

# Acts

*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. (Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)*

## **Breaking New Ground**

**February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**Acts 8:4-25**

**Rev. Levi denBok**

### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 8.

In our passage this morning, a SEISMIC SHIFT is taking place. Thus far in the story, we have watched as the gospel of Jesus Christ has transformed the city of Jerusalem. But here, in Acts 8, the gospel is beginning its spread to the nations! As you know by now, this was always the plan. Before he ascended to heaven, Jesus gave us this assignment:

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.** (Acts 1:8 ESV)

God's plan of salvation stretches beyond Jerusalem to the end of the earth. And this plan stretches back LONG BEFORE Acts 1. When God made a covenant with Abraham, he promised him:

in your offspring shall **all the nations of the earth be blessed** (Genesis 22:18a ESV)

God's plan has ALWAYS been to bless the nations!

And in our passage this morning, God's plan is moving forward and breaking new ground. As Matt mentioned last Sunday, God used the stoning of Stephen and the subsequent persecution of the church to mobilize His people. Overnight, a flood of passionate, all-in followers of Jesus fled

out of Jerusalem and into the neighbouring communities. Look with me to Acts 8. We will be reading verses 4-25. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> So there was much joy in that city.

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. <sup>10</sup> They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." <sup>11</sup> And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

<sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, <sup>15</sup> who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, <sup>16</sup> for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>17</sup> Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, <sup>19</sup> saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." <sup>20</sup> But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup> You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup> Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. <sup>23</sup> For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." <sup>24</sup> And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

<sup>25</sup> Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. (Acts 8:4-25 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As we work our way through this passage, we find a powerful demonstration of the kinds of things that happen when the gospel breaks new ground.

### **What Happens When The Gospel Breaks New Ground?<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Pastor Paul Carter for this outline.

Before we go any further, I want to take a moment to briefly explain what we mean when we use the term “the gospel”.

5 G’s explanation. (2 minutes)

The other day I came across a video from 2021 of a woman holding a cute little octopus in her hand. In the video, she lets it crawl back and forth from one hand to the next. Little did she know, it was a blue-ringed octopus – one of the most venomous animals on the planet! One bite would have killed her! But, oblivious to its power, she simply tossed it back and forth in her hands.

In the same way, sometimes, we seem to lose sight of the fact that this gospel we proclaim possesses life-altering, transformation-demanding, no-turning-back POWER! It literally changes EVERYTHING! And yet, we can be so casual and flippant with it.

I pray that this passage will awaken us to the power of the message that we proclaim. Here we find a portrait of a people group that is absolutely transformed! What happens when the gospel breaks new ground? Well, the first thing we see in this story is that:

### **1. It displaces lesser powers**

As these persecuted believers fled from Jerusalem, Philip wound up in Samaria. And, while he was there, he met a man named Simon. In verses 9-11, we’re told that Simon was a legend in his community. The people actually said of him:

“This man is the power of God that is called Great.” (Acts 8:10b ESV)

Can you imagine that?! It’s one thing to be well thought of by your peers, but it is another thing entirely when they understand you to be a walking, talking manifestation of the power of God!

Simon was a magician, and not the type of magician that you might find in a Las Vegas performance. Like Pharaoh’s magicians in the exodus account, Simon wielded dark, spiritual power. Anyone who has engaged with missions work outside of North America will tell you that

what we find in this text is not out of the usual. The occult is not a joke, and the Bible speaks openly about the reality of, and the power of the demonic.

Thankfully, however, the Bible also teaches us emphatically that the power of darkness is no match for the power of God! And we see that here in this story. Whatever power Simon wielded; it was dwarfed by the power of God as displayed in Philip! The community that had so highly revered Simon turned away from the powerful magician to follow King Jesus. In verse 13, we read this amazing detail:

**Even Simon himself believed**, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. (Acts 8:13 ESV)

The town magician – the man who had been known as the power of God – bent his knee and submitted to Jesus! He fell in line and expressed his faith through baptism along with the rest of the community!

Have you ever done that science experiment with your kids where you have a bowl of water with some food colouring dropped on top, and then you insert a little drop of dish soap? Do you remember what happens? The food colouring is jettisoned to the outside of the bowl because that's what dish soap does! Just a drop of it!

