

The Book of Acts – The Spirit Moving

The Power of the Gospel in Samaria / Acts 8:4-13 / July 13, 2025

Introduction:

In today's sermon, we will be looking at the aftermath of Stephen's martyrdom and the subsequent persecution of the early Church in Jerusalem. From our human perspective, it would be hard to see how exactly this practically brand new religious movement could survive such a thing. With a notable member of the Church body brutally murdered in broad daylight by an angry mob and the chaos of persecution from the religious elite that followed, it wouldn't be hard to imagine that some might think it was all over. The power of those in charge was indeed great, but the power of God is far greater. Even though the early believers were scattered after Stephen's death, this does not mean that God is done with His mission and this does not mean that the Holy Spirit is done with the expansion of the Gospel message. In fact, this is merely the beginning of the expansion of God's missionary work! The Lord used the darkness of that day to spread His Gospel to other parts of the world! Just as He so often does in the lives of those who believe, the Lord uses trial and tribulation to work something good. In this case, it is as the early Church father Tertullian said, "the blood of the martyrs are the seed of the Church." And those seeds will now be cast into Samaria, a land of outcasts, and eventually reach the ends of the earth. God's eternal blessings that come with salvation in Christ are being made available for those who are far off. But who are the Samaritans, and why are they thought of as outcasts? The historian Josephus and Jewish tradition trace the origin of the Samaritans to the captivity of the northern kingdom under Assyria in 721 BC. Jews of the northern kingdom were forced to intermarry with Assyrians after the captivity and produced the half-Jewish, half-Gentile Samaritan race. For instance, when the Jews accused Jesus of being a "Samaritan" in John 8:48, they were rudely suggesting that He was a half-breed, born of an unfaithful mother. In addition to this, the Samaritans had allowed syncretism from other cultures leak into their religious system. They believed they were true followers of the Torah but blended pagan practices with their understanding such as thinking that worshipping God could only be done from a high place. Unlike the Samaritans, when the southern kingdom of Judah was captured and sent into exile by the Babylonian Empire, they were given a section of land to reside in and maintain their heritage, traditions, and bloodline. In New Testament times, the Jews despised Samaritans and would have nothing to do with them. But now, that dividing wall of hostility is about to fall, and all according to God's plan. Today's passage shows us another partial fulfillment of what Jesus told the disciples would happen after He ascended into heaven. In Acts 1:8, the Lord foretold the coming of the Holy Spirit, but He also said that the disciples were to be witnesses not only in Jerusalem and in all Judea, but also in Samaria.

Acts 1:8

8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

This is another powerful display of God's sovereign reign over His creation. If He can speak light and life into existence out of nothing, surely something like martyrdom and persecution has no chance prevailing against the Almighty. The religious leaders thought themselves to be powerful but compared to the power of God they pose no greater threat than the world's mightiest ant.

And yet they remained persistent in their opposition of Jesus and His followers. From Stephen's heart-piercing words one thing becomes abundantly clear: that these people did not change. Their hearts were still rebellious and they saw no problem with the shedding of innocent blood. Their rage at the truth being exposed lead to Stephen's death, even while he forgave them. Even in the face of death the power of the Gospel in Stephen's forgiveness of his persecutors rings as clear as a bell... The enemy wants to hinder God's work, but will only learn that he is destined to fail over and over again. Let us look once more at verse 1 in chapter 8.

Acts 8:1

Saul Ravages the Church

1 And Saul approved of his 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. With Stephen's death, the persecution did not end, rather, it spiked in ferocity. His death marked an increase in persecution that scattered the believers except the apostles. This is important to note. Although Jesus' words about the spread of the Gospel were to those who witnessed His ascension, who does God choose to send out into the world to share the message of salvation? The other believers! The work of ministering to a world in need of salvation first rested not on the shoulders of the giants of faith. No, it rested on people like you. This tremendous responsibility of spreading the faith was carried out by everyday believers who trusted not in their own strength but in the powerful message of salvation to all who believe. It is likely that these people hadn't even seen the resurrected Christ and yet they are the ones who are fulfilling His will.

Acts 8:4-5

Philip Proclaims Christ in Samaria

4 Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. 5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.

From this verse, we are reintroduced to a man named Philip and his ministry. We learned about Philip back in Acts 6 when the elders suggested to find seven men to serve as Deacons in the daily distribution of food to the widows among them. One of those seven men, along with Stephen, was Philip. After the scattering of the believers in Jerusalem, Philip went to Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the result of this ministry is another mass conversion. Look at Acts 8:6

Acts 8:6

6 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.

