“Preaching the Good News”
Acts 8:1-40
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In Marrianne’s lecture on Acts 7, Stephen gave religious leaders a Jewish history lesson, causing them to become a vicious mob and stoning him. Acts 8 opens with the next part of the story: “And Saul approved of their killing him.” (8:1a) Thus begins our introduction to the young Pharisee who protected the leaders’ coats while they stoned Stephen to death – Saul of Tarsus.

Saul prided himself on keeping the Torah and Jewish traditions; had a strong background in Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures; trained as a Pharisee under Gamaliel and may even have debated with Stephen at the synagogue that day he was killed.

in this chapter I’ll point out that:

- Saul - Ravaged God’s people
- Seeds - Of the Gospel were scattered
- Samaria - Barriers were broken down
- Sorcerer - Was saved but shallow
- Spirit - Directed, empowered, transported

The death of Stephen was planned for evil, **but God** would use it for good. God’s amazing plan started to unfold as His gospel, His word, and His offer of salvation exploded beyond the walls of Jerusalem.

“On that day [of Stephen’s death] a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Saul began to destroy the church.” (8:1,3a)

Persecution scattered believers from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. Jesus told His Apostles: “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.” (Acts 1:8) Thus began the unstoppable expansion of the Gospel beyond Jerusalem, driven by the sovereignty of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Saul’s zeal for a “pure” Jewish Israel turned him into a notorious persecutor of the Church. His goal was to stop Christians and to do so with violence, dragging men and women from their families and throwing them into prison. Saul was the greatest persecutor of believers but would become the greatest evangelist and one of the most influential figures in Christianity when God’s grace leads him to become Apostle Paul. As an Apostle, Paul would write: “For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.” (Galatians 1:13)

Until that day when Stephen was martyred, few believers had gone outside Jerusalem to tell others about Jesus Messiah. God used Stephen’s murder to give believers a *persecution push* setting His plan in motion to make disciples of all people.

Sometimes we have to be uncomfortable before we'll move, and persecution forced believers out of their comfortable, exclusively-Jewish society into taking the gospel with them outside Jerusalem. "For the Kingdom of God to spread to the rest of the world, it had to go beyond its Jewish roots." (Bible scholar F.F. Bruce)

"Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails." (Proverbs 19:21) Not only did persecution fail to silence the good news, but God used it to scatter believers who would quickly and widely spread that news into faraway territories. "Those who had been scattered, preached the word wherever they went." (8:4)

Believers who fled Jerusalem were not formal preachers but "accidental missionaries." They were neither apostles nor trained evangelists. Theirs' wasn't formal preaching, but informal *chattering* to friends and acquaintances. "They went everywhere gossiping the gospel." (Church Historian, Wayne Meeks)

The Apostles remained in Jerusalem, and for good reason. When Jesus was with them, they were told to *first* go to the Jews to teach He was their promised Messiah. It was also the Apostles' responsibility to fully establish the church in Jerusalem before they left to evangelize the "ends of the earth."

Another of Luke's great examples of God's "divine appointments" is that of Philip and an Ethiopian. This Philip was one of the seven deacons in Acts chapter 6. He was a Hellenistic Jew and a Greek-speaking Jesus-follower. Luke tells us: "Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there." (8:5) It was time for non-Jews to hear about Jesus, so Philip left Jerusalem for Samaria. This would have been a huge "ask" for Philip. Samaritans were historically despised by Greeks (Gentiles) and Jews.

So, who were the Samaritans? Samaritans were a mix of a partly-Jewish and partly-Gentile people. Their religion was a mixture of Judaism and idolatry which permeated into their culture and beliefs. The Samaritans held to a few important aspects of the Jewish faith but had their own version of the Scriptures, their own temple, and differing views on the Messiah. Over the centuries, Jews despised Samaritans. Conversely, Samaritans despised the Jews because of their intolerance and "holier than thou" treatment of them.

When Jesus was on earth, He told His disciples to stay away from Samaria until after His resurrection. And then, He specifically told them to take the gospel there. Jesus had promised the woman at the well that Samaritans would worship in spirit and in truth and Philip was the evangelist who would start it to happen.