Well, the gospel is doing THAT in our passage this morning. In fact, the transformation of the city was so radical, that Simon pulled the Apostles aside to see if he might strike a deal to purchase some of this spiritual power for himself. The text says:

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, <sup>19</sup> saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:18-19 ESV)

But Peter replied:

"May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup> You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. (Acts 8:20b-21 ESV)

To this day, when a person attempts to purchase positions of spiritual authority it is referred to as “Simony.” You can’t purchase the Holy Spirit! You can’t manufacture the powerful transformation that the Spirit of God brings about in a person’s life! Self-help books have tried. Legalists and moralists have tried. False teachers have tried. But the authority-displacing, LIFE-TRANSFORMING power of the gospel only comes about through the work of the Spirit of God!

And for that reason, when a person tells you that they have believed the gospel and put their trust in Jesus, you should watch expectantly for a transformed life. Because, when the Spirit comes in, all lesser powers go OUT! Not overnight, of course. But slowly, and surely, the lesser powers will be displaced.

There’s a famous story of a man who approached the old famous preacher Rowland Hill. He drunkenly leaned against a lamppost on the street and slurred, “Hey! Mr. Hill, I’m one of your converts!” Rowland replied, “Well, you must be one of mine – You’re certainly not one of the Lord’s!”<sup>2</sup>

When the Spirit comes in, the power of sin goes out. The gospel displaces all lesser powers. Second, we learn in this story that when the gospel breaks new ground:

## **2. It creates a new community**

Later on, we’re going to discuss the tension that existed between the Samaritans and the Jews, but for now, let it suffice to say that these two polar-opposite groups of people were brought together as one community in this story. The gospel has the power to miraculously bring together people who have every worldly reason to remain apart.

The significance of what happened in this episode is emphasized by an unusual detail. To see this, we need to ask an important question: Why was there a delay in the Samaritan’s reception of the Spirit? They were saved and baptized under Philip’s preaching, but they did not receive the Holy Spirit until the Apostles came and laid hands on them. Why is that?

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<sup>2</sup> As told by Mark Dever in Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church 4<sup>th</sup> ed.*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 286.

To be clear: Nowhere in the New Testament Epistles do we EVER read about Christians who do not possess the Spirit. From Romans to the end of the New Testament, it is taught and assumed that **every Christian** is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. For example, when the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, he asked:

Or do you not know that **your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you**, whom you have from God? (1 Corinthians 6:19 ESV)

Notice that Paul doesn't qualify that line. He doesn't say, "Now, for those of you who have received the *second blessing* don't you know that your body is a temple?" No, he assumes that EVERY believer in that church is indwelt by the Spirit. He makes the same assumption when he writes in Romans 5:

and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts **through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us**. (Romans 5:5 ESV)

Again, notice that there is no qualifier. There is no category in Paul's mind for Christians who have not had the love of God poured into their hearts by the Spirit. He pointed the entire congregation to this glorious reminder.

We could go on and on with examples like this, but I'll point to one more. Paul wrote to the Ephesians and warned:

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, **by whom you were sealed** for the day of redemption. (Ephesians 4:30 ESV)

This verse is critical to our understanding because in it, Paul explains that one of the functions of the Holy Spirit is that He SEALS us as God's people. Think of the old wax seals that they stamped onto letters to ensure that the envelope had not been tampered with – the Holy Spirit is LIKE THAT! He is a seal on every believer identifying us as authentic children of God! Therefore, there can be no such thing as a believer who does not possess the Holy Spirit.

That's the regular pattern.

Yet, seeing that regular pattern makes this story all the more perplexing, because it's NOT what we see here! Look again at verses 14-17:

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, <sup>15</sup> who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, <sup>16</sup> **for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.** <sup>17</sup> Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:14-17 ESV)

What we find here is a group of people who have repented, placed their trust in Jesus, and professed that faith through baptism. And yet, until the Apostles came, they had not received the Holy Spirit. How is that possible?! What is going on in this story?

Now, some will try to explain this away by speculating that these folks were not *truly* converted under Stephen's ministry. "Perhaps his preaching was lacking, or their faith was defunct." Yet, as one commentator observes:

That Peter and John pray for the reception of the Holy Spirit rather than explain the gospel in more detail confirms that they accept the faith of the Samaritans as authentic.<sup>3</sup>

These were real, faith-filled Christians! And they had not yet received the Holy Spirit.

