

Acts 8:1-25

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[0 : 00] You're in a series in the book of Acts to see the way in which the gospel expands around the world. Under the known world, of course, it finishes in Rome, the centre of the world as it was in the first century.

And the book of Acts, of course, begins with Jesus, with his final words to the disciples, to the apostles, to the eleven who are gathered. And it's interesting, we often think of it as, we have the title Acts of the Apostles, but Luke, in his introduction, says it's the acts of what Jesus continued to do.

Remember that. It's actually really the acts of Jesus through the apostles. So the spirit of Jesus has come into the apostles. Remember those upper room discourse in John's gospel where he says, I will come to you, the Father and I will come and make our home in you.

And the wonderful thing is the Emmanuel, God with us, is the reality under the new covenant that the spirit of the ascended Christ has come to dwell in our hearts.

Acts 1.8, the final words, he says to the apostles, you will be my witnesses. And as witnesses, you are going to, he said, these words, he comes from verse 8.

[1 : 23] When the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world.

That's a programmatic statement for the book of Acts, as it comes to its conclusion with the apostle Paul in Rome. Peter himself ends up in Rome as well too, as we know from his first letter.

So the movement, as we see in the book of Acts, sees how this gospel goes forth. But it's not quite what we might have expected. You might have expected, therefore, the apostles then to be teaching in Jerusalem and then moving out in various stages to Judea and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world.

But there's still much to be taught. You'll recall, you haven't got there yet, but when you get to Acts chapter 10, when Peter is in Joppa and he has this vision of unclean animals and he's not going to eat any unclean animals, even though he was hungry.

And God says, don't call unclean what I have declared to be clean. Which, of course, was a way of speaking about the inclusion of the Gentiles, the non-Jews, I imagine most of us, in the kingdom of God.

[2 : 41] In the Old Testament, of course, Jerusalem was the centre and people came to Jerusalem. Remember the Queen of Sheba coming to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the centre of God's activity.

The temple was built there. So the Old Testament mission was, in many ways, centripetal, coming into Jerusalem. But under the New Covenant, it's centrifugal.

It flows out of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is, of course, the place where Jesus dies. Jerusalem is the place where the disciples meet together and where the coming of the Spirit, as you've seen in chapter 2 of Acts, the Holy Spirit of the risen and ascended Christ, empowering the people of God, not just the apostles, but all people of God with the Spirit of Christ.

So we come to, as we flow through, you get a couple of bumps along the road. You have the deacons, so-called deacons, in chapter 6.

And then, of course, you have in chapter 7, Stephen, not a bad deacon for a preacher, preaches and he's stoned to death. And there, as we come into chapter 8, you think, this is not quite what we expected.

[4 : 00] Well, that's not true. Jesus always expected suffering. Indeed, persecution for our faith. And so we see chapter 8 opens with the words, and Saul approved of their killing, Stephen.

Saul will come into greater focus in the next chapter. That's next week or the week after, possibly. So I won't transgress upon that area. But now we come into that, as Saul did that, Saul was

galvanised to persecute the church.

And so in verse 2, we have on that day a great persecution. The first time the word persecution occurs in the book of Acts. And the persecution breaks out, and Saul is key in imprisoning, going house to house and imprisoning men and women.

Very interesting. Not just the men. He's going to capture the whole family, men and women, put them in prison. But persecution broke out, and the church in Jerusalem, except the apostles, were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Persecution scatters the church. But God's in control. Because persecution also prospers the church. Because by going out of Jerusalem, which of course is the very thing that Jesus said they should be doing, he brings persecution to, as it were, push them outwards.

[5 : 40] And so they go to Judea and Samaria following that programmatic course that Acts 1.8 had established. Godly men buried Stephen, mourned deeply for him.

But in the context of that mourning, persecution breaks out, and men and women, brothers and sisters, are put in jail. But Luke goes on and he says, but God was using this scattered church, scattered disciples, because those who went out preached the word.

It's interesting that the apostles stayed in Jerusalem. Luke doesn't make any adverse comment about that, but you wonder as to whether they should not themselves have gone out. Perhaps they wanted to protect the church in Jerusalem that was left.

We've already had Peter and John in prison twice in the book of Acts, up to this point in time.

