekklesia*], entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he was delivering them into prison. Therefore, those who had been scattered [*diaspeiro*] went about, proclaiming the good news [*euangelizo*] of the word.

I. The Eschatological Assembly

Remember how Stephen said of Moses:

- Acts 7:38 — “This is the one who, in **the assembly in the wilderness** [*te ekklesia en te eremo*], was with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai...”

Now it seems that Luke purposefully echo’s Stephen’s language when he says:

- Acts 8:1 — [O]n that day a great persecution began against **the assembly, the one in Jerusalem** [*ten ekklesian ten en Hierosolymois*].

The obvious question, then, is: What is the relationship between “the assembly [*ekklesia*/church] in the wilderness” in the days of Moses and “the assembly [*ekklesia*/church], the one in Jerusalem” in the days of Luke? The “assembly” that was in the wilderness in Moses’ day consisted of all the physical seed of Abraham whose covenantal charter was the law of Moses (the whole nation of Israel). But now, in the days of Luke, the “assembly” (*ekklesia*/church) that was in Jerusalem consisted no longer of all the physical seed of Abraham, but only of the true spiritual seed of Abraham whose covenantal charter is the New Covenant in Jesus’ blood. Luke translates the language Stephen used to describe Old Covenant Israel into a context of eschatological fulfillment. The Old Covenant assembly/church (“the assembly in the wilderness”) has been fulfilled in the New Covenant assembly/church (“the assembly in Jerusalem”). This is important to understand in its own right, so we can be glad in our own participation in the fulfillment of redemptive history. But this connection between “the assembly in the wilderness” and “the assembly in Jerusalem” is also important because it sets us up to see a new theme of eschatological fulfillment.

II. The Eschatological Dispersion

Twice, in these verses, Luke references the death of Stephen and the general persecution against “the assembly [*ekklesia*/church] in Jerusalem” that followed (vv. 1a & 2-3).

- Acts 8:1a — Now Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the *assembly* in Jerusalem...
- Acts 8:2-3 — And some devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the *assembly*, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he was delivering them into prison.

And twice Luke follows these references to the death of Stephen and the general persecution against “the *assembly* in Jerusalem” with this observation:

- Acts 8:1b — ...and they [the *assembly* in Jerusalem] were all *scattered* [*diaspeiro*] throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria...
- Acts 8:4 — Therefore, those who had been *scattered* [*diaspeiro*] went about [throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria], proclaiming the good news of the word.

This is, really, rather shocking language. The Greek word for “scattered” is *diaspeiro* and the only other time it appears in the New Testament is in Acts 11 where the context is identical with the one here in Acts 8.

- Acts 11:19 — So then those who were scattered [*diaspeiro*] because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen...

In the Old Testament, *diaspeiro* (to be scattered) is an important word, full of redemptive-historical significance. Exile from the land, in the Old Testament, was the ultimate covenant curse because it meant that the people had been cast out from the special presence of God at the temple in Jerusalem (cf. Ps. 42-43; 137). It’s true that God was never tied down or bound to the temple, but during that time in redemptive history, it was at the temple in Jerusalem that God had chosen to put His name (cf. Deut. 12:11; 1 Kings 8:29; 9:3; 2 Kings 23:27; 2 Chron. 6:6; Neh. 1:9). Exile from the land, therefore, was the ultimate manifestation of God’s judgment because it was to be cut off and cast out from His special presence at the temple in Jerusalem. And this exile from the land—this being cast out from God’s presence—is described in terms of being scattered among the nations. We read in Leviticus and Deuteronomy about the covenant curses:

- Leviticus 26:33 — “You, however, I will **scatter** [*diaspeiro*] **among the nations** [*ho ethnos*]...”
- Deuteronomy 4:27 (cf. *diaspora*: Deut. 28:25) — “Yahweh will **scatter** [*diaspeiro*] you **among the peoples** [LXX, *ho ethnos*], and you will remain few in number **among the nations** [*ho ethnos*] where Yahweh drives you.”
- Deuteronomy 28:64 (cf. 32:26 LXX) — “Moreover, Yahweh will **scatter** [*diaspeiro*] you **among all peoples** [LXX, *ho ethnos*], **from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth**...”

