

AM Acts 8:1-25

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[0 : 00] From the book of Acts in the New Testament, Acts chapter 8, and it's on page 1104 of the church Bible.

! The scene of Acts deals with events after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven, and of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples on the church, and how they preached the word of God, the word about Jesus Christ.

And up to this point, the scene has all been in Jerusalem. That's where the action has been. But at the beginning of Acts, in chapter 1, verse 8, Jesus tells his disciples that you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

So now Judea, of course, is around Jerusalem. Jewish people lived there. But now we're going to Samaria. We're going to read about the gospel. Going to Samaria.

And we'll read from verse 1. So chapter 7 is about the martyrdom of Stephen, the first recorded martyr in the early church.

[1 : 44] So chapter 7 deals with that. So we will begin with chapter 8, that Saul approved of his, that's Stephen's, execution. And there arose on that day, a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem.

And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him.

But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house. He dragged off men and women, and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds, with one accord, paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.

For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them. And many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.

[2 : 53] So there was much joy in that city. But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city, and amazed the people of Samaria.

Saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest. Saying, this man is the power of God, that is called great.

And they paid attention to him. Because for a long time, he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, as he preached good news about the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Even Simon himself believed. And after being baptized, he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

[4 : 09] For he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they, that's Peter and John, laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.

But Peter said to him, May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money. You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before

God.

Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.

And Simon answered, Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me. Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

[5 : 35] May God bless his word to us. Let's join together again in prayer. Well, I'd like us this morning to turn back to that passage that we read, to Acts chapter 8, verses 1 to 25, on page 1104 of the Church Bible.

Amen. If you go to almost any country in the world today, you will find a church, a fellowship, a gathering of people who are meeting in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today, the Church of Jesus Christ is truly global. It is multi-ethnic, multilingual, multicultural. And if you were able to sort of do a quick travel around the world, different churches would look and sound and feel very different from each other.

There is almost infinite variety among the Church of Christ. And yet we are also united by our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and as our Saviour.

But if you go back to the beginning and you read the Gospels and about the life of the Lord Jesus there, Jesus himself was Jewish.

[7 : 06] All his 12 disciples, apostles, they were Jewish. And up to where we've read in Acts, basically the whole church is Jewish.

Now, in Acts chapter 2, we read about, this is going back a while, we read about the day of Pentecost when there were people from sort of scattered around the Mediterranean, around the world, the Middle East, who had come together in Jerusalem and they spoke different languages and they heard the word of God miraculously in their own languages.

But those people were all Jews. Some of them were converts to Judaism, but they were all Jews of one type or another. How did the church go from being this Jewish faith, this Jewish movement, to being the multi-ethnic, multilingual, multicultural faith it is today?

How did the early church burst the banks of Judaism? Well, we read how it happened in the book of Acts, of how the gospel overcomes the ethnic and the cultural and the linguistic barriers of the world of that day.

And the first major barrier, the first major boundary or wall that was overcome was how the word of God, the gospel, came to the Samaritans.

[8 : 42] that is the first major barrier that is overcome. And it's not the first barrier that we read of in the book of Acts. There are other barriers that are overcome, and through church history there have been many, many other barriers also that have been overcome by the word of God, by the preaching of the gospel.

But this is the first major boundary to be overcome. And it's part of one of the great themes of the book of Acts that the good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone.

It's for people from every nation and tribe and language and culture. Well, as we look at this, the overcoming of this barrier, we want to break it down into three barriers that were overcome in the Samaritans being brought into the people of God.

The first is the ethnic and cultural barrier, the second is a spiritual barrier, and the third is the barrier of disunity.

So let's look at these, these three barriers for the word of God, the message of Jesus Christ going to the Samaritans. The first barrier is the ethnic cultural barrier, and I'm struggling with terminology here because it's also kind of a religious barrier, because religion and culture, ethnicity, they're all sorts of in the mix together, and people didn't necessarily think of them as being separate sort of things like we tend to do today.