They're no strangers to prison. They're no strangers to the persecution that the Sanhedrin and the Jewish officials had brought upon them.

Maybe they stood there. We don't know the reasons why they were there. But Stephen, one of the deacons in chapter 6, he goes out, and sorry, Philip rather, goes out, like Stephen had gone out.

[6 : 58] And Philip, knowing the end of Stephen's life, being stoned, doesn't prevent him from going out. And he goes to Samaria and proclaims the Christ, the Messiah.

Samaria, of course, is the northern part of Israel. And Samaria, of course, had a rival kingdom.

You'll recall, if you know your Old Testament history, after Solomon died, his son Rehoboam had a foolish taxation policy.

Many politicians have that, don't they? And that sense in which he wanted to change the rules of taxation, and Jeroboam set up a rival kingdom. And so we get the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom.

And ten tribes go to the north, call themselves Israel. And the southern tribes Judah, being the maiden tribe with Benjamin, are in the south. And Samaria was set up as an alternative temple.

You may well remember when Jesus met with the woman of Samaria. She said, shall we meet in this temple, in Jerusalem, or in Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans have their temple?

[8 : 07] And Jesus says, no, the hour is coming when neither in this temple nor that temple will people worship God. But those who worship him will worship him in spirit and in truth.

Jesus was speaking to this Samaritan woman by the well, unknown, a social outcast, and it was socially impolite, even for Jesus to be encountering a woman in that situation.

When the disciples had gone into town to get some bread, came back, they didn't know what to say. So they just said, isn't it time for lunch? That sense in which they were trying to defuse the situation of here is Jesus speaking not just to a woman but to Samaritan woman.

But Philip knows the words of Jesus. Philip, no doubt, part of that 120 in the upper room where the spirit of Pentecost came. And part, of course, of the 3,000 who were converted on that first day.

And he goes out as a servant of Christ to preach the gospel to the Samaritans. And when the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs that he performed, because Philip is full of the Holy Spirit, and the signs and wonders were affirmation and confirmation that this was truly the work of the Messiah because it's Jesus in him.

[9 : 29] Remember the continuing acts of Jesus through the apostles. What a wonderful description of gospel work.

What a wonderful description of seeing people brought from darkness into light, from lameness into health, from bondage into freedom. And Philip also, we hear that there was a man called Simon.

Now Simon was a person who practiced sorcery in the city. And he amazed all the people of Samaria. There are always charlatans around. You know that, don't you?

And the evil one will often use charlatans and enable them to do various signs and wonders. You remember in Moses, a time in Pharaoh's court, when Moses did some signs, the magicians of Pharaoh did some signs.

Threw down his staff, became a serpent, and the magicians of Pharaoh did the same. Of course, when Moses turned the river Nile into blood, there was nothing they could do about that.

[10:48] There's a limit. There's a bit of showmanship. Satan has certain powers that God restricts him to. But Satan is always out to blind the eyes of people.

And it's only the Spirit of God that opens blind eyes. But sometimes Satan will allow someone to have a measure of belief, or really perhaps a superficial belief with regard to believing in Jesus.

And this person, Simon, is of that character. He boasted that he was someone great. He was a person who had the power of God, was the name of greatness upon him.

He commanded the marketplace. And yet the people who had been following him, now when they'd heard about the Messiah, began to follow Jesus, listened to what Philip had been saying, and believed.

And so Simon himself, and as you read the text, realise, well, he wants to be a part of this. He no doubt wants to continue to have his influence. And so he enters into this, and Simon is described, he believed and was baptised.

[12:06] Philip had been baptising, as deacons do in the New Testament, Philip had been baptising the people who believed in Jesus, following Jesus' command, to make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.

Philip had been doing that faithfully. And Simon comes along, and he superficially believed. But it transpires that in actual fact, he just wants to be part of the new thing, and exercise his influence as a man of great power.

Because he saw the signs that Philip had done, and he thought, wow, maybe I could do even greater signs than what I've been doing. Now news went back to Jerusalem.

And the apostles who were in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God. That's kind of amazing, isn't it? That Samaria had accepted the word of God.

You'd have thought they wouldn't be amazed. They should have remembered what Jesus said about being witnesses. And now it's actually Philip who'd gone, not them who'd gone to do that. He had done that.

