

# The Conversion of the Samaritans

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Welcome here for this Sunday, September 15th. My name is Kent Dixon, and it's my joy to be the pastor here. We're continuing in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World.

Acts turns out to be a very long book, so we're going through it together. Through this series, we're exploring in depth the New Testament book of Acts, which is important in the history of the church, and I believe it's relevant to us now.

So our focus passage this morning is Acts 8, verses 4 to 13. So if you want to grab your Bible, grab a Bible from the pew in front of you, if you are so inclined.

Acts 8, verses 4 to 13, and I'll read it for us as well. Let's hear that now. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there.

When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

[ 1 : 1 0 ] So there was great joy in that city. Now for some time, a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in that city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, This man is rightly called the great power of God.

They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. As we've seen so far, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ wasn't without less than a positive reaction from many people who heard it.

And we've even recognized the fact that many people directly and focused their efforts to stop it. Stop that news from being shared and spread.

As we learned through Acts 4, 1-3, some people who heard it took issue specifically with the message of Christ's resurrection that was conveyed in this message.

[ 2 : 2 8 ] In Acts 4-7, we learned how the persecution of the early church became progressively worse, right? We've seen that scale slide further and further into the extreme.

And as we considered last week, Stephen's death and Saul's targeted and relentless persecution of the church caused many followers of Jesus to leave that region because of the persecution.

But, here's something important to note, as the Christians were scattered, what went with them? The gospel. To me, that's God's amazing irony, right?

Scattering his people was part of accomplishing his plan again. Our sermon this morning is titled, The Conversion of the Samaritans.

As we've heard in our passage this morning, the followers of Jesus went everywhere. And they preached the word wherever they went, Scripture tells us. We learned right away that a man named Philip was part of this group.

[ 3 : 3 1 ] And you may remember that this was one of, Philip was, one of the selected seven. You may remember that sermon from several weeks ago. The people who were appointed to look after parts of the leadership of the early church, if you remember that story.

Philip's work in spreading the gospel involved both the Samaritan people and the Ethiopian eunuch. And that's a story we'll hear in a few weeks. So, before we talk about their conversion, I believe it's helpful to have some context.

Don't read ahead. Some context for the background of the Samaritan people. Everybody's eyes go right to the slide. So, stay with me. Stay with me. So, you can read more about this.

Read more about the context for how we get to the Samaritan people in the book of 2 Kings in the Old Testament. So, there's your light reading for this afternoon. Get home, have your grilled cheese sandwich, and open 2 Kings.

Israel had been divided into three main regions. Galilee in the north, Samaria in the middle, and then Judea in the south. And the city of Samaria, located conveniently in the Samaritan region, had been the capital of the northern kingdom in the days of the divided kingdom.

[ 4 : 50 ] So, before it was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC. And that's where 2 Kings comes in. During that war, the Assyrian king took many captives.

And he left only the poorest people in the land and resettled the land with foreigners. And this is what conquerors tended to do. They would take over a region of land.

They would push out all the people who belonged there and welcome in whoever, whomever, to repopulate the land and essentially reboot it and take it away from the people who had lived there. So, these foreigners that were invited into the land intermarried with the Jews who were left there. And so, this mixed race of people became known as the Samaritans.

The Samaritans were considered, now this is terminology that no one loves, I certainly don't, but this is the reality for the Jewish people at the time.

[ 5 : 53 ] The Samaritans to them were half-breed people. The pure, quote-unquote, Jews at the time in the southern kingdom of Judea, there was an intense hatred between these two groups, between the Jews and the Samaritans.

And you can see it throughout the New Testament, when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman by the well. What's the reaction? People don't like it because of who she was, because of the people who she was from.

But as we know, Jesus himself went into Samaria. He commanded his followers, in fact, to spread the gospel there. He didn't say, okay, spread the gospel everywhere except Samaria, because, hmm, Jesus didn't say that.

He said, go there specifically. So, we talked about Philip. What was his ministry like in Samaria? Well, we learned from our passage this morning that the people listened to Philip.

They listened to him as he preached the truth of Jesus to them. And Scripture tells us they listened intently to him. It was what Philip had said and the miracles that he performed, casting out demons and healing people who had been paralyzed, that drew people to pay attention to him.

[ 7 : 13 ] So, there's a combination of the message and the action come together to draw people's attention. And during that time, our passage from this morning tells us, and maybe you remember, there was great joy in that city.

There was a sense of God's spirit at work. And it's also interesting to recognize that the attention of the people, in fact, had turned. We hear that in Scripture as well.

