

Good From Evil

Fairview Missionary Church | Angola, IN

Scripture: Acts 8:1-25

Speaker: Joel Greenwood

February 26, 2023

This morning we're going to jump back into the book of acts. We took a break for a while. We had Christmas, and we had Dominique speak, but now we're going to jump back in for a few weeks. And then we're going to take a break again as we get into our Easter series. But if you remember when we left off last week or not last week, it's been a while. When we left off last time, we talked about acts chapter one verse 8 being really the theme verse for the entire book. This really sets the outline for what's going to happen in the book and in acts chapter one verse 8.

Jesus said to his disciples, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And so today, we are going to see how the gospel message, the good news of Jesus Christ is spreading from Jerusalem to Judea and this morning, we're really going to be focusing on Samaria. The good news of Jesus is going to make its way into Samaria.

When Jesus left his disciples, he told them in acts chapter one, that they were supposed to stay in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit. Until God poured out his spirit on them, they were to stay in Jerusalem. And so of course we read through acts chapter two, when God poured out his spirit on his disciples, if you remember, they had tongues of fire that came and separated on each of them. And they began to speak in different languages to the people that were surrounding on the day of Pentecost.

And if you recall, there were 3000 men that gave their lives to Christ, not including men and women. There are over 3000 people that were baptized and proclaimed Jesus as their lord and savior. The church just exploded in Jerusalem. And they struggled the disciples struggled with the same things that all of us struggle with.

If we hadn't explosion like that, we would get in our little comfort zone in our bubble here and we'd want to grow the church and maybe we would add on to the church and, you know, we would be okay with where we are at, but we know that the plan that God had for the message of Jesus was not made to just stay in Jerusalem. It was to spread into all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. But yet, we have this problem. We like comfort, don't we? Many of us found out a lot more this week that we like comfort.

When we lose electricity, right? Or we lose water or we lose those things. We like to be comfortable. And sometimes God has to product us a little bit. Sometimes God has to make something happen in our lives that causes a little discomfort that forces us to get out of our comfort zone. When we left off last week, God did something very drastic. In order for the disciples to move beyond Jerusalem, when we left off last night, I keep saying last week last time, you remember that Steven had been killed because of his faith.

The very first martyr for the Christian faith. Stephen was the first one to die because of his belief in Jesus Christ that he was the son of God and he proclaimed him as lord. He was killed. Now, of course, this is a horrible thing. I'm not ever going to say this is a good thing, but what is amazing as you look at scripture and certainly as you look at our lives and you look at history, God has the habit of taking that which was intended for evil and using it for good. This was something that was intended for evil.

The enemy was trying to shut down this movement of people believing in Jesus Christ, but God was going to use it for good. Because of these harsh conditions as the murder of Steven would begin to spread in Jerusalem and people would be persecuted for their faith. Jerusalem was no longer a safe place for these disciples and believers to stay. And so they had to begin to spread. They were fleeing because of the persecution, but again, as only God could work all of this out.

Of course, wherever they went, they took their faith with them. They took their faith with them. And so really, thousands of missionaries got sent out from Jerusalem all at one time, not because they wanted to, but because they were forced to. And so they went around to wherever they could find to live and to make life happen, but they took their faith with them. And so, of course, churches would begin to pop up all over the place in the known world. The fulfillment of acts chapter one verse 8 was happening before their very eyes.

And I love how God decided to make that happen. Because you don't see these men and women sitting in a room and saying, okay, what is the best plan for this to happen? They didn't lay the groundwork. Okay, we're going to go to this church and we're going to go there and we're going to move here. No God made it happen naturally. God is going to accomplish his purposes and his plans, regardless of what we do. And so here we see that happening as the church is beginning to spread out. Now, as we enter chapter 8 today, we are going to be briefly introduced to a man who will play a huge role in the rest of the story.

Certainly, in the book of acts, but also in the New Testament church. I would say, arguably that he will play the largest role in the New Testament outside of Jesus Christ. And you need to know that this man doesn't enter our story or the scene wearing a hero's cape. He doesn't enter riding on a white horse with all of the right answers. This person will prove that in life it doesn't matter how you start. It matters how you finish. And I believe this man will give hope for all of us.

Maybe you came into the church today. Maybe this is your first time. Maybe you're watching online or listening on the radio and you think to yourself, pastor, I have done so much wrong in my life that I could never make it right. God could certainly never make it right. He doesn't want somebody like me. Maybe you're looking at people around you here in this building or maybe your family or friends and you're thinking, I am just not that person. God could never save somebody like me. If you feel that way today, you are really going to like this man that we are going to be introduced to you.