Centuries later, when Judah was about to go into exile to Babylon, God spoke through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel:

- Jeremiah 13:24 (cf. Jer. 15:7, LXX; cf. *diaspora*: Jer. 41:17 [Jer. 34:17, MT]) — “Therefore I will **scatter** [*diaspeiro*] them like chaff...”
- Jeremiah 18:17 — “Like an east wind I will **scatter** [*diaspeiro*] them before the enemy...”
- Ezekiel 20:23; 36:19 (cf. Ezek. 17:21; 22:15) — “I swore to them in the wilderness that I would disperse them **among the nations** [*ho ethnos*] and **scatter** [*diaspeiro*] them among the lands... I **scattered** [*diaspeiro*] them **among the nations** [*ho ethnos*], and they were dispersed throughout the lands.”

The Psalmist laments in the face of God’s judgment:

- Psalm 44:11 — You give us as sheep to be eaten and have **scattered** [*diaspeiro*] us **among the nations** [*ho ethnos*].

In Ezekiel and Zephaniah we read about the day when God will gather those who were “scattered” (cf. Isa. 11:12; 56:8; Jer. 39:37 [LXX; 32:37, MT]; *diaspora*: Deut. 30:4; Ps. 146:2; Isa. 49:6).

- Ezekiel 11:17 (LXX) — This is what the Lord says: “I will also take them **from the nations** [*ho ethnos*] and gather them from the countries among which I **scattered** [*diaspeiro*] them.”
- Zephaniah 3:10 (LXX) — From the ends of the rivers of Ethiopia, I will take in my **scattered** [*diaspeiro*] ones.

So definitive was this divine judgment that those whom God had scattered (*diaspeiro*) among the nations became known simply as “the scattered,” or, “the Dispersion” (*ho diaspora*; the Diaspora).

- John 7:35 (cf. Isa. 49:6; Ps. 146:2; 2 Mac. 1:27; Ps of Sol. 8:34; 9:2; Jud. 5:19) — The Jews then said to one another, “Where does this man intend to go that we will not find Him? Is He intending to go to **the Dispersion** [*ho diaspora*; the scattered ones] among the Greeks...?”

With all this weight of background, then—and given the connection Luke has already drawn between the Old Covenant “assembly in the wilderness” (the assembly which was ultimately “scattered” among the nations) and the New Covenant “assembly in Jerusalem”—what does it mean when Luke twice says that this New Covenant “assembly, the one in Jerusalem” was “scattered [*diaspeiro*] throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria”? Here’s what we might call “the eschatological Dispersion”—a dispersion with a very different character than the old dispersion. And it’s Stephen’s testimony that’s already prepared us for this. Remember how he showed that an earthly temple in Jerusalem cannot be the ultimate and final “place” for that fullest revelation of God’s saving presence. Remember how he saw in Jesus, standing in heaven at the right hand of God, the ultimate, eschatological “place” of God’s saving presence with us. Stephen’s testimony before the Sanhedrin has prepared us to see how this dispersion of the New Covenant assembly no longer partakes of the character of judgment or curse. To be scattered from Jerusalem no longer means what it used to mean. It no longer means that the people have been cut off or cast out from God’s presence. But that’s only putting things “negatively.” Stephen’s testimony has also prepared us to see this eschatological dispersion of the New Covenant assembly in a whole *new* (positive) light.

Here in Acts,^{*} the dispersion of the New Covenant assembly is the means that God uses in His sovereignty to spread the proclamation of the Gospel outside of Jerusalem, and even outside of Judea (cf. Peterson; Kistemaker; Stott; Martin on Jm. 1:1 [WBC]; McCartney on Jm. 1:1 [BECNT]). In Acts 1:8, Jesus said to the apostles:

- Acts 1:8 — “...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My **witnesses** both in Jerusalem, and in all **Judea and Samaria**...”

And now what does Luke say?

