

# Acts 8:1-25

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[0:00] Friends, while you're standing, let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this morning. In Jesus' name, Amen.! Amen. Please be seated. Good morning, everyone. Good morning. It's nice to see you all. If you're new with us, my name is Aaron. I'm one of the ministers here.

We are in a series in the book of Acts called Sent by Jesus. And this morning we're going to talk about the remarkable story of Samaria, about how the gospel came to Samaria. So we're looking at chapter 8. And it's a remarkable story for a number of reasons. So let's get into it. It's a remarkable story because of what preempted this missionary movement to Samaria. And what preempted this missionary movement to Samaria was persecution.

So St. John's has planted a few churches and it's quite a process. There's lots of prayer. There's lots of meetings, conversations, announcements, discussions with the diocese.

There's budget discussions, there's forms to be filled in. You've got to talk to CRA. There's lots of people, you know, putting their wisdom into this. Lots of documents have to be written.

[1:15] There's a big send-off. And then they're off to East Van or to Winnipeg or to Richmond. So these missional church plants, they're pretty well organized and they're pretty intentional.

So what spurred this big missional impetus into Samaria in Acts chapter 8? How was it organized? Remember, at this point in history, back in the day, the Christian movement was a local movement. Hadn't moved beyond Jerusalem.

So what spurred this big first missional movement beyond the gates of Jerusalem? What was the process? Well, there was no official process. It happened because of death.

Death and the threat of prison caused this. Acts chapter 8 starts with a pretty ominous line, and Saul approved his execution.

That's how it kicked off. There was a guy called Stephen who was publicly murdered for being a follower of Jesus. He was the first Christian martyr. And that kicked off a great time of persecution, the Bible says.

[2:22] Verses 1 to 3 said, Saul was going house to house. He was tracking down Christians. He was dragging them away. He was killing them or he was throwing them in prison. It says in verse 3 that he was ravaging the church.

What does that mean? Ravaging. It's a strong word, isn't it? It means it's like a wild animal tearing apart its prey. Christian persecution was sadistic.

It was particularly cruel. That's what it's trying to tell us. Now, if you go back to the start of the book of Acts, we had a pretty great start.

Apostles preached. It was like 3,000 people came to faith. But Saul wanted to knock that on the head. So he starts this brutal campaign of oppression.

And because of that, because of that persecution, all these Christians had to leave Jerusalem. They had to flee. And it sounds terrible. And it says here in verse 1 that they were scattered to the regions of Judea and Samaria.

[3:32] Judea and Samaria. Those two places should prick our memories. Because in chapter 1 of Acts, verse 8, hear these last words of Jesus before his ascension.

You shall receive the Holy Spirit and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria. Last words of Christ.

Go tell people in Judea and Samaria about me. The two places where the Christians fled because of the persecution were Judea and Samaria. This is no coincidence. It's interesting, isn't it? So what would you say about all of this?

You'd say that God used persecution to move his people into the mission he wanted for them. God used persecution to move his people into the mission he had given them.

It's just completely wild. At the end of chapter 7, it looked like the church was going to be persecuted into extinction. Clearly this was Saul's hope. But in God's providence, that persecution led to an explosion of evangelism.

[ 4 : 36 ] In February 2008, St. John's voted to leave the Anglican Church of Canada. I was there. It was brutal. And I remember reading the articles.

We were eviscerated by the journalists. We lost the building. People lost homes. Some staff lost pensions. Health insurance plans. We were slandered. I remember when we lost the building and reading about it in the mainstream media.

And the victory was hailed as, it was kind of like a victory over a hate group. It was devastating. That was February 2008.

In June 22nd, 2009, the Anglican Church of North America was founded. And we joined it. Since then, since then, ACNA has planted 500 churches.

At the moment, and I just, I checked this out with the church planting person down in the States in ACNA. At the moment, there are 20 to 25 church plants happening every year in ACNA.

[ 5 : 42 ] That's two church plants every month. Isn't that remarkable? I mean, when going through what we went through, who would have predicted this?

This was on no one's bingo card. It was just kind of awful. What an amazing story. It's like the story of Joseph in the Old Testament when he confronts his brothers for trying to kill him.

And he says, what you intended for evil, God intended for good. And that's what we have in Acts chapter 8. Saul tried to destroy the church.