They had previously followed and listened to a man named Simon. No, not that Simon, for people who are in the New Testament looking at the chosen. Not that Simon, but Simon the sorcerer.

And the passage this morning tells us he had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. So, again, we only see half of it, right? Simon didn't necessarily have a good message that he was telling, but he had flashy things that were going on, right?

He was doing things that drew people's attention. So, he had half of it, but here comes Philip with both parts, right? So, Simon had also been a bit of a self-promoter, we get, because he boasted that he was someone great.

[ 8 : 25 ] Do you find that attracts you to someone else when you're in a conversation or you're in a relationship, and your conversation, your interaction with them, largely focuses around how great they are?

Isn't that fun? Have you ever had that kind of interaction with someone? Let me, oh, enough about you, let's talk about me, right? It's not great, and it's not really, it doesn't build relationship.

Let's put it that way. So, we can say what we want about the Samaritans, but they were at least consistent. They recognized power and authority, and they seemed to be captivated by impressive things, right?

They saw action, as I talked about. They saw these things happening, and they were impressed. Seems to be human nature often, doesn't it? We're impressed by shiny things.

We're impressed by not necessarily always words or a message, but action. We're attractional people in lots of ways, and that's okay.

[ 9 : 31 ] But it was Philip's message that we learned that affected them the most, and that they believed what he had to say. So, what was Philip's message?

He preached about two main things. He preached about the kingdom of God, and he preached about the name of Jesus Christ. And the response was dramatic.

People seemed eager to believe what he said. And then people, both men and women, Scripture tells us, wanted to be baptized. This message was inspirational.

The response was dramatic. Simon the sorcerer, we read, also believed in Simon's message and was baptized. While we're not sure if he became involved in the ministry, we don't learn about that, Simon was definitely amazed by everything that he saw and heard.

And he followed Philip, we learn. So, it's important for us to recognize that these are significant events. Because, why? Have you ever thought about this before?

[ 10 : 37 ] Maybe you won't. Maybe you haven't, but now you will. Well, these events mark the first time that the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached to non-Jewish people.

It's significant, right? This gospel that began as a message to the Jews, Jesus said, go to all the world and preach the gospel. This was the beginning of that.

So, let's dig into the conversion of the Samaritans a little bit more. Our passage this morning says that Philip proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.

So, we know that Philip must have preached a gospel message of some kind, right? But we don't really have any detail. Well, this passage in Acts doesn't say, here's what Philip said, here's his point number one, here's his intro, here's point number one, point number two, he had no slides.

Point number three, and his conclusion, wrapped everything up and summarized it nicely. It doesn't say anything like that. Nothing. So, but it would have included some sort of a gospel message. And it would have included a message of Jesus and his ministry.

[ 11 : 45 ] It would have talked about who Jesus was, that he was the Messiah, what he had done, and that then, by implication, Philip and others who were preaching the gospel of Christ came out of that.

So, it would have talked about Jesus' identity as the Son of God. It would have also, very likely, given the detail of his death and his resurrection. So, this would have largely been the same things that Peter preached about Christ in Acts chapter 2 and 3.

Peter preached a very specific, very clear gospel message. And so, Philip would have learned from that and passed it on as well. So, what would Philip have been saying about the kingdom of God? That's a question, right? When we hear that phrase, the kingdom of God, do we know what it means? Do we have some idea? Do we have no idea? Well, John and Jesus and the apostles had earlier taught that the kingdom was a few things.

Was at hand, they said often. That it was present. This is highlighted many times in the book of Matthew. This sense that the kingdom of God is at hand.

[ 12 : 58 ] Later, Paul and John both wrote in Colossians and Revelation about the kingdom as being present, being here. It's not a future thing. It is a now thing.

We can definitely feel confident in landing on the expression, kingdom of God, literally meaning the reign of God. God's sovereignty over all creation.

That's what the kingdom of God means. So, it's likely that Philip spoke of the rule and reign of God as being present, living and active, and probably specifically in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, Jesus' ministry, Jesus' coming, Jesus' death and resurrection was a representation of the kingdom of God being present. So, what might have some of the things been that Philip said concerning, as Scripture says, the name of Jesus Christ?

Because our passage this morning says that was another factor of what he was preaching about. So, this would have likely included a message that both repentance from and remission of sins were now being proclaimed.

[ 14 : 05 ] They were available solely in and through the name of Jesus Christ. Christ. That's what Philip proclaiming the name of Jesus Christ likely would have meant.

In Mark 16, 15 and 16, Jesus says, Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.

See the progression there? Believes, baptized, saved. But whoever does not believe, Jesus said, is condemned. So, proclaiming the repentance and remission of sins was something that Jesus commended of his followers.