^{*} James addresses his primarily *Jewish Christian* readers as “the twelve tribes” [the *eschatologically restored* Israel], the ones who are in the Dispersion [*ho diaspora*]” (Jm. 1:1). Peter addresses his primarily *Gentile Christian* readers as those who are “foreigners of [the] Dispersion [*diaspora*]” (1 Pet. 1:1). Obviously, this isn’t the old dispersion of the Old Covenant assembly (curse and judgment), but rather a new “dispersion” of the New Covenant assembly. In 1 Peter (and probably in James), the New Covenant Dispersion highlights the reality that as Christians we are living as foreigners in the world (1 Pet. 1:1, 17-18; 2:11; 5:13)—though this need not exclude the thought of being salt and light in the world.

- Acts 8:1b, 4 — ...and they were all scattered/dispersed [*diaspeiro*] throughout the regions of **Judea and Samaria**... Therefore, those who had been **scattered/dispersed** [*diaspeiro*] went about, **proclaiming the good news** [*euangelizo*] **of the word**.

Here is an eschatological Dispersion that no longer partakes of the nature of judgment and curse; instead, it's the means God is using for the "gathering in" of all His elect. Think about it like this: If the Old Covenant assembly's scattering among "all the nations" [*pas ho ethnos*; Deut. 4:27; 28:64] was the sign of being cut off and cast out from God's presence, what does it mean when the resurrected Jesus says to His disciples:

- Matthew 28:18–19 — "**Go therefore** and make disciples of **all the nations** [*pas ho ethnos*], baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all that I commanded you; **and behold, I am with you always** [**in all the nations to which you may go**], even to the end of the age."

In this eschatological scattering/dispersion, God's people are not cast out from His presence; instead, Jesus has promised to be with them forever as they proclaim the Gospel among all the nations—even to the end of the earth (cf. Acts 11:19-20). In Deuteronomy, God said that He would scatter His people "from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth" (28:64). Remember, again, Jesus' words to the apostles in Acts chapter one:

- Acts 1:8 — "...you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even **to the end of the earth** [*heos eschatos ho ge*]."

Jesus is echoing, here, the word that God spoke through the prophet Isaiah:

- Isaiah 49:6 — "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and **to cause** [**the Dispersion; *ho diaspora***] **of Israel to return**; I will also give You as **a light of the nations** [*ho ethnos*] **so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth** [*heos eschatos ho ge*]."

Do you see what's happening here? We understand now that it's this eschatological *dispersion* of the New Covenant assembly which God is using to *gather in* not only the scattered sheep of the house of Israel, but also all His elect who are scattered among all the nations of the earth. "Therefore," Luke says, "those who had been scattered [*diaspeiro*] went about, proclaiming the good news of the word."

III. The Eschatological Gospel Proclamation

The Greek word for "gospel"—or "good news"—is *euangelion*. But since good news by its very nature is meant to be spread abroad and proclaimed, it's not surprising that in the Greek, the noun *euangelion* comes in a verb form: *euangelizo*. It's from this word that we get our English word, "evangelize." If *euangelion* means "gospel," then *euangelizo* means "to gospel"—"to preach, to proclaim, to spread abroad and disseminate the good news." The verb *euangelizo* appears only once in Matthew (in an OT quotation; Mat. 11:5) and never in Mark (Matthew and Mark use a different verb meaning "to proclaim" [*kerusso*] and pair it with the noun *euangelion*

[Mat. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; 26:13; Mk. 1:14; 13:10; 14:9; 16:15]). But it appears a total of 32 times in Luke/Acts. We could say that *euangelizo* is definitely a “Luke word.” In the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel, the angel Gabriel says to Zechariah: “I was sent to speak to you and **to bring** you this **good news**” (Lk. 1:19). In chapter 2, the angel said to the shepherds: “**I bring** you **good news of great joy**” (Lk. 2:10). In chapter 3, Luke tells us that John the Baptist “**proclaimed the gospel** to the people (Lk. 3:18). In chapter 8, we learn that Jesus was “going around from one city and village to another, preaching and **proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God**” (Lk. 8:1; cf. 4:18, 43; 7:22; 16:16; 20:1). In chapter 9, we see the twelve disciples “going throughout the villages, **proclaiming the gospel**” (Lk. 9:6). Here in Acts, the first time *euangelizo* appears is in chapter five, when Luke says that “every day, in the temple and from house to house, [the apostles] did not cease teaching and **proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ**” (Acts 5:42; cf. 8:24). Later in this chapter (chapter 8), we’ll see Philip “**proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ**” (Acts 8:12; cf. 8:35, 40). In chapter 10, Peter speaks of the word that God sent to the sons of Israel, “**proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ**” (Acts 10:36). In chapter 13, Paul says to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch: “[W]e **proclaim** to you **the good news of the promise made to the fathers...**” (Acts 13:32; cf. 14:7, 21; 15:35; 16:10). And in chapter 17, Luke will tell us that Paul was “**proclaiming the good news of Jesus and the resurrection**” to the Gentiles (Acts 17:18; cf. 14:15).