[13:25] So they sent Peter and John. Now it's very interesting that Peter and John are sent. Why is that? Well, if you remember back in Luke's Gospel, remember the book of Acts is volume two of Luke's Gospel, if you like.

The readers of Luke's Gospel would have remembered this. When the day drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he came up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

And he sent messages ahead of him who went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make preparations for him. But the people of Samaria did not receive him because he had set his face toward Jerusalem.

And you can see the antagonism between Samaria and Jerusalem in that verse. And what's the response of the apostles? And when his disciples, James and John, saw it, they said, Lord, do you want us to send down fire from heaven and consume them?

How's that for a lieutenant in your band of merry men? Look, these Samaritans are not going to have it. We're going to call down God to destroy them. And Jesus rebukes them.

[14:43] How interesting. Now John comes to Samaria. No doubt the very words of Jesus' rebuke were in his ears as he came to the Samaritans to find out what was happening.

Because he was developing an understanding that yes, indeed, it's not judgment you call it out upon people. That's not what Jesus was here to do. He was here to save. And although Jesus' ministry was just to the Jews, he taught the disciples that there was a wider field.

Indeed, if you remember in John chapter 4, when Jesus with the woman of Samaria, she is so excited. She goes back to town. And now she's a woman of a certain reputation with the men she'd been living with over the years.

She tells them, come and hear about the Messiah. And a crowd comes. And Jesus says, the field is white under harvest. And he's talking about Samaritans.

The time was not yet. This was a precursor, if you like, of what was taking place now in Acts chapter 8. And now John with Peter come into Samaria. And they see that there is genuine belief in people.

[15:53] And they lay their hands on them. And the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Now, this has caused some concern for some commentators, particularly in the Pentecostal variety, to think, ah, this is a second experience of the Holy Spirit.

As if this is the normative expression. And Pentecostal theology has taken that view, but in my view, a mistaken view.

You have to see the Samaritans in the course of redemptive history. Just as the Spirit of God came upon the disciples, they were already regenerate believers in Jesus in his earthly life.

Remember Peter's great confession, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. No, that movement of Jesus being ascended so he could send his Spirit upon his disciples.

And now that we've been moved out of Jerusalem and into Samaria, they need to be assured, the apostles need to be there to demonstrate this is a true conversion.

[17:00] It's not a normative experience for Christians. Rather, it is fulfilling Acts 1.8. Just as Peter, when he talks to Cornelius in chapter 10, sees the Spirit of God come upon Cornelius in the presence of the apostle.

Likewise in Acts 19, in Ephesus, Paul is there as an apostle, one untimely born, but nonetheless apostolic initiative and imprimatur upon the Holy Spirit regenerating.

And not just regenerating, but bringing these people into the new covenant, into the realm where Jesus is king. Jesus, the God man.

So the disciple, the apostles rather, Peter and John, they lay hands. Then our attention draws to Simon. And Simon says, ha ha, even more exciting when Peter and John are here.

I mean, Philip didn't do too badly. He's just a deacon. Ha ha ha. But when the apostles come, wow. So what does he say? Look, I've got some money here.

[18:04] Can you, can I buy what you've got? What a shallow understanding of the Christian faith. But you see, he was not truly converted, was he?

He wasn't a man who'd surrendered his life to the Lord Jesus. So he wanted to buy this gift. And what does Peter say?

May your money perish with you. It's interesting. J.B. Phillips, who did a modern translation last century, and he expresses it, he says, to hell with you and your money.

That kind of grasps it pretty well, doesn't it? In other words, that's where you're going. May your money perish with you. You thought you could buy the gift of God with silver.

But you have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.

[19:13] For I see that you have the gall of bitterness, and you're captive to sin. If Simon was a believer, what would he have said?

He'd have repented. He'd have said, yes, I'm mistaken. Forgive me. But what does he say? Oh, would you pray to the Lord, this doesn't happen to me, what you just said?

In other words, I just don't want the outcome of what you've just said, which is God's judgment upon him. Simon gives name to the term simony.

Simony in the medieval church, and later on, was where people would buy a parish, or a living, or a title, in order to exercise a ministry over people.

