

Zechariah 3:7

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[0 : 0 0] Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me, declares the Lord Almighty. Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. These words of God recorded by the prophet Zechariah declare a solemn and a glorious truth, that God the Father so loved the world, that He struck His own Son, His only Son, Jesus, who willingly stood in our place to receive the blow that justice demanded. Jesus, the good shepherd, was struck and gave His life in the place of His sheep. But the words of God recorded by Zechariah also prophesy concerning the sheep.

We are told, as we have read and as we were considering just a week ago, that the sheep will be scattered. How was this aspect of the prophetic word fulfilled? Well, as we have noticed already and as we've read in Matthew's Gospel in chapter 26, Jesus very clearly and very explicitly identifies the manner in which this aspect of the prophecy finds fulfillment. And it is in the falling away of the disciples as Jesus is arrested there in Gethsemane.

But last week we just posed the question in a very fleeting manner, really, as to whether the prophetic word concerning scattered disciples finds its exhaustive fulfillment on that dark and somber night in Gethsemane. I think the honest answer is that it may have done. It may well be that the prophecy recorded in the book of Zechariah does find its conclusive and exhaustive fulfillment there in Gethsemane. But it may be that there is further fulfillment. And this is what I want to explore this evening. We touched on it last week, but I want to develop it a little further. This theme, if you wish, of how God scatters His people, there is a sense in which what we say, I hope, will be relevant and helpful regardless of whether we are persuaded that it is in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah. It may well be that it is. But even if it is not, the truths that we will be thinking about concerning how God scatters His people are helpful to notice and to learn from.

Now, we noticed last Sunday morning how Jesus, with equal certainty, prophesies not only the scattering of the disciples but also their subsequent restoration. For after Jesus is raised by the very one who struck Him down, He will, He informed His disciples, go ahead of the disciples into Galilee.

That's the language that Jesus Himself uses. I will go ahead of you into Galilee. And so, the restoration of the disciples is presented in a very particular context, a future encounter in Galilee. And we thought a little bit about, well, why Galilee? What was the significance of Galilee? And we did so by following the references to Galilee in Matthew's Gospel, and very particularly in the account of the resurrection. We noticed how the angel spoke to the women and gave them the task of informing the disciples that they were to go to Galilee, for there they would see Jesus. And then Jesus Himself repeats that same instruction to the women. And we noticed the curiosity, I suppose, of how though there is this very clear reference to Galilee, in actual fact it is in Jerusalem, where the disciples first meet Jesus. So, that kind of left you thinking, well, what's the significance of Galilee? And all became clear, all was revealed, or all is revealed, at the very end of the Gospel, where we find in chapter 28 and verse 16, then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.

[4 : 28] And what follows is the well-known words of the Great Commission, where the disciples are sent, scattered, if you wish, into all the world by Jesus. And as we suggested, in a manner of representing these scatterings, scattered by fear in Gethsemane and scattered by grace in Galilee. That's really taking us to where we got to a week ago. But I want to continue and to follow through on this idea of the disciples being scattered, because at this point, they haven't actually been scattered. Jesus says, you must go, but they haven't yet gone.

They aren't immediately scattered. This was a scattering with a time delay, as the disciples were, as is very clearly recorded in Luke's Gospel, instructed to stay in the city until they were clothed with power from on high. So, they were to go to all the nations, but not yet. They weren't yet equipped. They weren't yet spiritually equipped to go. And so, they had to remain in Jerusalem, and then at Pentecost, they would receive that empowering that they required that they might go into all the world. So, they're commanded to go. They're scattered, or the command to go is there, but it hasn't yet happened. Well, when does it happen? When does this scattering, decreed in eternity, and commanded in Galilee take place? And for that, we need to go to the book of Acts. And we've read two passages in Acts where the very same word is used, the very same verb, to scatter. The Greek verb is an interesting verb. It's the verb from where we have the English word diaspora. Well, indeed, the English verb disperse. This idea of the diaspora, especially we think of in terms of the Jewish nation, the Jewish diaspora. But of course, we can use it of any people who are scattered for whatever reason. Well, that's the Greek word that is used in Matthew's Gospel, and the one we re-encounter in Acts.

