

Scattered Abroad Yet Gathered in God's Purpose

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Main Text

John 7:35
Acts 2:5–11
Acts 7:42–43
James 1:1
1 Peter 1:1

When you read Jews in your Bible the real name is Israelites. There is a BIG difference; a genetic difference. The Israelites of the Bible are the Caucasian people of today. Even the word Caucasian is not used today, but just the plain generic word "white." The reason why is that people might discover the origin of word "Caucasian" and discover their true identity. When our ancestors left their captivity from Assyria and Babylon they left north and headed over the Caucasian Mountains.

There have been previous posts on this website, where the word Jew was not changed. Keep this in mind when you read these posts (there are only a few of them). Sorry for the oversight.

Sermon Theme

By the New Testament period, many Israelites were still living scattered among the nations. Yet God was not finished with His dispersed people. The scattering that had once spoken of judgment became, in God's providence, a stage for the gospel to be heard across many lands. The Lord knew the scattered, spoke to the scattered, saved from among the scattered, and called them to live as strangers and pilgrims with hope in Him.

Introduction

The Old Testament tells us how Israel and Judah were scattered.

Assyria carried away the Northern Kingdom.

Babylon carried away Judah.

Jerusalem was destroyed.

The temple was burned.

The people were dispersed among the nations.

Some returned to the land, but many remained scattered abroad.

By the time we come to the New Testament, the Israelites are not all living in one place. Many are in Jerusalem and Judea, but many others are living throughout the Roman world and beyond. They are in foreign cities, foreign provinces, and foreign cultures. They are Israelites by covenant heritage, but they live among Gentiles.

That is why, in John 7:35, when the people hear Jesus speak of going somewhere they cannot come, they say:

John 7:35

“Whither will he go, that we shall not find him? will he go unto the dispersed among the Gentiles, and teach the Gentiles?”

They knew there were dispersed Israelites among the Gentiles. They knew there were Jewish communities outside the land. The dispersion was still a living reality.

But the New Testament does something powerful with that reality. It shows that God is still working among the scattered. It shows devout Israelites from many nations gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost. It shows Stephen remembering Israel’s captivity beyond Babylon. It shows James writing “to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” It shows Peter writing to “strangers scattered” across several provinces.

The message is clear: scattered does not mean forgotten.

God knows His people wherever they are.
God can speak to His people wherever they dwell.
God can gather worshipers from many lands.
God can turn dispersion into witness.
God can give hope to strangers and pilgrims.

The scattered people are still under the eye of God.

1. The Dispersion Was Still Known in the Days of Jesus

John 7:35 says:

John 7:35

“Then said the Israelites among themselves, Whither will he go, that we shall not find him? will he go unto the dispersed among the Gentiles, and teach the Gentiles?”

Jesus had said:

John 7:34

“Ye shall seek me, and shall not find me: and where I am, thither ye cannot come.”

The people misunderstood Him. They wondered where He could go that they could not find Him. Then they asked whether He would go to “the dispersed among the Gentiles.”

This phrase points to the Israelites’ dispersion. Israelites were living among Gentile nations, scattered outside the land of Israel. These were not imaginary people. The dispersion was well known.

But notice the question also says, “and teach the Gentiles?”

Even in their misunderstanding, they speak words that point toward something larger in God’s plan. Jesus’ mission would indeed reach beyond the borders of Judea. The gospel would go to Israelites first, but also to Gentiles. The scattered Israelites among the nations would become part of the pathway by which the message of Christ spread through the world.

At this point in John 7, the people do not understand Jesus. They are confused. Yet their question reminds us that God's redemptive plan was bigger than one city, one province, or one nation's border.

The dispersion was a result of judgment in history, but God could use even that history for a larger purpose.

The scattered synagogues, scattered families, and scattered Israelites communities meant that when the gospel began to spread, there were already people in many places who knew the Scriptures, looked for the promises, and had some knowledge of the God of Israel.

God can work through what looks like loss.

What men call dispersion, God can turn into preparation.

2. Pentecost Gathered Devout Israelites From Many Nations

Acts 2:5 says:

Acts 2:5

"And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Israelites, devout men, out of every nation under heaven."

This is a mighty verse.

At Pentecost, Jerusalem was filled with Israelites from many nations. They were devout men. They had come from far places. The dispersion had spread them abroad, but the feast had gathered them back to Jerusalem.

Acts 2:6 says:

Acts 2:6

"Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language."