He's going to make you feel good about yourself. I promise. He's going to have a lot to say coming up in the book of acts. But for this morning, we're going to focus on another man named Philip. Philip is going to end up in Samaria. He is going to flee the persecution. It's taking place in Jerusalem. And when you find a Jew in Samaria, that is a strange occurrence. Some of you that have studied this history know that Jews and Samaritans go together like oil and water. They don't connect.

You see, those people that lived in the land of Samaria, they were considered the half breeds. They weren't even fully genetically Jewish because they were part of the people that came out of the dispersion when a Syria came in and conquered the northern kingdom. And so the men and women began to marry and have offspring. And those were the Samaritans. And so the Jews didn't want to associate with the Samaritan so much so that when they would travel from the Galilee region to Jerusalem, they would cross the Jordan River before they would enter Samaria just to go around it and then cross the Jordan River again.

They so desperately despise that area, but you see when you're fleeing persecution and somebody is trying to take your life, that area doesn't seem so bad. And so Philip and others go to Samaria. And when they go there, they are going to do what God asks them to do. We're going to start a next chapter 8 one. So if you have your bibles, I encourage you to open there. I'm going to pray acts chapter 8 one, and then we're going to jump into the story where we are introduced to this man named Philip.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank you that you love us, that you care for us that you often take that, which is intended for evil, and you use it for good. And this is just another story of that. You took the death of Stephen and you used that to spread the good news of Jesus Christ around the known world. And we are here because of that. And so we thank you for turning our mess and our chaos into something beautiful.

My prayer this morning is that we would be open to hear from you and your spirit that you would continue to transform us to become more like you. Father that we would take our next step towards you as we read another story of your faithfulness and how you work amongst us. And so we ask this in Jesus name. Amen. Acts chapter 8, starting in verse one. We're going to read through verse three. And Saul, here's the man I'm introducing you to, approved of their killing him. He is standing there.

Remember, we just finished chapter 7. They have murdered Steven and Luke tells us that Saul was standing there actually holding the jackets we would find out of those that were murdering Steven. On that day, a great persecution, Luke tells us, broke out against the church in Jerusalem. And all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him, but Saul, this man began to destroy the church, going from house to house in Jerusalem, he dragged off both men and women and he put them in prison. So this is the first time we are introduced to Saul and scripture. It's not the way that you want to be introduced, correct? I mean, here he is being introduced as a man that was approving the death of Stephen. He wants to destroy the church. You see, Paul was a passionate man.

He was passionate about what he believed in and being raised in the Jewish culture and reading the Old Testament, memorizing most of it, Paul had an idea in his mind of what the messiah was going to look like when he came back and we've talked about this. He was looking for a warrior. He was looking for a conqueror. He was looking for somebody that was going to restore Israel as a national or as an international power. And when Jesus came, claiming to be the messiah, claiming to be the Christ, he was nothing of what Paul thought or what Saul thought this man would look like.

And so of course, he thought this was heresy. How dare this man claim to be God? How dare these people begin to follow him? And he was so passionate about his faith that he wasn't okay with people believing that. And so Saul actually began to actively seek out those that were believing this heresy to put them in prison so that the message would not spread any further. But what we find out about Saul is that you can be passionate, but you also can be passionately wrong.

You see, when I talk to people about their life, I find people that are passionate about a lot of things. I certainly run into people that are passionate about sports, people that are passionate about politics, they're passionate about music. And so they want to talk about it. They study it, they research it. And just as I think through that, and I think about my own life, is anybody that passionate about their faith? Do we spend that much time and energy investing in our relationship with God?

Would people say that about me? It's a good first question. For all of us, I think, as we begin to look at acts chapter 8, you see, God is going to use Saul's passion to persecute the church as a way for his church to explode in growth. And this trend continues all through scripture. Again, it's a beautiful theme that you see through scripture that everything the enemy tries to do to stop people from worshiping God, only makes more people do so.

Everything he tries to do only makes more people to do so, which proves once again that even in the midst of our chaos, God is working. Even in the midst of the world in which we live or we read the news and we get upset or we think to ourselves, God, I'm not sure I would do it that way, which really means if I were God, I would change it, right? I know better than he does. It's a very dangerous thing to think, but all of us have, but

as we read this story, we need to recognize that even in the midst of chaos, God has a plan, and he is working it out for something good.