[10 : 20] So the passage begins with the persecution after Stephen's martyrdom, and especially that persecution at the hands of Saul of Tarsus.

And of course later on in Acts we come back to this character Saul. This isn't the end of him. It's not the last we hear of him. But the result of this persecution is a dispersion.

The believers scatter. They go throughout Judea and Samaria to escape the persecution that is going on in Jerusalem.

And it's only the apostles that stay in Jerusalem. And in verse 4 we read that those who scattered went about preaching the word.

And I think we see in that just that the overcoming of persecution by God's great plan and purpose. God's great plan and purpose is that God's word, the gospel of Jesus Christ be spread, that it goes out.

[11:27] and we find that those Saul and others are trying to suppress this movement, they're trying to suppress this message, God's word overcomes it. And of course we see that throughout history.

We see it in the world today. In China in 1949 under Chairman Mao the communists took over. It was an atheist regime and they booted out all the foreign missionaries in China. And the missionaries were very concerned. The church was quite young.

In many ways it seemed quite weak. And they were worried about its future. But of course today that church in China numbers many millions and is growing. Or closer to home.

If we go back even a decade or two, what was called new atheism was very much kind of very prominent in the culture.

[12:27] and you had people who, very prominent new atheists who absolutely derided belief in God. Now, it's not that that movement has disappeared, but it's much weaker now than it was, say, a decade ago.

And there are testimonies of people who were actually set on a journey of seeking God by just the virulence of that new atheist movement.

People, I suppose, were confronted with people ridiculing belief in God and Christian faith and it set them thinking, well, what is this faith that is being so ridiculed?

And many people testify to coming to faith in Christ partly through that new atheist movement. So, even in our world today and throughout history, people have tried to destroy and suppress the message of Jesus Christ, Christ, but God's power overcomes that.

Well, in verse 5, we're introduced to this character Philip. It's not the first time we've read a Philip in the book of Acts. Now, this Philip is not the apostle Philip. One of the twelve apostles is named Philip, but this is not that Philip.

[13:42] Rather, it's a Philip we were introduced to in chapter 6 when we read of the seven helpers who were chosen to help in the serving of the church, helping to serve the widows and the poor in the church.

And one of those was called Philip. And this is that Philip that we read about in this chapter. So, Philip goes to Samaria and proclaims to them the Christ or the Messiah.

and this is a new development in the spread of the gospel. It's a new phase in Acts.

So, we looked at the beginning in Acts chapter 1 verse 8 where Jesus tells his disciples, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

And up to now it's been all in Jerusalem. But now the word goes to Judea. That's not such a big movement because Judea was populated by Jews. But Samaria is something different.

[14:55] This is a much bigger step and it is the gospel overcoming a major barrier in the world of that time. So, who were the Samaritans?

Well, we need to sort of go back in history quite a long time. And back into Old Testament history. So, about a thousand years before Christ there was Israel's greatest king, King David.

And then after him his son Solomon. But after Solomon's reign the kingdom was divided into two.

There was the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel.

And that northern kingdom of Israel Israel was from its very beginning it began to introduce the sort of corrupted worship of Yahweh, of the Lord.

And then also it began to worship other gods, gods of the peoples around them. And that went on for two or three hundred years.

[16:04] in God's judgment on the northern kingdom of Israel, they were in the 8th century BC besieged by the Assyrian Empire.

Who then captured Samaria in 722 BC and deported many of the Israelites and replaced those people by people from other parts of the Assyrian Empire.

Now, sometime later, of course those peoples worshipped all kinds of different gods. And because of that, in judgment the Lord sent lions that destroyed people and so the imperial powers sent a priest back there to teach them how to worship the Lord.

And they're thinking the Lord was the local god, so they sent a priest back to teach them how to worship the Lord. And so from then on, the people just worshipped the Lord but also kept on worshipping the other gods of the different places they had come from.