The Holy Ghost was poured out. The disciples spoke. The multitude heard. And every man heard in his own language.

This is a reversal of confusion and a sign of gospel expansion.

At Babel, languages had been confused and people scattered. At Pentecost, scattered peoples hear the wonderful works of God in their own tongues. God did not erase their languages. He used their languages to make His message known.

Acts 2:8 says:

Acts 2:8

"And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?"

These Israelites were connected to Jerusalem, but many had been born elsewhere. They had mother tongues from distant lands. They were Israelites, yet their earthly lives had been shaped by dispersion.

Then Acts lists the places.

Acts 2:9–11 says:

Acts 2:9–11

“Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Israelites and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.”

This is a picture of scattered Israel gathered to hear.

Parthians heard.

Medes heard.

Elamites heard.

Dwellers in Mesopotamia heard.

Those from Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Crete, and Arabia heard.

They heard “the wonderful works of God.”

This shows us that God had not forgotten the dispersed. He had appointed a day when Israelites from many nations would be present in Jerusalem to hear the gospel proclaimed in power.

What looked like scattered history became a gathered audience.

The dispersion had sent Israelites into many lands. Pentecost brought representatives of many lands back to Jerusalem. The gospel was then heard by men who could carry that testimony back to the places where they lived.

God was turning scattering into witness.

3. God Speaks in Languages People Understand

Acts 2:11 says:

Acts 2:11

“...we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.”

This is one of the great mercies of Pentecost.

God did not require all the scattered hearers to abandon their languages before hearing His works. He caused His works to be declared in their tongues.

The message was one, but the languages were many.

This teaches us something about the heart of God. The Lord is not limited to one earthly language. He is able to make His truth known to people from every place. His Word can travel. His gospel can be proclaimed in the tongues of the nations.

The scattered Israelites heard in languages tied to their birthplaces. Their dispersion had affected their speech, culture, and daily life. Yet God met them there.

This is a comfort.

A person may be far from the land of his fathers, but God can speak to him.

A person may live among Gentiles, but God can reach him.

A person may have grown up in a foreign tongue, but God can declare His works in words he understands.

The wonder of Pentecost is not merely that the disciples spoke in tongues. The wonder is that the scattered heard the wonderful works of God.

The message of Christ was not trapped in one small circle. It was ready to go to the nations.

4. Stephen Remembered the Earlier Captivity

Acts 7:42–43 says:

Acts 7:42–43

“Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets...

Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan... and I will carry you away beyond Babylon.”

Stephen, preaching before the council, reminded Israel of their long history of rebellion.

He did not flatter them. He did not pretend that the captivity had been an accident. He spoke plainly of idolatry and judgment. He said God gave them up, and he quoted the warning that they would be carried away beyond Babylon.

This is important because the New Testament does not erase the Old Testament lesson.

Israel’s scattering and captivity were tied to sin. The dispersion was not merely a sociological fact. It had a spiritual history behind it.

Stephen’s sermon is a warning: a people can have sacred history and still resist God. They can remember Moses and yet reject the Prophet like unto Moses. They can honor the temple and yet miss the Lord of the temple. They can claim the fathers and yet resist the Holy Ghost.

Acts 7:51 says:

Acts 7:51

“Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost...”

Stephen teaches us that the deeper problem was not location but heart. Israel’s fathers had resisted God in the wilderness. Later generations resisted the prophets. Stephen’s hearers were resisting the testimony of Christ.

The lesson of scattering must not be reduced to geography. The Lord is after the heart.

A person can be in Jerusalem and still be far from God.

A person can be among the dispersed and still be near by faith.

A person can stand near the temple and still resist the Holy Ghost.

A person can live in a foreign land and still receive the Word.

Stephen reminds us that the real danger is not being scattered from a place. The real danger is being hardened against God.

5. James Wrote to the Twelve Tribes Scattered Abroad

James 1:1 says:

James 1:1

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.”

James writes “to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.”

This greeting carries the whole history of Israel’s dispersion into the life of the early church. James is writing as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” He addresses scattered Israelitesish believers, or Israelitesish communities with special relevance to believers in Christ, under the language of the twelve tribes.

They are scattered, but they are addressed.

They are dispersed, but they are not ignored.

They are outside one central place, but they still receive apostolic instruction.

James does not say, “Because you are scattered, you have no responsibility.” He does not say, “Because life is hard in dispersion, holiness no longer matters.” Instead, he writes a deeply practical letter about trials, wisdom, temptation, hearing and doing the Word, bridling the tongue, caring for the poor, avoiding partiality, living by faith, and waiting patiently for the coming of the Lord.