The Holy Spirit gave Philip "signs and wonders" to cast out unclean spirits and heal the paralyzed and crippled. Such miraculous signs authenticated his message and also captured the attention of one *Simon the Sorcerer of Samaria*. Some translations say he practiced magic. Watching magicians frustrates me trying to figure out their tricks! My friends stopped asking me to go with them to magic shows. While everyone around is gasping at the coolness of the trick, I lean over and whisper, "Where did it go?!" or "How did he do that?!" They look at me like I just asked them what a spoon is!

Most magicians just perform illusions, yet Simon's sorcery came from Satan just as it had with Pharoah's magicians in Moses's time. Simon used sorcery to amaze and deceive and I'm sure he made some shekels doing so. The local people believed he was "God's Great Power" however, his power did not come from God.

Luke wrote that when the Samaritans heard Philip proclaim "…the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized and followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw." (8:12, 13) Seems that Simon became the "ex" sorcerer of Samaria…or did he? We'll return to him in a moment.

"Philip's goal wasn't to make more Jewish believers. His goal was to make Messianic Samaritans!" (Jim Swaney, pastor and former People of the Word lecturer) Philip's ministry in Samaria demonstrated the effectiveness of sharing the good news to people and places not familiar to us.

The spread of the gospel was new, and thus far, few Gentiles had believed in Jesus. So, the Jerusalem church sent Apostles Peter and John to Samaria to find out if Gentile non-Jews and Samaritan half-Jews were actually believing in and accepting Jesus as Messiah.

Do you recall that when John was a disciple, he once asked Jesus if he and his brother James could call fire to reign down on a Samaritan village? Now as an Apostle, instead of John calling down fire to *destroy* the Samaritans, he would be calling upon a *different* kind of fire.

"When [Peter and John] arrived, they prayed for the new believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit." (8:15-17) Ephesians 1:13 tells us that at the moment of salvation, the Holy Spirit is given to believers, so why hadn't the believing Samaritans received Him yet?

Let's remember that the book of Acts is history of how God started the church. In the very early stages of spreading the gospel, some of the events were special circumstances designed by God. We must allow the rest of the Bible to help us with interpretations and applications. How the Samaritans received the Spirit shouldn't be construed as normative but taken for what it was—an accurate account of what happened in *their* case, because it was God's sovereign plan for it to happen that way.

Also, an Apostolic presence was needed to confirm the Samaritans were coming to faith in Jesus and to emphasize the significance of the Samaritan's conversions. God's Holy Spirit *would* come upon the Samaritans but not until Apostles Peter and John were present and for God's good reasons:

- The church was to be "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." (Ephesians 2:20) Apostles needed to be present for the "official" start of the

Samaritan church, just as they had been present in Jerusalem for the start of the church there.

- Perhaps God wanted Peter and John to witness the gift of the Spirit when they prayed and laid hands upon Samaritan believers. Prayer and the laying on of hands provided a *Samaritan Pentecost,* if you will, that paralleled what believers experienced at Pentecost in Jerusalem. The Samaritans were filled with the same Spirit as were the Jewish converts, making them part of the same church.

- The presence of the Apostles served to keep the early church unified. Remember, there was a great animosity between Jews and Samaritans. If the church in Samaria had begun with no connection to the Jerusalem church, they would likely not have been accepted. However, animosity that had existed between the Jews and Samaritans was overcome by Spirit-created unity.

We return now to Simon: "When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, 'Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.'" (8:18,19) Simon didn't say, "Give me also the Holy Spirit." Instead, he said, "I want to *buy* the Holy Spirit." Could Simon have been more interested in miracles than in the Messiah and personal gain?

Simon's request to buy a gift that *only* God can give was so offensive, it garnered a severe rebuke from Apostle Peter who told him:

- You will die and your money will die with you.
- You will have no part of this ministry.
- Your heart is not right before God.
- Repent from your wickedness.
- Pray the Lord will forgive you.
- You are full of bitterness.
- You are captive to sin.