And so, we see the apostles obeying him and obeying his call, his commission to them to preach that message. So, how did the Samaritans respond to this message?

Remember, they were changed, right? They turned their attention from Simon and his bluster and show to this message of Philip that was different.

[15:14] So, the fact that they listened to what Philip had to say implies that they were two things, teachable and also obedient. Right? Someone who believes one way and is not open to being taught, not open to being shown a different understanding of something, is closed.

They're not necessarily obedient. They're not open to learning something different. But more than that, the Samaritans believed what they heard. Then they acted on what they heard.

And they were baptized. So, just like Peter, Philip was committed to the Lord's commission. We talked about the apostles being committed to the commission. And he sought to fulfill that.

He was acting on what he was told to do. And so, for the Samaritans who followed and acted on Philip was saying then, their obedience included being baptized.

So, we can see how the Samaritan people responded. But what about Simon? Right? Everybody, lots of people read this section of Scripture and think, oh, he's a sorcerer.

[16:20] Well, what does that mean? And was he into the occult? And wasn't he, you know, was he possessed? And, you know, we spin off into all these things. That's not necessarily important. We want to focus in a little tighter.

So, we see how the Samaritan people responded. But what about Simon? We've heard about his seemingly earnest and immediate response to Philip. Philip, he heard this message of Jesus Christ and he responded.

But lots of people say, well, was he truly converted? Is that up to us? I don't think it is. Many people who have considered Simon's story tend to deny or question whether his conversion was actually genuine.

Whether it was actually heartfelt. Well, why? Largely because of what happened with him after. And we'll get there in the weeks ahead. But despite some people questioning it, Luke makes it clear in his writing that Simon also believed, he says.

It definitely seems that Simon was exposed to exactly the same message and teaching as other people. And he seems to have believed in the same way that other people did, at least initially.

[17:32] His faith seems to have certainly been as real as anyone else. I don't think there's anything in Scripture that says otherwise. But there's so many different views on Simon's story from outside the Bible, from scholars and things.

The indication of Scripture, though, is that his conversion was real. There's nothing in there that says otherwise. And Simon also serves as an example, in my mind, of how someone who has followed Jesus and lost their way, we'll see that coming, can also and always be restored.

We'll see that again in the weeks ahead. When a Christian sins, we don't need to be baptized again, right? You don't need to have your card punched again.

Again, we're given and told clearly that we repent. We pray. We confess our sins to Jesus. And just like anyone who doesn't follow Jesus, Christians can still be overtaken by sin.

But we can be forgiven and restored through a relationship with Christ. So this morning, we've been given an amazing model, I think, of what conversion looks like.

[18:53] It's that word that we often use, conversion. But it's a lot simpler and more straightforward than most people think. If you've ever heard Billy Graham explain the gospel and explain what salvation is all about, very compact, very simple.

And I've heard lots of people over the years say, oh, Billy Graham oversimplified. Well, really? I think we overcomplicated. Someone said I agree.

But did Jesus make it complicated? No. Why do we make it complicated? Good question. I think in our minds as human beings, we think nothing could be that grace-filled.

Nothing could be forgiveness without cost or consequence or some sort of debt that we would owe. It's not what Jesus said.

So as we've considered in the past, though, the gift of salvation is freely given. But it's also a gift. And what does a gift need to have happen?

[ 20 : 02 ] It needs to be received. The opportunity for someone's life to be changed forever comes when Jesus Christ is preached. When the power and love and amazing grace of the gospel is presented as the breathtaking gift that it is.

But the gospel of Jesus must be received. It must be followed. And that natural progression from belief should be the desire to be baptized. To demonstrate and declare to the world that Jesus has changed your life.

Full stop. The story of the conversion of many Samaritan people that we've looked at this morning is dramatic. It's impressive. This is a large group of people.

But at its core is that same uncomplicated invitation that's available to every individual to follow Jesus. Receive his free gift of the opportunity to be restored into a personal relationship.

With Jesus himself and also with his father. And with our heavenly father. The opportunity to repent of our sin and receive forgiveness and be welcomed back.

[ 21 : 19 ] With open and loving arms. So, how about you? Have you believed and been baptized? Praise God if you have.

And talk with someone if you haven't. If you have, but if you've strayed from the faith. If you feel shaken and you feel doubt and worry and anxiety.

Welcome to the world. Are you still bearing the weight of past regrets in your life? My friends, it is never too late to confess.

To repent. To receive God's forgiveness. Made possible through Jesus. So, no matter what your circumstances may be.

I want to remind you that it's never too late to turn or return to Jesus. Amen.