This teaches us that scattered people still need sanctification.

James 1:2 says:

James 1:2

“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations.”

Scattered believers face trials. They are not exempt from pressure. But James tells them that trials can work patience.

James 1:3–4 says:

James 1:3–4

“Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.
But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”

The scattered are not forgotten; they are being formed.

Their trials are not meaningless. Their dispersion is not outside God’s care. God can work patience, maturity, wisdom, and endurance in people living far from home.

James also tells them:

James 1:22

“But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”

This is vital. The scattered must not only remember the Word. They must do it.

Israel’s earlier scattering came because the people refused God’s voice. James now writes to scattered people and tells them to receive and obey the implanted Word. The answer to scattering is not merely memory. It is obedient faith.

6. Scattered Believers Must Ask God for Wisdom

James 1:5 says:

James 1:5

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”

Scattered people need wisdom.

They live among pressures. They face temptations. They may be poor, mistreated, marginalized, and tested. They need to know how to walk faithfully in a complicated world.

James says, “Let him ask of God.”

That is a beautiful word to the dispersed. Even if they are scattered abroad, they can ask God. They may not be gathered in one city, but they can pray. They may be far from Jerusalem, but they are not far from the throne of grace.

The Lord gives wisdom liberally.

This connects to the whole theme of dispersion. When God’s people are scattered, they must not live by fear, pride, or worldliness. They must ask God for wisdom and walk in obedience.

A scattered believer needs wisdom to endure trials.

A scattered family needs wisdom to remain faithful.

A scattered church needs wisdom to witness among strangers.
A scattered people need wisdom to keep their identity in God.

James gives them that call: ask God.

7. Peter Wrote to Strangers Scattered

1 Peter 1:1 says:

1 Peter 1:1

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.”

Peter also writes to scattered people.

He calls them “strangers scattered.” This phrase carries both physical and spiritual meaning. These believers are living in various provinces, but they are also strangers in the world because they belong to God.

Pontus.

Galatia.

Cappadocia.

Asia.

Bithynia.

These are real places. The scattered are not abstract. They live in provinces, cities, homes, workplaces, and communities where they must follow Christ under pressure.

Peter writes not to make them comfortable in the world, but to strengthen their hope.

1 Peter 1:2 says they are:

1 Peter 1:2

“Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...”

That is a powerful comfort.

They are scattered, but elect.

They are strangers, but known.

They are dispersed, but chosen according to God’s foreknowledge.

They may be far from one another, but they are sanctified by the Spirit unto obedience.

Peter lifts their eyes from their scattered condition to God’s eternal purpose.

Their identity is not determined by geography. It is determined by God.

8. The Scattered Have a Living Hope

1 Peter 1:3 says:

1 Peter 1:3

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope...”

Peter writes to suffering, scattered strangers, and he begins with blessing.

“Blessed be God.”

Why?

Because God has begotten them again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

The scattered believer’s hope is not merely return to an earthly land. It is resurrection hope. It is living hope. It is hope rooted in Christ.

1 Peter 1:4 says:

1 Peter 1:4

“To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you.”

This is a mighty contrast.

Earthly inheritances can be lost. Israel and Judah knew that painfully. The land had been invaded. Cities had been burned. Crowns had been cast down. Captivity had come.

But Peter speaks of an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, unfading, reserved in heaven.

The scattered strangers may not feel secure in the world, but their inheritance is secure in heaven.

This is the Christian hope in dispersion.

The world may treat believers as strangers. Circumstances may scatter them. Persecution may pressure them. But no empire can burn this inheritance. No exile can remove it. No enemy can defile it. No time can cause it to fade.

The scattered have a living hope in the risen Christ.

9. The Scattered Are Kept by the Power of God

1 Peter 1:5 says:

1 Peter 1:5

“Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Peter tells the scattered believers that they are kept.

This is the comfort they need.

They are scattered through provinces, but kept by God.

They are strangers in the world, but kept by God.

They face trials, but kept by God.

They may be misunderstood, but kept by God.

They may suffer, but kept by God.

The keeping power of God is greater than the scattering power of the world.

This connects beautifully to the Old Testament promise:

Jeremiah 31:10

“He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock.”

Peter writes to scattered strangers and tells them they are kept by the power of God.

The Shepherd still keeps His own.

This does not mean they will never suffer. Peter makes it clear that they may be in heaviness through manifold temptations. But their faith is being tried and purified.