We go on to the story in verse four. Luke tells us that those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. So Philip went down to a city in Samaria and he proclaimed the messiah there. Now let me just hit pause. When I read something like this, Philip went down to a city in Samaria, I instantly because of our culture and because of how we use our term down and up, I think of driving down going south, right? Like I'm heading towards Florida, but that's not what they mean here.

We always use terms of up and down to think north and south, directionally. So if we're going to go up north, we're going to go to Michigan to what I call the promised land, right? So we're going to go up there. You know, if we're going to drive east, we don't mention that state, but you got to go there sometimes. You know, that type of thing. When they said they were going up or down, they're talking about height. So when he went down to Samaria, again, this is just for information. Of course, Jerusalem is on a mountain mount Zion. So when he went down to Samaria, he went down the mountain, but he actually went north to Samaria.

Just so if you're as confused as I am now, you're not or more so. Okay, here we go. So he went down to Samaria to proclaim the messiah there 6. When the crowds heard Philip, and they saw the signs that he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with streaks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. And so he's doing miraculous signs amongst the Samaritans. So of course, there was great joy in that city.

So Luke tells us that Philip goes to that city and he begins performing these miraculous signs. People are being healed of sicknesses and diseases. They are having evil spirits sent out of them if you could imagine all of this taking place. I love that Luke tells us that the people were intrigued, right? Like they wanted to know what was going on. Wouldn't you? Could you imagine if somebody came into our town here into our city and we all know people that for their entire lives have had something wrong with them?

Well, they're medically or physically or mentally or whatever else we know these people have diseases, they have sicknesses, maybe they're lame. And this person comes to town and he begins to heal these people. And so we see them around town. And we said, wait a second, didn't you have something wrong with you? How are you healthy? I think that we all would be intrigued as well. As the stories would begin to circulate, oh, well, there was this guy who came into town and he told me to walk. And so I walked. We would begin to ask questions.

And I don't know about you, but I am just skeptical when it comes to healings and things that take place when I watch on TV. You know, you guys have seen those TV shows and other pastors and things that are going on and you hear stories. Maybe I just don't have enough faith, but I always think to myself, that person was just faking when they got to service. You know, they just showed up in a wheelchair. They really weren't, you know, whatever, and then they get up and walk. But you can't argue it if you've known that person your entire life. This wasn't just some big scam.

It wasn't a magic trick. It wasn't whatever else. These people knew each other. They lived a life together. And so they knew that something miraculous was taking place. And I also want you to notice the stark contrast that Luke is beginning to set up between the religious leaders and people in Jerusalem. And now these half breeds Samaritans in Samaria. What were they doing in Jerusalem? In Jerusalem, they were persecuting the followers. They were killing them. They were putting them in prison. They didn't believe it.

And these were supposed to be the religious leaders. And now we have these half breed Samaritans and Luke tells us that there was great joy in that city. They were celebrating the fact that God was doing something amongst them. They were happy they were excited, and again, it's amazing this contrast that Luke is setting

up because Jerusalem was supposed to be the religious capital of the world. That was where God's presence was.

It's where the temple was built. It's where God was supposed to be. And yet those people didn't recognize the messiah. Instead, the Samaritans, again, the half breed, those that had kind of lost their way. We're not following Jesus. They were filled with great joy. And it causes me to ask the question, do you ever feel like you are preaching in Jerusalem and you just want to go to Samaria?

Do you ever feel like you just have family and friends and coworkers and neighbors that you just so desperately want them to know Jesus? You try to love them. You do everything you can. You share the good news of Jesus to the best of your ability. And those people just go, eh, I don't want it. I don't want it. And you think, couldn't they just be more open to this? I know I do sometimes.

Now, fortunately, for me, no one has threatened my life as far as I know, but I sometimes wonder why God has placed us here for this time. So what's going to happen next? Let's look at what takes place here. Now, for some time, Luke tells us, a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city, and he amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great.

And all the people agreed, both high and low, they gave him their attention and they exclaimed this man, Simon is rightly called the great power of God. And so they followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. So here we're introduced to this man. It's the only time this man shows up in scripture. I assume he's a Samaritan. He's living in Samaria, and he performs sorcery. He does magic tricks. Somehow he does all of these things. And so we are introduced to Simon the sorcerer.

We don't have a lot of details about him, but we know according to Luke that he had a good reputation among the people. He made boastful claims that he was someone great, he was well known. He was prestigious, basically Luke tells us he owned the market in Samaria on magic and sorcery. And he was able to do things that the Samaritans could not explain. And so because of that, it probably made him very wealthy. So what happens when Philip comes to town?