To Philip, Simon then said: "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me." (8:24) Had Simon's initial profession of faith been sincere or had he just said the words? Was his plea for prayer simply out of fear or was he repentant? Only God knows the heart, however, many scholars believe Simon's faith was sincere - that he actually had become a believer, but his errant thinking led him to sin and believe God's gift could be bought.

"Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." (Ecclesiastes 7:20). Until we are glorified in God's presence, *all* mankind inhabits a sin-infected body. However, because believers have God's Holy Spirit dwelling in us and guiding us, we can achieve greater and greater victory over sin.

"After [Peter and John] further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, [they] returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages." (8:25) This concludes Luke's account in Acts chapter 8 of Samaritan converts coming to

faith in Jesus. In spite of persecution, the good news was heard outside Jerusalem's walls. because what Saul intended for evil, God used for good.

Then, Luke gave us another account of the Spirit using Philip to spread the gospel into the Gentile world. "An angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." Philip didn't question the angel about why he couldn't remain in Samaria where his ministry was so successful. Instead, he obeyed immediately.

On the desert road Philip would meet a man who needed a question answered; which led to the man's salvation; which demonstrated the importance of being sensitive to the Spirit's guidance. Their meeting was no coincidence because an *angel* directed the get-together.

"On his way [Philip] met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of the treasury of the queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet." (8:26-28)

It's believed the Ethiopian was in fact, a eunuch, primarily because of the number of times Luke referred to him that way. In antiquity, many men who served royalty were eunuchs. Most faced societal shame and were unable to reproduce or marry. However, many were influential as was the Ethiopian who managed the queen of Ethiopia's treasury making him a high-ranking government official.

It's believed he was wealthy because owning a scroll of Isaiah would have been costly *and* he had a chariot. Also, he was literate, meaning he must have afforded or been given an education. Most scholars believe he was a Gentile proselyte — a non-Jew who worshipped God and may have even converted to Judaism. Yet, because he was a eunuch, per Mosaic law, he would not have been allowed to fully participate in temple worship.

"The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.' Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet." (8:29,30a) Philip asked the perfect question of someone seeking the Lord: "Do you understand what you are reading?" (8:30) The Ethiopian responded, "'How can I unless someone explains it to me?' So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him." (8:31)

Verses 32 and 33 were from Isaiah 53. What better passage for the Ethiopian to be reading than *that* passage, perhaps, the single greatest prophesy in the Old Testament about Jesus Christ the Savior-Messiah. Jesus fulfilled many of the prophecies in Isaiah 53, including His rejection, His silence before His accusers, His death between wicked men, the substitutionary nature of His suffering, and His burial in a rich man's grave.

"The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?' Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus." (8:34,35) I wondered if Philip replied, "Have your driver slow down because I have a lot to tell you!" Philip certainly would have given him *all* the

gospel story, including the coming of Jesus Christ, His substitutionary death, His resurrection, and His offer of eternal life.

Some people think the Old Testament is not relevant today, but Philip led this man to faith in Jesus by using *only* Scripture from the Old Testament and the good news that someone had once shared with Philip. If the Old Testament in your Bible looks new and unused, it may mean you're missing out on a major portion of God's revelation of Himself and the recording of His plans for humanity.

Regarding the eunuch, how and why a man was made a eunuch and the effects it would have on his life must have been devastating. I wondered if Philip also discussed with him, or if the Ethiopian had read, Isaiah 56, because it sounds like the Lord wrote it just for him:

> "Don't let foreigners who commit themselves to the LORD say, 'The LORD will never let me be part of His people.' And don't let the eunuchs say, 'I'm a dried-up tree with no children and no future.' For the LORD says: I will bless those eunuchs who keep My Sabbath days holy and who choose to do what pleases Me and commit their lives to Me. I will give them—within the walls of My house— a memorial and a name far greater than sons and daughters could give. For the name I give them is an everlasting one. It will never disappear!" (Isaiah 56:3-5)

Philip must have taught the man that in his newfound faith, baptism was a step of obedience, and he seemed eager to obey: "As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him." (8:36,38)

This story exemplifies what Apostle Paul taught in Romans: "How can [the unsaved] call on [Jesus] to save them unless they believe in Him? And how can they believe in Him if they have never heard about Him? And how can they hear about Him unless someone tells them?" (Romans 10:14)

Let's move on to Acts chapter 8 verse 37. I'll refer to it as: "Who axed Acts 8:37?"