Now, that's 600, 700 years before the events we're reading about in Acts. And by the first century, so that's the time that Acts is recording, by that time the Samaritans had become monotheists.

[17:26] So they ditched the other gods and they worshipped the one God, the Lord. And they believed in the books of Moses, but that was all they believed in. They didn't accept the rest of the Old Testament.

So that meant they didn't have the Psalms, they didn't accept the temple in Jerusalem, but they just followed the books of Moses, the Torah. They practiced circumcision, and that meant that the Samaritans were not the same as Gentiles.

So in Jewish eyes, you had Jews and you had Gentiles. So the Gentiles, Gentiles basically means non-Jews. And they were uncircumcised.

And the Jews looked down on them for that. Now the Samaritans were sort of somewhere in the middle because the Samaritans were circumcised following the books of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament.

But they were still not accepted by Jews. They were mixed racially and religiously, and therefore the Jews despised them for that reason.

[18:34] So for example, in John chapter four, verse nine, we read that Jews do not associate with Samaritans. A little bit later in the third century AD, this is what the Mishnah, which is a Jewish writing, it says that he who eats the bread of the Samaritans is like one who eats the flesh of swine, of pigs.

And we know that Jews abhor eating pork or pig meat. They're drawing an equivalence with eating at the same table with Samaritans.

And the hostility went both ways. A few years before this, some Samaritans had defiled the temple in Jerusalem by spreading human bones there.

And so there was this sort of long-standing hostility, enmity, hatred between Samaritans and Jews. A hostility that went both ways.

One very fascinating and instructive thing to notice though in the midst of that hostile relationship is the attitude of the Lord Jesus, which is very different from that of his fellow Jews.

[19:56] In John chapter 4, we read of Jesus going to Samaria, to Sychar, and preaching to the Samaritans, and in fact staying with them, staying in their homes, preaching to them, and many came to faith in him there, in Sychar.

And then of course Jesus' famous parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10, in which Jesus makes a Samaritan the hero of that story.

Also in John 8, verses 48 and 49, we read that some of the Judeans who are opposing Jesus, they say to him, are we not right in saying you are a Samaritan and have a demon?

And Jesus responds by saying I don't have a demon. But he doesn't say I'm not a Samaritan. Now of course he isn't a Samaritan, Jesus is a Jew. But he doesn't take part in that racial hatred by dissociating himself with being a Samaritan.

And we see in Jesus there's no hint of racism there. Because Jesus' view of Samaritans is that they're exactly the same as Jews in that they are made in God's image, God's likeness.

[21:19] And that they are also like Jews, sinners, those who have rebelled against God, exactly the same as Jews. And also like Jews, Samaritans are those that Jesus has come into the world to save.

And so there was no room for any feeling of racial superiority. Well now Philip goes to this city it's quite likely the city of Samaria so that the main city of the Samaritans and there in verse 5 we read that he preached or proclaimed to them the Christ in verse 12 that he proclaimed or preached the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.

His preaching was accompanied by many miracles many signs of demons being brought out and of the paralyzed and the lame being healed.

And the result of this was that people paid close attention in verse 6 and in verse 12 that many believed in Philip's message and that he baptized them both men and women.

And so the gospel the word of God comes to Samaria that boundary that ethnic cultural that racial that boundary of hatred and hostility between Jews and Samaritans is overcome by the word of

God.