What's going to happen between Simon and Phillip Simon who owned the market on magic and sorcery and healings and whatever he was doing in dabbling with, what's going to happen when he has a run in with Phillip. Look at this. But when the people of Samaria believed Philip, as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized both men and women. So baptisms are taking place in Samaria. And in verse 13, look at this.

Simon himself, this sorcerer, a Samaritan sorcerer, believed, and he also was baptized, and he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles that he saw. You see, when Phillip showed up, Simon knew that he had now witnessed real power. Real power, this was different. This wasn't fake. This wasn't magic. This wasn't sorcery. He was doing things that Simon could never imagine doing.

Now, I want you to understand that this is how Simon the sorcerer made a living with Philip there, doing these things. This was going to put Simon out of a job. It was going to ruin his reputation. It was going to take away his power and he certainly was going to lose his position. In the community, that can cause people to do a lot of crazy things. Think back to Jerusalem and think back to the religious leaders, the Pharisees, the Sadducees. Do you know why they killed Jesus?

Do you know why they began persecuting these new believers? Because they were afraid that somebody was going to steal their power. Somebody was going to take away their wealth. Somebody was going to take away their position in society. And so they drove them away. Again, the stark contrast between these religious people and then these Samaritan people, the Samaritan, Simon, a sorcerer, humbles himself, and recognizes God, he recognizes the power of God.

And so he believes, and he's baptized. He knew real power. He knew it wasn't a trick. And it just causes me to make this statement. Isn't it amazing that a Samaritan sorcerer recognized the truth about Jesus before the religious Jewish Pharisees? Unfortunately, I think the same is true today. I'm going to share with you something that I believe from my own personal life and experience.

I believe that America, the United States of America, specifically those people who have grown up in the church are the toughest mission field in the world. I've had the privilege the opportunity to go to Mexico and Brazil and China and I hear stories from our other missionaries and Uganda and Liberia and even in Israel as they share stories and I have personal experiences of talking to people about who Jesus is and I am always amazed at how open other people are to the good news of Jesus Christ.

And then I come back here to my own family and friends and neighbors that don't want anything to do with Jesus and it just amazes me. And I'm reminded of this in acts chapter 8 where I just think to myself, am I in the wrong place? Am I in Jerusalem and do I need to go to Samaria to share the good news? And I had to ask the question why? I had to ask the question why is that the case?

Why are people here so turned off to the message of Jesus? And I'll give you what I think if it's not the biggest reason. It is a large reason. The reason that many people hear are so turned off to that is because if they receive it, they have a lot to lose. A lot to give up. Let me share with you what I mean. When I would go to Mexico on a mission trip and I would talk with a teenager in Mexico and I would share with him, you know, about Jesus and about his love and about his forgiveness and his grace and mercy.

And I would say, are you willing to sacrifice your life to proclaim him as lord? Are you willing to give up control of your life, your dreams, your visions, your future, so that you will serve him whatever he asks you to do, that teenager in Mexico says, absolutely. Because that teenagers are already living in a house that has a dirt floor, barely has enough food to eat, doesn't have much hope for his future to begin with. It's an easy decision. You mean I have hope to follow the messiah, Jesus, the savior of the world?

Absolutely. This is the spirit of Simon the sorcerer. He knows he's lost. He knows he can't get anything on his own. And so he is all in. And so then I come back to the states, and this is no one person in particular, so I'm not describing anyone in the congregation, all right? I come back to the states and I talk to the 40 year old businessman. And I share with him about the love of Jesus Christ and the grace and the mercy that he wants to offer him. If only he would give up control and allow Jesus to be the lord of his life and his tentative.

Why? Well, he's tentative because if God asks him to give up everything, which he doesn't always do, this guy has a cushy job making 6 figures a year. He lives in a beautiful house; his 401K is growing. And so he has dreams of retirement and what that's going to look like. He loves to work hard, but he also likes to play and party hard. And he doesn't want to give that up. He doesn't want to give up those things. And I'm not saying that if you give your life to Jesus, he asks you to give everything, but what if he does?

And that's where these people in our lives, it's a struggle. What if he does ask me to give up that? That's the spirit of the Pharisees, and the Sadducees. Instead of looking at what they could gain, they look at what they could lose. It's the wrong focus. The contrast now, of course, Simon the sorcerer has a lot to figure out. And we're going to see that in the next few verses, I'm just going to read through those and then wrap this up.