1 Peter 1:7 says:

1 Peter 1:7

“That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth...”

The scattered life can be a tested life, but tested faith is precious before God.

10. Scattered Believers Must Live as Pilgrims

Peter later says:

1 Peter 2:11

“Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.”

This fits the opening address: “strangers scattered.”

The scattered believer must remember that this world is not his final home. He must live as a pilgrim. He must abstain from fleshly lusts. He must not become like the world simply because he lives among the nations.

This was always the danger in dispersion: assimilation, compromise, forgetfulness, and fear.

But Peter calls them to holiness.

1 Peter 1:15–16 says:

1 Peter 1:15–16

“But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.”

Scattered people must be holy people.

They may live in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, or Bithynia, but they belong to God. They may be surrounded by Gentile customs, but they are called to holy conduct. They may be strangers in society, but they are not strangers to God.

This is one of the New Testament’s great lessons about dispersion: God’s people must carry holiness into every place where they are scattered.

11. The Dispersion Became a Bridge for the Gospel

When we put these passages together, we see something remarkable.

John 7 mentions the dispersed among the Gentiles.

Acts 2 shows Israelites from many nations hearing the wonderful works of God.

Acts 7 remembers the judgment of being carried beyond Babylon.

James writes to the twelve tribes scattered abroad.

Peter writes to strangers scattered throughout several provinces.

The scattering remains real, but God is working through it.

At Pentecost, Israelites from many nations hear the gospel. Later, as believers spread, the message of Christ travels through networks of synagogues, families, travelers, merchants, and communities.

The dispersion became part of the road system of gospel witness.

God did not cause sin in order to do good, but He is sovereign enough to bring good even out of the consequences of sin. Israel’s scattering was judgment. But God, in mercy and wisdom, used the scattered condition to place witnesses and hearers throughout the nations.

This is the providence of God.

What was meant as shame can become a stage for testimony.

What was born in judgment can become an avenue of mercy.

What looked like dispersion can become distribution.

What looked like weakness can become witness.

The gospel of Christ is not bound to one land.

12. Scattered Does Not Mean Silent

The Israelites at Pentecost heard and then could carry testimony home. James wrote to scattered tribes with instruction. Peter wrote to scattered strangers with hope. The scattered were not silent objects of history; they were called to live, believe, obey, endure, and witness.

God's people should never say, "Because I am scattered, I have no purpose."

A believer in a far place still has purpose.
A family in a strange land still has purpose.
A church under pressure still has purpose.
A suffering saint still has purpose.
A stranger and pilgrim still has purpose.

God can use scattered people.

He used Esther in Persia.
He used Daniel in Babylon.
He used Ezekiel among captives.
He used Israelites from many nations at Pentecost.
He wrote through James to the scattered.
He wrote through Peter to strangers scattered.

The scattered may be small in the eyes of the world, but they are not useless in the hand of God.

13. Scattered People Need the Word of God

James and Peter both show that scattered believers need teaching.

James gives practical wisdom.
Peter gives living hope.
Stephen gives warning from history.
Acts shows the gospel proclaimed in many tongues.
John shows the reality of Israelites dispersed among Gentiles.

The scattered cannot live by memory alone. They need the living Word. They need doctrine, correction, encouragement, warning, and hope.

James tells them to be doers of the Word.
Peter tells them to hope to the end.
Stephen tells them not to resist the Holy Ghost.
Acts tells them the wonderful works of God.
John points to Christ, whose words they misunderstood but whose mission would reach far beyond them.

This is important for the church today. God's people may be spread across many places, cultures, and situations, but the Word must go with them. The Word keeps identity. The Word guards holiness. The Word strengthens hope. The Word corrects error. The Word turns strangers into faithful witnesses.

A scattered people without the Word will drift. A scattered people under the Word can endure.

14. Scattered People Must Not Resist the Holy Ghost

Stephen's sermon is the warning in this collection.

Acts 7:51 says:

Acts 7:51

"Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye."

The danger is not only being scattered. The danger is resisting God.

The fathers resisted in earlier generations. Stephen's hearers resisted in his day. Every generation faces the same question: will we hear the Lord?

The people in Acts 2 heard and were pricked in their heart. They asked what they should do. Many received the word and were baptized.

Acts 2:41 says:

Acts 2:41

"Then they that gladly received his word were baptized..."

That is the right response: gladly receive the Word.

Acts 7 shows another response: resistance.