And that was simony, and it comes from this person. We learn later in the second century, and end of the first century, from Justin Martyr, and a few other writers, that a man called Simon, presumably the same man, had gone to Rome, and had argued with Peter in Rome.

[20:29] If it is the same man, he was clearly unconverted. But I think Luke makes it very clear, that he was unconverted. What do we see here, then, in Acts chapter 8?

We see persecution from without, and we see the work of Satan, in trying to tear apart the church, scattering the church, thinking it would control the church.

Men and women were put in prison, by Saul. Philip baptized men and women. And you get the same language there, to say, here comes judgment from Satan, through the hands of Saul.

Here comes grace and mercy, through the hands of Philip, in the baptism of men and women.

Persecution from without. Well, in many ways, the church has always experienced that, in the Roman world, and in future places, and in places around the world, at the moment, persecution, in

China, where, in India, in Muslim countries, where radical elements, of society, and governments, oppose the church, they have to go underground, or meet secretly.

Opposition from without, is always there, and will always be there. But what surprises us most, is opposition from within. Simon was trying to exercise, that opposition.

[22 : 04] When Paul Drotch speaks, to the Ephesian elders, in Acts chapter 20, when you get there, sometime this year, he says, two things, he says, wolves in sheep's clothing, will come in among you, to destroy the flock.

But he also says, some will arise within you, to destroy the flock. Well of course, you've experienced that, in the Anglican Church in Canada, haven't you?

You know, it's like where people, who own the name of Christ, have persecuted, the saints. And you are among those, who have been persecuted, thrown out of, St John's, Shaughnessy, cast out, as if you were unbelievers, defrocking your minister, and Jim Packer.

What an ungodliness. And yet Jesus, is still on the throne. Jesus is still, building his church, ruling his kingdom, in the hearts and lives, of men and women.

Acts chapter 8, is part of this, historical, redemptive historical movement, of the expansion, of the church of God, from Judea, Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts, of the earth, as the book of Acts, continues on its way, to Rome.

[23 : 29] And indeed, as it continues, on its way, to Canada, and Australia. Yeah, the uttermost parts, of the earth. And there, the gospel, continues to thrive.

But remember, there'll always be opposition, from outside, and there'll always be opposition, from inside. Beware, of the work, of the evil one. Pray, for God's continuing, protection, upon yourselves.

And how does, the final verses, finish, after Simon, is confronted, by Peter, and Peter, and Simon gives this, you know, weak, lame response.

After, Peter, and John, had further proclaimed, the word of the Lord, and testified, about Jesus. It's all about Jesus, isn't it? Peter, and John, returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel, to other villages, in Samaria.

It had clicked. God, was saving Samaritans. The old enemies, of the Jews. And indeed, God's going to save Gentiles.

[24 : 39] People whom the Jews thought, were way beyond the pale, of salvation. Because God's heart, is so big. But all who was made, in his image, are precious to him.

And his desire, as we heard, in the exhortation, to the confession, is he does not desire, the death of the wicked. That they might turn, from their sins, and live.

Brothers and sisters, what a joy it is, to be a part of your, congregation this morning. To know that your trust, is in the living God, in Jesus, whom he has sent. And if you're here, as a visitor today, and Jesus is not known, to you as your, personal saviour, your master, and your king, then do not leave, today without talking, to someone.

To find out, how your sins, can be forgiven. And you too, can be inheritors, of the kingdom of God. And enter into, the new heavens, the new earth, when Jesus returns.

Where every tear, we wiped away. Where all sorrows, will disappear. And death, shall be no more. May God so, strengthen us, in our testimony, to Jesus.

[25 : 53] Jesus, like the scattered church, from Jerusalem. That we might, grow, God's kingdom, by his word, and through his spirit, giving glory, to the Lord Jesus.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you, that you are, a sovereign God, whose purposes are sure. We thank you, Father, that you've, enfolded us, into your family, as your sons, and daughters.

And we, as brothers and sisters, in Christ, have an inheritance, which is undefiled, kept in heaven, perfected, through Christ, for us.

Help us, to live out our days, and that we too, might share, that living gospel, of hope, with those, who do not know him, that they too, might find, forgiveness of sins, and the hope, of everlasting life.

And we pray this, in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.