And in the end, he made it unstoppable. Tertullian was an early Christian thinker around 200 AD. And he wrote a work called Apologeticus. And he wrote it in response to the persecution by the Roman authorities who were trying to quash this new faith.

And he says this. Kill us. Torture us. Condemn us. Grind us to dust. And the more you mow us down, the more we grow.

[ 6 : 47 ] For the seed of the church is the blood of Christians. See, the Roman strategy was crush the movement. And the actual result was multiply the movement. So what's my big point here?

I think it's this. We should not judge setbacks too quickly. Or defeats of the church. Defeats of the church. Don't judge too quickly when things are looking a bit wobbly.

Sometimes God uses these tremendous disruptions to get us going, to move us forward, to bring him his glory. And the breakup with the Anglican Church of Canada, it was hellish.

But look at what the Lord has done. Praise the Lord. Okay, let's keep going. We're still in the first four verses here. As I said at the start, the evangelism of Samaria was a remarkable story.

First, because it was persecution that actually led to the mission. Why else is it remarkable?

[ 7 : 50 ] Look at verse four. Now, those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Those who were scattered went about preaching the word. It's talking about just the ordinary Christians.

It's not talking about apostles. It actually says the apostles stayed in Jerusalem. It was the ordinary Christians that were preaching. Just normal people. Normies. Just normies. Now, but what does it mean that they were preaching?

And what does that mean? It's an interesting word. It's not the same word as what I'm doing right now. It's not stand-up delivering sermons. The word's more like gossiping. They're more like gossiping about Jesus. It's more like they're just having conversations about Jesus with the people they come across.

Those who were scattered were having Jesus conversations with people. It might go something like this for us. It's like, how was your weekend? Somebody says, oh, it's very good.

Played pickleball, I'm assuming. Played pickleball. Well, I went to church. It's a very good-looking pastor. Delivered an excellent sermon. Just obviously use your own words.

[ 8 : 52 ] But something along those lines is probably good. And the person says, I didn't know you went to church. Yeah, it's important to me. Have you always been religious? Well, actually, no.

Somebody told me about Jesus when I was about 20. And I thought it was really interesting. And I thought, I need to find out more about this. So I started going to church. Have you given much thought to this kind of thing yourself? That's what it's talking about.

Just these kind of conversations. Now, these conversations might go nowhere, but they might go somewhere. So as you're scattered about your everyday life, sow these seeds, these dandelions. Sow these seeds in simple and honest and kind ways. That's what was happening back then. And it turned the place upside down. And we can all do this. We can all be honest with people about what's important to us.

It's just normal people. I was in LA a week and a half ago. I go on retreat for one week every year with guys I went to Regent College with.

[ 9 : 58 ] And there was a woman called Amy I met there who gave us a ride to the hotel we were staying at. 15 years ago, no, 16 years ago, 16 years ago, this woman, Amy, moved to California because of some sort of family drama.

She was scattered, actually. She was scattered. Moved to California. And in her neighborhood, she thought, you know, there's no churches I can really connect with here. And she thought, I'd really love if there was an Acne church, an Acne church here.

And Acne was still pretty new, but she liked it. She liked the vibe. So she reached out to a bishop she kind of knew and said, look, I just think an Acne church would do really well in my neighborhood. And the bishop said, look, I might know a guy you can talk to.

She goes, I've got a few friends. I'll be talking to a few friends about this. So she met with this church planter. She invited some friends. And a church was planted.

Now, I visited that church two Sundays ago. That church has about 2,500 people going to it. It's probably the biggest church in Acne.

[ 11 : 00 ] When they run Alpha, this is a true story. When they run Alpha, 400 people come. They have planted a lot of other thriving churches.

As an aside, the church, you'd be happy to know, was planted by an Attizo apprentice from St. John's, actually. Isn't that cool? But it's probably the largest and arguably the most evangelistic church in Acne.

How did it start? What was the impetus? This woman was scattered. She wasn't an entrepreneur. She wasn't a minister. There's no theological education. She wasn't like a big-time business person with really crazy big ideas.

She's a part-time bookkeeper. That's what she does for her job. She's a regular woman. She's a normie. She moved because of stress. She's scattered. But she loved Jesus.