[22 : 52] But the second barrier is a spiritual barrier and in verses 9 to 11 we're introduced to this character Simon the sorcerer or magician and that was his trade his job was to be a magician and as a magician he had great power and influence in that society he was a religious leader in verse 11 we're told that people paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic I guess he was a kind of shaman figure and in verse 11 we're told that sorry verse 10 people said that this man is the power of God that is called great and he amazed people by his power now in verse 13 we're told that

Simon himself believed and was baptized and it seems that the signs that were performed by Philip were a major factor in his believing it was greater than anything that Simon had witnessed before and in verse 13 we're told that he was amazed he was astonished by the signs that he saw Philip perform well moving on in the story in verses 14 to 17 we read of the apostles Peter and John coming to Samaria to lay their hands on people so that they can receive the Holy Spirit and we're going to come back to that in a few minutes but Simon sees this he sees and it seems that when Peter and John lay hands on people and they receive the Holy Spirit something spectacular happens accompanying that perhaps something similar to what happened on the day of Pentecost you know when the flames of fire came to rest on each of the disciples there was the sound of a mighty rushing wind perhaps something similar to that happened because

Simon is obviously really impressed by this and so he offers money for the ability to lay hands on people so that they may receive the Holy Spirit Simon's background was that was in magic in sorcery and it was a world where you would pay a master sorcerer or magician to learn their skills and you would pay for that and then you would learn their skills and become a magician yourself and have power influence be a way of earning money and prominence in society now perhaps that world may seem alien to us although perhaps not of course those sort of things go on today in our own society people's belief in the occult and the power of magic and so on but maybe for many of us it seems a bit distant a bit remote but a lot of the motivations that motivated

Simon to offer money to Peter and John are rather universal and they affect us too the motivation of wanting power wanting influence wanting prominence wanting money and so we all need to be on our guard against those temptations not to seek those things for ourselves but rather to seek the kingdom of God to seek his kingdom first well Peter's reaction is very strong in verse 20 may your silver perish with you because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money you have neither part nor lot in this matter for your heart is not right before God repent therefore of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord that if possible the intent of your heart may be forgiven you for I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity

Peter's reaction is so strong because the power of the Holy Spirit is utterly different from magic from sorcery and it must not be confused I mean the clue is in the adjective the spirit is the Holy Spirit he is not tarnished by commercial transaction he is the Holy Spirit the spirit he was pure and good and righteous and holy and the coming of the spirit is the gift of God it is given at God's discretion and God is sovereign in that the Holy Spirit can't be manipulated by human beings giving money by doing a transaction well Simon is given opportunity for repentance and the last we hear of Simon is in praying in verse 24 pray for me to the Lord that nothing of what you have said may come upon me now was that genuine repentance or just sort of motivated by fear we don't know but the main point here is the supreme power of Jesus

[28 : 32] Christ here is this so called great power of God in fear and trembling requesting the apostles to pray for him now in today's world also we have much so called magic occult power sometimes it goes under the name of new age spirituality people interested in fortune telling or manifesting or horoscopes or seances or witchcraft of one type or another don't seek power or wisdom from those things there is a much greater and infinitely greater source of power and wisdom which is also supremely good and that is from Jesus Christ believe in him come to him and that source of power and wisdom can be yours for free and so here we see in this passage the spiritual barrier overcome by the power of

Jesus Christ Jesus Christ defeats all earthly spiritual powers well finally the third barrier to be overcome is that of disunity so in verses 14 to 17 Peter and John go down to Samaria from Jerusalem they're sent as a delegation from the apostles in Jerusalem and they come and they pray for the Samaritans they place their hands on them and when they do that they receive the Holy Spirit and this event is linked to Pentecost the same things happen we've noticed that whatever

happened there was very spectacular because Simon wants to be able to do that himself and offers money for that he's impressed by whatever visual accompaniment there is whether that's the sound of the mighty rushing wind and the flames of fire and so on that happened at Pentecost but this raises a question for us why did not the

Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit when they first believed why is there this gap you know they believe at the preaching of Philip and then there's a gap until Peter and John arrive before they receive the Holy Spirit now in the New Testament teaching the general rule the general sequence is that when people believe they receive the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12 verse 13 Paul writing to the church in Corinth to all the believers there says that you all were baptized with the one Spirit and in Acts 2 verse 38 Peter in that sermon at the day of Pentecost tells the Jews who say what shall we do he says repent and be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus and you will receive the Holy Spirit so receiving the