And I want to just think about the two occasions where we find it again. First of all, in Acts chapter 8, and reading from verse 1. I was pausing for a moment there because for some obscure reason I was in Mark's Gospel, and I wasn't seeing at all what I was looking for. But now that I'm in Acts, I do find what I'm looking for. So, in Acts chapter 8, the context is the death of Stephen.

Stephen, the martyr, this first martyr. And we know of Saul who was standing there giving approval to his death. And what happens as a result of that is a great persecution breaks out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

So, that which had been decreed, that which had been prophesied, if we believe that that is indeed what is included in the prophecy, certainly what had been commanded now actually takes place. And how different to the first scattering from Gethsemane, which was characterized by a guilty silence concerning Jesus? You know, when they were scattered at Gethsemane, they said nothing. The last name that they would have named would have been the name of Jesus, for this would have incurred them in such a great danger. And we know of Peter how he denied even knowing Jesus, this guilty silence. But now they are scattered, provoked, yes, in God's divine plan by this persecution. But as they are scattered, they don't go in fear. The persecution doesn't generate in them this paralyzing fear, not at all.

[8 : 43] For they go, and they go boldly. They're scattered boldly. And we're told in the passage that they go preaching the word, preaching the word, and proclaiming the Christ. So, these believers, these disciples, sent, scattered into Judea and Samaria, and very vocally announcing to all who will be willing to listen who Jesus is, who this Jesus is that they follow, who this Jesus is, what he has done, how he died on Calvary, how he rose again from the dead, and why, what is the significance of this, how those who hear must respond to this message. But the scattering of the disciples that begins there at the moment, this historic moment of the great persecution, is not a one-off event. The believers continue to be scattered. In chapter 11, we've read already how we have this process further described. Verse 19 of chapter 11 in Acts, Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from

Cyprus and Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. In chapter 8, they don't really get very far, Judea and Samaria, but now by chapter 11, they've extended further. The scattering continues, in this case, northwards, up to Antioch, Antioch, and indeed to other locations that are mentioned here in the passage. But Antioch is of particular interest to us, and it's of particular interest to us because we're told that in Antioch, some of those who had been scattered, these are Jewish believers, began for the first time to tell the good news to Greeks also. Indeed, it's interesting that the impression given, more than the impression given, what we're told is that the majority of the believers were telling the message only to Jews.

Now, if this is because they felt that that is what they should do, and that they oughtn't to tell others, whether they simply felt more comfortable doing that, let's not inquire in great detail. But the point is that some of them, and we're told that very clearly there, some of them began to tell the good news to Greeks also. It's becoming apparent, I think, that this scattering is no random phenomena, but rather a central plank in God's missionary enterprise. This is how God does mission. He scatters His people. Indeed, we can go beyond the book of Acts. It's true that the two references that we've quoted in Acts really refer to the the one action of scattering. Simply, the second passage describes how it had continued. But you might argue, well, yes, but that was a one-off. They were scattered, and now we're in different times. But it is interesting to notice how the language continues to be used at a much later date in the primitive church. If we go to 1 Peter 1 and verse 1, notice the manner in which Peter writes his letter and those whom he addresses.