She started having Jesus conversations. Friends, don't underestimate how God can use you. Okay, let's keep going. Let's keep going here. The story of the gospel coming to Samaria is a remarkable story.

[ 12 : 06 ] It's remarkable because the mission happened as a result of persecution. It's also remarkable because the workers on the ground, the drivers of it, were just normal people gossiping about Jesus.

Okay, why else is it remarkable? It's remarkable because of the place they went to. Because it was Samaria. Jewish believers in Samaria telling Samaritans about Jesus.

This is remarkable. Why is it remarkable, you ask? Because the Hebrews hated Samaria. There was at least 700 years of bad blood between these places. In John chapter 8, Jesus was called a Samaritan as an insult.

They were regarded as traitors of the faith, and we don't have time to get into it. But Samaria was this hodgepodge of sort of syncretistic religions. You can look up, I think it's 2 Kings 17. Sort of tells the story of the beginning of the animosity between the two places.

But Jews basically avoided a place like the plague. But there they were. What does this tell us? It tells us this. There are no no-go zones when it comes to mission.

[ 13 : 18 ] When it comes to sharing Jesus. There are no no-go zones. Your Muslim neighbor. Your boss. Your taxi driver. Your non-binary cousin.

You know, when Christ ascended in Acts chapter 1, he became the Lord of all. He became the Lord of all. Which means there is not a person on the planet that Christ is not Lord over.

There is no place, therefore, that isn't the mission field. And you can imagine some people back in the days would have been like, Oh, yeah, I understand that. But surely not Samaria. Those guys, that's a terrible place.

There's this strange little bit in this passage I want to point out. Verses 14, 15, and 16. Now, when the apostles in 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 might receive the Holy Spirit, for it had not yet fallen on any of them.

It's strange, because that's not typical. The Holy Spirit comes at salvation. So why is the delay there? There's a delay so that the big-name apostles could come and pray for them, I think.

[ 14 : 35 ] And I think that was sort of like giving in an official stamp of approval, saying, Yes, even in Samaria. Even in Samaria.

Now, there's lots of debate about that, so I'll leave the issue there. But the big point is this. There are no no-go zones when it comes to mission. You can't look at somewhere. You can't look at someone and say, Well, the gospel is not for them, because Christ is Lord over all.

Let's keep going. It's a remarkable story, the gospel coming to Samaria. It's remarkable because persecution preempted it. It's remarkable because regular folks fanned the flame.

They were all in on telling the Samaritans about Jesus. And that's particularly astonishing, because there's 700 years of hatred there. And the story continues by zooming in on two people.

The first is Philip in verses 5 to 8. It says, Philip went down, and he proclaimed Christ to them. And all these amazing things happened. Unclean spirits coming out.

[ 15 : 35 ] And healings and great joy came on the sitting. What's remarkable about this is this is not the apostle Philip. It's entirely another guy.

When I went to Synod a few years ago, I did a talk, and I was thinking how to introduce myself. So I said, Hello, I'm Aaron. I work at St. John's in the role of middle management.

This is Philip. He's middle management. You could read earlier on, he was elected earlier to do admin stuff for the church to help poor people in the early church.

Middle management Philip. But gee, he loves Jesus. And he wants people to know Jesus. So he preaches in Samaria. And he crosses ethnic boundaries.

And he crosses cultural boundaries. And he crosses religious boundaries. He crosses these boundaries because he takes Jesus seriously when Jesus says, Be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria.

[ 16 : 40 ] And he's talking to people. And folks' lives are getting changed. And he's not a big shot. He's not an apostle. But he loved Jesus. And he couldn't stop himself. Before he knew it, he had a revival on his hands.

It's astonishing, isn't it, the gospel? Isn't the gospel astonishing in the hands of anyone? And what I love about this also is he was a refugee.

He was a refugee in a hostile environment. He probably didn't want to be there because he had to leave his home because of the persecution. So where God has you, that's your mission field.

Whether you like being there or not, maybe you don't like your neighborhood or your home. Or maybe you're in a facility you don't particularly like. If that's where God has you, do not let bitterness distract you from God using you in the place he has you.

That's your mission field. Now let's talk about this other guy here. We've got this guy called Simon the Magician. If Philip is the encouraging example, Simon is the warning.

[ 17 : 44 ] He's a powerful man. He's a well-known magician. Folks said, well, he could do these tricks. I don't know what they look like, but he did all these tricks. And people said, well, he must be a man of God.