What we must reiterate here is that Philip went to the Samaritans. A people group despised, if not hated, by the Jews. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has no boundaries and Salvation is for all. The message of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus Christ cannot be confined or restricted by anyone. Neither persecution nor deep seated prejudice can stop the power of God. Throughout history, men have thought

they are capable of binding God's Word and stopping it from spreading in the world, but this is only a fanciful dream that will never come true. So Philip went to a city in Samaria and preached, or proclaimed the Gospel. We do not know what specific city, but we do know. The verb "proclaim" in Greek is κηρύσσω (kay-ROOS-so), which means: "to publicly announce religious truths and principles while urging acceptance and compliance—to preach." Louw-Nida, 33.256. This term is not a technical term, but a term used to proclaim the message of God with authority and confidence. The term used in the Old Testament is קָרָא (kara), which means "to call" and has the idea where the prophets of the Old Testament would proclaim God's word with authority, expecting that the listeners would take action on the message being delivered. In addition to this, Philip was performing signs so that the people there couldn't refuse the truth of what they saw. This mere Deacon, on the run from persecution, was preaching/proclaiming the message of God with divine authority and confidence. And the people responded. With one accord they paid attention to his words. And how could they not when signs of power were being performed before their very eyes?

Acts 8:6-8

6 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. 7 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. 8 So there was much joy in that city.

The incredible miracles being shown to the Samaritans was the Holy Spirit's way of validating Philip's mission. He was doing what the Apostles did in Jerusalem even though he was Deacon. With the help of the Holy Spirit, Philip was doing the work of the Lord. Because of Philip's ministry, people were being liberated from unclean spirits (7-8), many people were healed from physical disabilities, and there was joy in the city! Could you imagine? A man walks into town and heals people physically and spiritually while telling everyone about someone even greater than himself who can give them eternal forgiveness and reconciliation with God? Yes, there was much joy in that city. But now, there comes a shift in the narrative. There was a man named Simon, who had been practicing magic, which was forbidden in the Torah, and the Samaritans had fallen for his skills. Look at verse 9.

Acts 8:9

Simon the Magician Believes

9 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.

All the great and powerful things about God, His message, His miracles were going on - the city was filled with joy. But then something happens. This man named Simon, who was a magician or sorcerer, who went about amazing people with power borne from darkness, and had the audacity to call himself great. Perhaps he was simply an illusionist, tricking people in order to puff himself up and reap the benefits of an awestruck crowd? Or maybe he really was tapping in to demonic power? What we do know is that at one point in time he had the Samaritans wrapped around his finger. But in spite of this man making himself known for a while, and people listening to him, they are now listening to Philip and paying close attention and are no longer paying attention to Simon.

Acts 8:10-11

10 They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." 11 And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.

In verses 10-11 we learn that this man has another name that he earned through ill bought means: This man is the Power of God called Great. However great Simon may have been, he was not greater than God, and his magic has no equivalent to God's great works. You see, this is the fate of spiritual fraudulence: whenever a cheap imitation, no matter how good it may seem is compared to the authentic thing, there is no denying it. The only logical course of action is put down the imposter and turn to the real thing. Power, real spiritual power, is utterly overwhelming when faced up against an imposter. Although the people had paid attention to and had exalted Simon the Magician, this wasn't the case any longer. Instead, the people now paid attention to Philip's message and they paid attention to the power of God at work in and through him.

Acts 8:12-13

12 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. 13 Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

In verses 12-13 we learn that the people of Samaria not only listened to and believed Philip's message, but walked forward in obedience and were baptized. It says that even Simon himself came to faith and was baptized and started following Philip. However, was Simon really saved? The last sentence here is telling of what is to come. Seeing the power of God being manifested through Philip in signs and great miracles may have served to tempt Simon. It is not that God was tempting him, it was the lust for power and fame and greatness that Simon hadn't repented of that made him hunger for it once more. This man who was known for displays of power was now coveting the power of God so soon after a confession of faith. So, was Simon really saved? We will see that next week. For now, let us turn to our conclusion while the worship team makes their way back up to the stage... What can we learn from this passage that we can apply to our own lives and our own personal ministries? Are you taking part in the fulfillment of Jesus' words in Acts 1:8? Are you participating in sharing the Gospel message to the ends of the earth (or, at the very least, the ends of this city)? Are you proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ? The message of forgiveness for our trespasses against a holy and righteous and powerful God; reconciliation with our Creator, bought for us as a ransom by the blood of His Son? If you are not, why not? Is it the fear of rejection? Maybe the fear of persecution? God is more powerful than these things and He will not allow His plans to fail. Even if it looks like all is lost, we can have faith that the Lord is still at work, still moving, and will accomplish His will! Or maybe you haven't been sharing the Gospel because you think yourself unqualified to do so? Do you think Philip, a newly appointed Deacon felt unqualified? Or do you think He relied on the power of God as he shared his faith with people who could have been hostile to him? Don't deny God's power by thinking He can't work through you! Maybe you find yourself too distracted by the things of this world to pay attention to something so powerful that it can bring everlasting joy and

everlasting life to an entire city? Stop giving your attention to things that make themselves out to be great but aren't really anything great at all. You cannot trust them. Instead, trust in the powerful working of God in salvation. He can turn persecution into prayer, rebellion into repentance, and anger into adoration. He is more powerful than we can possibly imagine and He aims to transform the hardest of hearts into those who not only trust in the message of the Gospel but seek to share that transformation with everyone. After all, it was said by the same man who once approved of Stephen's death:

Romans 1:16

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.