We notice there in that first verse, Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ, and sprinkling by His blood. Grace and peace be yours in abundance." Here, Peter uses this picture of God's people as a scattered people, almost in the sense of that's the way it is. That's the way it is. That is what the church is. That is what God does. He scatters His people around the world, and clearly with a purpose, with a purpose that they would carry a message, that they would, as the first disciples did, proclaim the Christ. This idea then, or this picture that we're given of God scattering His people, what does it teach us? I want to very briefly highlight four lessons implicit in this intriguing picture of God scattering His people. And I imagine that others' lessons could also be drawn, but there's four that I want to share with you this evening. First of all, and first in order, but also first in priority, this picture of God scattering His people reminds us that mission is

God's work. We can't scatter ourselves. This very word, this Greek word, it can be used and was used of a farmer scattering his seed, where it is clear that in the absence of the farmer, the seed are quite incapable of reaching their destination. That's blindingly obvious. Seed don't scatter themselves.

[14 : 26] A farmer needs to scatter them. And so this language of God scattering His people and using whatever means He chooses. In the case of the persecution, He used the enemy of God's people as the means. But it is God who is behind the scenes. And He's scattering His people. So it is God who is at work.

Now that's not to say that we are without responsibility, but it is to recognize that God is the hands-on director of the missionary enterprise. So this is, I think, the first lesson that we can draw from this picture of believers being scattered. Mission is God's work. Before we do move on to a second lesson, it is worth reminding ourselves that though it is God's work, we do have a responsibility.

And what is our responsibility? Well, as we are scattered, we are to do what the disciples did. They preached the good news. They proclaimed the Christ. Or if we want to use the same picture of scattering. As God scatters us, we scatter the seed of the gospel. God scatters us that we would then scatter the seed, the good news concerning Jesus Christ. So this picture reminds us that mission is God's work.

But a second lesson that we can draw is that in understanding mission as God scattering His people provides us with a healthy counterbalance to what can be a modern obsession with carefully devised strategies for evangelism and mission. What is God's strategy? Well, He just scatters His people.

That's the way God does mission. He scatters His people. And in response to our demand for detail and roadmaps and, well, what are we going to do and where are we going to go and how are we going to do that?

[16 : 37] God simply commands us to go. Just go. Just go into all the world. That is God's strategy. He tells us to go. He scatters us to those places where He would have us be. Now, in identifying or recognizing that, this is not to suggest that mission is a random and chaotic enterprise. For God scatters purposefully.

He knows exactly where He sends each of us. You are where God wants you to be. He has brought you here. He has sent you from elsewhere. Whatever your own personal history. If you are a Christian and you find yourself in a given location, in a given activity, it is because God has sent you there.

So, it's not a random exercise. But nonetheless, it is helpful to not get too hit up with working out precise strategies that we might have and be reminded that this is God's strategy. He scatters His people to where He would have them go. A third lesson that we can draw, or truth that we can draw out from this picture of God scattering the disciples, is that the borders that we must cross as we are scattered are certainly geographic. That was true of the disciples very clearly. But they're not just geographic.

They're also cultural. And we know we could possibly use other words to describe the borders that we cross. But we'll stick with those two. Geographic and cultural. I stressed, as we were noticing, the manner in which this verb is found in Acts chapter 11. The detail that at this stage in the scattering, some of the believers, some of the Jewish believers, began for the first time to tell the Greeks also. So, what we find is that for these Jewish believers, that the challenge doesn't involve only crossing physical borders. And we shouldn't minimize just what a huge challenge that was. Here are men and women who, no doubt, were well set up in Jerusalem. It was their home. Their families were there. They had jobs there. They had work there. And then suddenly, because of the great persecution, they have to leave everything and go into nations that they'd never been to before. That was a huge challenge. Crossing physical borders and frontiers. But I wonder if, for many of them, that other border that they had to cross, that cultural border of engaging with Greeks, with Gentiles, and speaking to

Greeks of Messiah Jesus, of the promised Messiah. And this promised Messiah was for the Gentiles as well. I wonder if, for many of them, that was a much bigger challenge, a much more difficult frontier to cross.

[19 : 42] And yet they do so, because they've realized, they've captured that Jesus is not just for them. He is for everyone. And that, I think, is helpful for us. It may be the case that God will scatter us in a way that involves crossing physical, geographic frontiers. And there's no doubt in my own mind that that is something that God, of course, does continue to do. The age of crossing frontiers is by no means one that has passed. But there may be many of us whom God does not require to cross physical, geographic frontiers.