So the scattered must choose. Will they receive the Word or resist the Spirit? Will they obey or harden? Will they repent or repeat the sins of their fathers?

The dispersion itself is not the final issue. The heart before God is the issue.

15. The Scattered Are Called to Hope in Christ

The Old Testament hope included return, restoration, gathering, and the promises of God to Israel. The New Testament reveals the central hope in Christ.

Peter writes to scattered strangers and immediately speaks of Jesus Christ, His resurrection, living hope, heavenly inheritance, and salvation ready to be revealed.

The scattered believer is not merely waiting for better earthly circumstances. He is waiting for the revelation of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 1:13 says:

1 Peter 1:13

"Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end..."

Hope to the end.

This is the call to every scattered saint.

Do not let exile steal your hope.

Do not let being a stranger make you forget your inheritance.

Do not let suffering make you doubt God's keeping power.

Do not let the nations around you shape your identity more than Christ does.

Do not live as though this world is your final home.

Hope to the end.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ gives scattered believers a hope that no empire can destroy.

16. Lessons From the New Testament References to Dispersion

First, the Israelites' dispersion was still a known reality in the days of Jesus.

John 7:35 speaks of "the dispersed among the Gentiles."

Second, God gathered Israelites from many nations to hear the gospel at Pentecost.

Acts 2 shows devout Israelites from many lands hearing the wonderful works of God.

Third, God can speak to scattered people in languages they understand.

At Pentecost, every man heard in his own tongue.

Fourth, scattering must still be understood in light of sin and warning.

Stephen remembered Israel being carried away beyond Babylon because of idolatry.

Fifth, scattered people still need instruction.

James writes to the twelve tribes scattered abroad.

Sixth, scattered people must be doers of the Word.

James does not excuse disobedience because of difficult circumstances.

Seventh, scattered believers are strangers but chosen.

Peter writes to strangers scattered, yet calls them elect according to the foreknowledge of God.

Eighth, scattered believers have a living hope.

Their hope rests in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Ninth, scattered believers are kept by God's power.

The world may scatter, but God keeps.

Tenth, scattered people can become witnesses.

God can turn dispersion into gospel opportunity.

Closing Exhortation

By the New Testament, the Israelites were still scattered among the nations.

Some were in Jerusalem.

Some were in Pontus.

Some were in Cappadocia.

Some were in Asia.

Some were in Rome.

Some were in Egypt, Libya, Arabia, and beyond.

Some were devout men gathered at Pentecost.

Some were strangers scattered across provinces.

Some were hearing the gospel in their own tongues.

Some were being warned not to resist the Holy Ghost.

Some were receiving letters of instruction and hope.

Scattered, but not forgotten.

The Lord knew them.

The Lord spoke to them.

The Lord gathered many to Jerusalem at Pentecost.

The Lord sent His Word to them through His servants.

The Lord gave them living hope in Christ.

The Lord called them to holiness as strangers and pilgrims.

So let every scattered heart hear this: your location does not hide you from God.

You may be far from familiar places, but you are not far from His knowledge.

You may feel like a stranger, but you can be elect according to His foreknowledge.

You may be under trial, but you can be kept by His power.

You may be among many nations, but you can still hear the wonderful works of God.

You may live in a strange land, but you can still live holy before the Lord.

The world may call God's people scattered.

God calls them known, chosen, instructed, kept, and filled with hope.

John 7 reminds us the dispersion was real.

Acts 2 shows the scattered hearing the gospel.

Acts 7 warns us not to resist the Spirit.

James calls the scattered to live the Word.

Peter calls the scattered to hope in Christ.

And the message is this:

Do not let scattering become forgetfulness.
Do not let trial become bitterness.
Do not let foreign surroundings become compromise.
Do not let suffering silence your praise.
Do not resist the Holy Ghost.
Receive the Word.
Do the Word.
Live as strangers and pilgrims.
Hope to the end.

The God who knew the dispersed among the Gentiles still knows His people today.

And the risen Christ gives the scattered a living hope.

Closing Prayer

Lord God, You know Your people wherever they are scattered. You gathered devout Israelites from many nations at Pentecost and caused them to hear Your wonderful works. You warned through Stephen, instructed through James, and comforted scattered strangers through Peter. Help us to receive Your Word and not resist Your Spirit. Teach us to live as strangers and pilgrims with holy conduct and living hope. Keep us by Your power, strengthen us in trials, and use us as witnesses wherever You have placed us. In Jesus' name, Amen.