When Luke says, here, that “those who had been scattered went about, proclaiming the good news of the word” (Acts 8:4) we know what this “word” is. It’s the good news about the kingdom of God; the good news about the name of Jesus Christ; the good news that Jesus is the Christ; the good news of peace through Jesus Christ; the good news of the promise made to the fathers; the good news of Jesus and the resurrection; in short, it’s the good news of great joy! This is the good news that I’m called to be proclaiming every Lord’s Day.

Who are the ones proclaiming the good news in the Scriptures referenced above? The angel Gabriel, John the Baptist, Jesus, the twelve disciples (in Luke), the twelve apostles (in Acts), Philip, and Paul. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, it’s almost always the Apostle Paul who’s proclaiming the good news (Rom. 1:15; 15:20; 1 Cor. 1:17; 9:16, 18; 15:1-2; 2 Cor. 10:16; 11:7; Gal. 1:11, 16, 23; 4:13). Paul says in Ephesians chapter 3:

- Ephesians 3:8 — To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, **to proclaim** to the Gentiles **the good news of the unfathomable riches of Christ...**

So what does this mean for all of us? It’s true that there are those who’ve been called and appointed to be “preachers of the Gospel.” In a previous sermon, we saw how Acts is the story of the completion of the apostolic task of being Jesus’ witnesses “even to the [redemptive-historical] end of the earth.” It’s not our job to finish something that the apostles left unfinished. There is no “Acts 29.” We don’t have our own “Jerusalem,” or our own “Judea” or “Samaria.” The apostles, in the power of the Holy Spirit, fulfilled the commission Jesus gave them to be His “witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the [redemptive-historical] end of the earth.” This is the completed story that Acts tells.

But as wonderful as these things are, it's an equally wonderful thing when we read in Acts 8: "And on that day a great persecution began against *the assembly* in Jerusalem, and *they were all scattered [diaspeiro]* throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, *except the apostles...* Therefore, *those who had been scattered [diaspeiro] went about, proclaiming [making known] the good news of the word*" (cf. 11:19-20). To be in possession of the "good news" (*euangelion*) is to be in possession of that which by its nature is meant to be spread abroad and proclaimed (*euangelizo*; cf. Isa. 52:7). Therefore, simply to be in possession of the good news is our authorization to make that good news known to others.

Conclusion

Even though we've not all been scattered as a result of persecution, nevertheless, as members of the **eschatological assembly** we are all living in the **eschatological dispersion**, and the reason for this dispersion is so that we might all be proclaiming (making known) the **eschatological good news** about Jesus Christ. The reason we're still dispersed among the nations is so that Yahweh's salvation might continue reaching—even as it has already reached—to the end of the earth; because the end of the earth is where we are. The end of the earth is always wherever we are. This is why, for us, there is no longer any "Jerusalem" or "Judea" or "Samaria."

On the one hand, the dispersion reminds us that we're called to live as those who are foreigners in a wicked and hostile world (1 Pet. 1:1). On the other hand, the dispersion reminds us (as we see here in Acts 8) of our calling to be salt and light in a lost and dying world. Jesus says to each one of us as His disciples:

- Matthew 5:13–16 — "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out to be trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

The Apostle Paul exhorts us:

- Philippians 2:14–15 — Do all things without grumbling or disputing, so that you will be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

The privilege that's been entrusted to us who are in *possession* of the good news is simply to do what that good news is always—by its very nature—calling us to do: Tell that good news to others. We're not called to finish something the apostles left unfinished, but we have been given the privilege of building upon their completed mission, proclaiming and spreading abroad, today, the same good news of the unfathomable riches of Christ—until He returns.