He must have this power from God. Super popular with people and popular with himself, actually. It says in verse 9. It says he thought of himself as someone great, which is just a brilliant line, isn't it? I love that. When Philip came on the scene, Simon looked at him and thought, gee, he's got some great stuff going on. Remarkably, what does Simon do?

Jumps on board. He jumps on board. Can't beat him. Join him. And he was baptized. But it doesn't seem like it was a genuine conversion. Later, he tries to buy the Holy Spirit power.

Verse 13 says he was amazed by it all, but he wasn't truly converted. He wanted the Holy Spirit to be another sort of trick in his magic box, I guess. See, Philip was all about the gospel, wasn't he?

[ 18 : 47 ] Simon was all about Simon. He was in it for Simon. And we laugh about this idea of trying to buy the Holy Spirit. But for centuries, this was a thing in the church.

It was called simony, named after Simon. Simony is the sin of trying to buy or sell spiritual things. And during the Middle Ages and the corrupt years of the church, there was a time where you could buy the position of bishop.

You could buy your way to heaven. This has, in part, actually led to the reformation and the establishment of the Anglican church. In more modern times, we have a more subtle version of it. It's people who use faith for self-promotion.

It exists whenever someone seeks out a role to promote themselves. It could be preachers or trustees or volunteers. Anyone. If you're in it for you, to promote your idea, to promote your agenda, it's a spiritually dangerous place to be.

There was a scandal in the wider church land quite recently. A well-known, charismatic, itinerant preacher was caught out.

[ 19 : 56 ] But here's the deal. So he was on the conference circuit. He'd go around preaching. Very popular guy in a certain part of the Christian church in North America. And he'd go to all these huge conferences.

And he would preach. And in the middle of his sermon, he'd stop and he would say something like, I feel like the Lord is telling me there's someone here called Brianna. And somebody would put up their hand and go, I'm Brianna.

And he would say, does the word Northfield mean anything to you? And she'd say, my kids go to Northfield High. And he goes, well, you know, the Lord has a message for you.

And it would say something quite encouraging to them. And I watched a few videos of this guy. Very impressive. Very impressive speaker. Very good. And everyone would say, you know, this is the Holy Spirit.

That he has these insights into people's lives. Folks, it was all a scam. It was all a scam. Christian investigative journalist outed him. Turns out that this guy would somehow find out who's going to the conference and would just data mine their social media pages, pick out these facts of their life, and pretend to have this astonishing prophetic gift.

[ 21 : 04 ] This all happened in the last month. The guy was wanting to profit from the gospel. He was in it for himself. It's a terrible story. This is what Simon was, in it for himself.

Philip was very strong with him, calls him to repent. He says, your heart's not right with God. And he says in verse 20, may your silver perish with you because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money. It doesn't seem like Simon repented, though.

He just sort of weakly says, oh, pray that these bad things don't happen to me. It's not repentance. See, Simon wanted the power of God, not God himself.

Easy trap for Christians, that one. He wanted recognition. He wanted the Holy Spirit to be a tool in his tool shed. He wanted the magic trick of all magic tricks.

He wanted to use God to get things, not God himself. Another easy trap for us. See, true Christianity is about service and surrender and about a changed heart.

[ 22 : 00 ] Someone was amazed. He was baptized, but actually never converted. I read a description this week of people like Simon. It says, they are varnished with religion, never visited with grace.

So here's the lesson for us. Keep bringing your hearts to God, especially when you serve.

Ask yourself, who am I doing this for? Okay, I'm going to finish up here very quickly. The gospel is powerful.

It crosses every boundary. Racial, social, physical. Doesn't care who shares it. It's been shared by an apostle, by a lay person, by middle management, by normies.

It doesn't matter. Transforms lives. The gospel transforms lives. And the warning here is do not play with it. Do not mess around with it.

[ 23 : 03 ] Do not use it for your own purposes, whether you preach or sing or write or hand out service sheets or teach or clean. Remember, we must remain desperately dependent, all of us, on the work of the Holy Spirit to straighten out our hearts.

So that we can serve him and others can know Jesus. Friends, God wants to use you.

And we want the remarkable story of Samaria to be the remarkable story of Vancouver. Amen.