But you still see the spirit of a man who is willing to surrender. And to give up, look at this. When the apostles in Jerusalem, those that had stayed behind, heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God. They sent Peter and John to Samaria to find out what's happening, right? They hear these stories. They're like, wait a second. The Samaritans are receiving Jesus. That can't be right. And so they have to send people to verify. So when Peter and John arrive, they prayed for the new believers there, that they might receive the Holy Spirit because up to that point, the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them.

They had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. So then Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. It was like a day of Pentecost too, right? The Holy Spirit comes upon all of these new believers. If you could just picture what that would look like and feel like and sound like. When Simon, the sorcerer saw that the spirit was given on that the laying on of the apostles hands, he offered them money. Now, this is not surprising, right? He was a wealthy man and he sees this amazing outpouring of the spirit.

And for either one of two reasons he says, hey, can I buy that ability? I'll pay you whatever you want. Either one, because he had experienced the Holy Spirit, and he wanted as many people to receive that as possible, or maybe he had some ulterior motive and was hoping, hey, if I have that power, I'll keep my position, and I'll, you know, whatever else we don't know the exact reasoning, but look at the response. And he said to them, give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit. And so Peter, and we all know Peter at this point, right?

Okay? Peter's the harsh one, right? He's the one that's just going to say whatever is at the front of his mind. He's not going to think about it. His filters, a lot smaller than our filters, right? And so look at what Peter says to this man. May your money perish with you because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money. You have no part or share in this ministry because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the lord and the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart for I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.

And I just imagine Simon going like, wow, wow. I just wanted to be able to give people the spirit, you know? This is kind of harsh. But we see the spirit of Simon a little bit here. So Simon answered Peter, prayed to the lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me. And after they had further proclaimed the word of the lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and Sean returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages. And so they saw how effective this was, and they said, man, if Philip is having converts, we're going to do the same thing.

We're going to preach in Samaria on our way back to Jerusalem. Now, thinking back to Simon, the sorcerer, could you just put yourself in his shoes and imagine being called out by Peter in front of everybody? You've just had this experience and it's new to you and you're trying to make sense of it. And we do get a little heart, a little look, our peek into the heart of Simon the sorcerer. He says, well, just pray that none of that that you just said will happen to me. Maybe that wasn't my goal. I didn't want any of that.

And so we see that. Now, Simon doesn't show up in scripture again, Simon the sorcerer. We have extra biblical literature that would suggest that he continues to be a follower of Jesus Christ, but we don't have anything in scripture. About him. But it's interesting that even Peter going down to Samaria, found it hard to believe that they were receiving Jesus and the truth. He still in his mind had that religious idea. These aren't the people that are going to accept him.

And it probably even bothered him that some of the Samaritans were confessing Jesus as their savior. He probably wasn't too happy about it, but he goes down and he sees this is real. This is really happening. These people have a different spirit amongst them. It's open to receive this good news. And so as we close today, I asked the question of all of us, are we willing to receive the good news our stuff? You see, whenever the gospel of Jesus Christ is presented, we have two options.

We either can receive it and we can welcome it in with open arms and say, okay, God, I am I am going to submit myself to you, whatever that means, giving up comforts, giving up some of the things that I have. I will submit to you because what you offer is so much greater than what I currently have. Or we can reject it. We can reject it because we're afraid that what we're holding on to so tightly is going to be pulled from us. And we think that what we have here is so great.

And so we're all about building our kingdom and accumulating wealth and stuff and happiness and possessions and we want all of that because that's what the world tells us is important. And so we buy into that lie. And so today, like always, there's many here who have already proclaimed God as their savior. You've said Jesus, you are my lord. I've surrendered everything to you.

And for you, this is just an opportunity to praise and to thank him for who he is and to say God continue to teach me, continue to point out things in me, errors in my life that I need to grow, how I can better serve you. But there's potentially other people here today that are either watching or listening or hear that have never proclaimed Jesus as lord. And so maybe today, the gospel is being shared again, and you just need to come before him and say, God, I don't know what it is that I'm holding on to, but I'm willing to give it up for you.

Because what you offer is so much greater. And so I encourage you to do that. Let me close in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you for loving us where you are, where we are. I thank you for even in the midst of our messiness, even in the midst of our sins, even in the midst of the mistakes that we make that you still use broken people like us.

And father if there's anybody here who doesn't know you, personally, intimately, I pray that their heart and their mind would be open to experience you today. They would proclaim you as lord and savior of their life that they would repent of their sins, they would turn from them and they would run towards you. And receive all that you have waiting. We ask this in Jesus name.

Amen.