Does your Bible translation contain verse 37? The ones I use do not, but it *is* included in the footnotes. Some of the translations that include verse 37 say something very close to this: "Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And [the Ethiopian] answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." (8:37) Acts 8:37 clearly articulates the doctrine that to be saved, one must believe "that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

I explored many writings of Biblical scholars, academia, and researchers to learn why verse 37 doesn't appear in every translation. Here's what I learned.

Scholars, and translators of the Bible, interpret the *oldest manuscripts available* to determine the writer's original wording. Some versions of the Bible do not include verse 37

because the manuscripts they studied did not support that verse as being part of the original writings. Yet there are many translators who agree that: "… there were very ancient copies which contained [verse 37] and passed it on through many generations of copyists." (The Trinitarian Bible Society)

There is no debate among scholars and translators whether that verse is part of Biblical *teaching*, because it is in complete agreement with Scripture. "The omission of "verse 37" does not change core Christian teachings, because the necessity of believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God is affirmed in other passages throughout the Bible." (gotquestions.org) For example, the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

In my prior lecture on Acts 3, a divine appointment was defined as a meeting between people that was unmistakably ordered by God. The meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian is another example of a God-ordained encounter. God brought them together to fulfill His purpose. Philip was told by an angel to go to a specific place and approach a complete stranger. Then Philip engaged in a conversation with the stranger who "just happened" to be reading from Isaiah 53 which led him coming to faith. Then after the man's conversion and baptism, Philip was, well… here's what happened…

The Ethiopian was baptized and, "When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing." (8:39) Was water still dripping from the Ethiopian's baptized eyes when *poof*, Philip was gone?

In verse 39 the verbs "snatched, caught, carried" are how various translations record Philip's *supernatural exit*. Many scholars believe he was *teleported*, meaning: "to move or transfer from one place to another instantly without traveling across the physical space in between." Man is limited by time and space. God is not, and if the Holy Spirit moved Philip, it was a sudden miraculous departure that only the Spirit of the Lord can do!

"Philip's boundary-breaking mission in Acts 8 is appropriately capped off by his sudden, miraculous removal from the scene…The Spirit blows where [He] wills, sweeping the gospel across standard zones of times, space, and society." (F. Scott Spencer, professor and pastor)

The eunuch went on his way rejoicing, and Philip went on *his* way to where the Holy Spirit dropped him off next. "Philip appeared at Azotus…" (8:40a) Azotus was a couple days walk from where Philip was with the Ethiopian, so if the power of the Spirit *did* teleport Philip, it would have been a quick and comfortable commute! The Lord had a huge mission for Philip — to spread the gospel as he worked his way up the coast to Caesarea.

The next time Luke mentions Philip, it will be in Acts 21, about twenty years later, when Apostle Paul will travel through Caesarea and meet up with Philip; and Philip will welcome the man who drove him out of Jerusalem.

"…God [used] our foolish preaching to save those who believe." (1 Corinthians 1:21) His global love and His plan to have His gospel spread outside Jerusalem began when Philip obeyed Him and started evangelizing anyone who would listen, including the Gentiles in Samaria, in Gaza, and from Azotus to Caesarea.

Chapter 8 opened the doors for us to see:

- That persecution did not *stop* the good news – it spread *because* of it.
- The good news spread through an evangelist, Apostles and amateur missionaries.
- We too need to be obedient like Philip in sharing Jesus with others.
- No one is beyond the reach of God's saving grace.

So, consider asking the Lord, "How do You want me to serve You today? Lead me to someone You've prepared to hear the gospel and give me the power and the boldness to do so."

Then, be ready for possible divine appointments and to be moved to do something the Holy Spirit is calling you to do.