Holy Spirit happens when people believe when they repent when they come to faith in Jesus Christ that is the general pattern why does that not happen here well I think the reason is that this is a new development in the whole course of God's plan for history and in the progress of the gospel the progress of God's great plan and mission this is the first major ethnic and cultural boundary to be crossed as we've already seen and we've noted also this traditional hatred and hostility between Jews and Samaritans and that hostility meant that there was a danger that was there when the Samaritans believed the danger was that the Samaritan church would just develop completely separate completely siloed from the Jewish church in Jerusalem completely independent of the apostles and on the other side the Jewish church would just completely ignore them they're not of us we don't like them we hate those people we're just going to carry on as a

Jewish church that was a real danger in this situation and so to prevent this the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit was dependent on the apostles from Jerusalem the Jewish apostles whom Christ had chosen and that was vitally important from both sides from both angles for the Samaritan church it showed that they were dependent on the apostles and that the authority of the apostles was over the whole church now of course for us today there are no living apostles today but that authority comes through the New Testament and all of God's people are under the authority of the New Testament as well as the Old Testament but for the Samaritan church it meant that it showed very clearly to them that they were dependent on the apostles but then for the Jewish church it was also really important because the apostles

[34 : 00] Jewish apostles Peter and John saw that what had happened to themselves on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon them had now happened equally and just as much to the Samaritan believers in Christ and so they were one with them it was the same Holy Spirit who had come down upon the Jewish disciples on the day of Pentecost had now come down upon the Samaritan believers they were one people one church so just two sort of applications of this one negative one positive the negative application is that we can't use this narrative about the Samaritans as a pattern for a two stage discipleship that first of all you come to believe and then at some later stage you receive the Holy Spirit or are baptized with the Holy Spirit this is a unique situation because of the barrier that we've been speaking of of course the same is true about the day of

Pentecost itself that also can't be used as a model for a two stage discipleship where the disciples came to believe in Christ and then sometime later they were baptized with the Holy Spirit the disciples were unique because of course they were with Jesus they had Jesus with them and it was only when Jesus was taken up to heaven that the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them but positively this stresses the unity of the church the unity of God's people across all the racial and cultural and social and ethnic barriers of the world today and of course there are many barriers and boundaries and walls that divide people walls often of hostility that divide people in our world today Paul speaks of this in Ephesians chapter 2 and it's worth reading the whole second part of that chapter from verse 11 to verse 22 but I'll just read verses 19 to 22 and here he's talking about it's really about the division between

Jew and Gentile non-Jew and he's speaking to the mainly Gentile Ephesians and he says so then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord in him you also you Gentiles you non-Jews it applies to the Ephesians and it applies to us

today you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit so with the coming of the Spirit with the ascension of Jesus Christ God's people includes not just Israelites but people from every race and tribe and so we should seek the unity of the church seek the unity of God's people now of course we live in a situation where there are many different kinds of churches different denominations and to be realistic that's not going to go away but I think the challenge for us is how do we view those people how do we view maybe believers who are part of different churches from ourselves how do we relate to them we're not to view them as being kind of outside as if we are the only church but we're to view them as brothers and sisters in Christ the gospel is a gospel of reconciliation of making peace of course the cross of Christ the death of Christ makes peace between human beings and God that is the most fundamental and basic reconciliation that takes place peace but it also the gospel reconciles people who are often torn apart by hostility to each other we think of this part of the world today where there are Palestinians and Jews who are you know who have gone through this awful conflict in recent days and yet there are Palestinians and Jews who are united in Jesus

Christ and that of course applies to the many other so many other conflicts in our world today well may God help us to live out that unity in our own lives in our own world today may we be those who seek to build bridges that cross those boundaries that exist in our world and to be at peace with all our brothers and sisters in Christ amen may God bless his word to us let us conclude our worship