But we must cross other kinds of borders and frontiers, cultural ones, in engaging with those with whom we find it very difficult to engage, as we would proclaim, the good news concerning Jesus.

It may be, to give one or two examples, engaging with those in our own city who come from other nations, who adhere to other religions. It may be seeking to engage with and show love to those who are struggling with addictions of one kind or another. It may be the great challenge and great difficulty for us of trying to engage with and to connect with an up-and-coming, largely unchurched generation that we feel we simply can't connect with almost at any level. How would I even begin to speak to such a person? What would I say? And even less so, to try and tell them about Jesus, well, it just seems such a huge difficulty. How could I possibly do that? But as God scatters us, He would have us cross frontiers and borders to go to places that we are very uncomfortable in, not just physical places, but engage with those who we have great difficulty in engaging with. Maybe just to give a very concrete example of that. This morning, well, in the intimation sheet, for those of most of you will have read it in the morning, but any who have received it this evening, I make reference to this opportunity that has presented itself of a large group of Chinese lecturers who are coming to spend six months at Aberdeen University doing an English course. And we've been given the opportunity of showing hospitality to them just to take the opportunity to explain. It doesn't involve accommodation. One or two folks ask me, will they be staying with me? No, it doesn't involve that, so don't let that put you off or let that be an obstacle. But even showing hospitality to those who come from a different country, for some it may seem a bit scary. You know, what would I say? You know, how would we get on? Would it be awkward? Would I find that difficult? Well, as God scatters us, it doesn't always mean having to go to China. In God's economy, He's chosen to scatter the world and bring them here. And I might say in that connection, maybe we should be thankful that

God has seen fit to bring, in this case, these Chinese friends, or soon to bring them to our own doorstep. And it might be, who am I to say this, but it might be that if we fail to grasp the opportunity, He may choose to send us to China if we're not prepared to meet with those who come to our front door.

So, this picture of God scattering His people across frontiers isn't just about physical frontiers, though it is about physical frontiers. Let's not forget that that is an integral part of it, but it's also about other kinds of frontiers and borders that we have to cross in telling people the good news about Jesus Christ. But there's a final thing, a fourth thing that I want to close with, as we think about this picture of God scattering His people. And it is this, that the picture of a scattered people reminds us that the scattering is a means to an end. It is not the end of the story.

[24 : 10] We come back to the picture of the farmer. Just as the farmer scatters his seed in the expectation of a harvest, so God scatters His people with the intention that they would be the means for the ingathering of His people the world over. The farmer who scatters his seed doesn't think that that's job done and he can simply forget about what he's done. No, he does it with an end in mind, that in at the time that would be expected there would be a harvest. And so God, He scatters His people, and He scatters us with that end in mind that we would gather in His spiritual harvest of men and women from all over the world, from every tribe and people and nation and language.

In this connection, it's listening, or it's intriguing rather, to listen to the testimony of the high priest Caiaphas concerning the purpose of the coming of Jesus as recorded for us in John's Gospel. Now, Caiaphas was no friend of the Gospel, and yet, very intriguingly, he is used of God to prophesy concerning Jesus and the purpose of Jesus' coming. Now, I'll just read one part of what is recorded for us in John's Gospel and in chapter 11. And there it says, of Caiaphas and of his prophecy, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, but also for the scattered people of God, God, to bring them together and make them one. From that unlikely source, we have this truth reinforced, that we are scattered, if you wish, for the scattered, that all might be brought together and made one.

And so, as we close, I close by simply posing questions to you and to myself. What about you? Where is God scattering you? Because be assured that Jesus continues to scatter his people, and he will continue to scatter us until that day when all the scattered people of God are brought together and made one. And on that day he will return. Let us pray.