What do we do with that? Why did Luke highlight this strange detail?

As we look at the progression of the Book of Acts, the answer becomes clear. Consider this: We saw this same delay in chapters 1 and 2. After Jesus ascended to heaven, were the Apostles truly converted? Absolutely! But were they filled with the Spirit? Not until Pentecost – ten days later!

Well, in the same way, what we find here in this passage is what you might call a "Samaritan Pentecost."

Remember, this idea of the gospel going out from the Jews to the outside world was a massive, paradigm-shifting change for the early church! One of the most significant storylines in this book

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<sup>3</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 410.

is the ongoing challenge that the church faced as the nations were brought into the family of God. It was wildly complicated, and there was no shortage of suspicion. “Is this real? Are they ACTUALLY saved? Should we really welcome them in?”

When the mass conversions happened in Samaria, the Apostles were still in Jerusalem. Yet, in God’s wisdom, the Samaritan mini-Pentecost was delayed until the Apostles themselves arrived to bear witness to it. Peter and John rushed down to see if the reports about the Samaritans were true, and when they got there, God poured out His Spirit on this new extension of the church in the same way that He had poured it out on the Jerusalem church.

A new community was formed, and the Apostles joyfully returned to Jerusalem to share the great news of what God had done!

The forming of this new community is far more miraculous than you likely realize. As we will hear in a moment, the Jews and the Samaritans were long-standing enemies! But the gospel has the power to create a new community because, finally, when the gospel breaks new ground:

### **3. It overcomes old hostilities**

I hope I’m able to communicate even a sliver of the beauty of what God accomplishes in this story!

We can’t appreciate the significance of this development unless we wrap our minds around the deep hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans. The animosity started in the tenth century B.C. when the Northern tribes of Israel broke away from the Southern tribes. The North was then defeated by Assyria, and the Assyrians mixed and matched the survivors of the various nations that they conquered. We read about this in 2 Kings 17:

And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel. And they took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities.... So they feared the Lord but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away.

<sup>34</sup> To this day they do according to the former manner. They do not fear the Lord, and they do not follow the statutes or the rules or the law or the commandment that the Lord commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel. (2 Kings 17:24, 33-34 ESV)

This mixed race of people in the North – the aftermath of the Assyrian conquest – became the Samaritans. Ethnically, they were considered half-breeds. Religiously, they were heretics. The hatred between these two groups was 1,000 years in the making. We catch a glimpse of this hostility in Luke 9, when Jesus made a plan to pass through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem:

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. <sup>52</sup> And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. <sup>53</sup> But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51-53 ESV)

Pause here. When the Samaritans found out that Jesus was making his way towards Jerusalem, they said, “We see how it is. We’re just a pit stop for you on your way to that self-righteous city. You can keep on walking. We’re not interested.”

And do you remember how Jesus’ disciples responded? Luke records:

<sup>54</sup> And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “**Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?**” (Luke 9:51-54 ESV)

The Samaritans want nothing to do with a man who has ties to Jerusalem. James and John want to burn the Samaritans to ashes. This episode is just a taste of the deep-seeded hatred that existed between these groups.

And yet, in our passage this morning, seemingly overnight the church in Jerusalem and the church in Samaria became one big happy family! How does that even happen?

Consider this: If the Jerusalem church had continued to grow in peace, we can assume that they would have eventually sent a delegation of the Apostles to speak to the Samaritans. God can use any means to change a hard heart, but humanly speaking, how would that have been received? Imagine the scene: Esteemed, Jewish leaders strolling down from Jerusalem to invite the Samaritans to join them... They likely would have been chased out of the region!

But God had a different plan. And it wasn't a plan that we would have drawn up.

Persecution struck. Stephen was murdered. A group of Hellenists – Jews who themselves were often treated like second class citizens – were chased out of Jerusalem with accusations of having opposed the temple. In desperation, they fled to Samaria. When the Samaritans met this persecuted, rejected, disenfranchised group, they welcomed them in and listened to what they had to say. They received the gospel and, in an instant, old hostilities were overcome and salvation came to Samaria!

Again, we would NOT have drawn up this plan. And yet, would anything else have worked?

Then, once the gospel had taken hold and the Samaritans had laid down their weapons, God sent the Apostles to welcome their new brothers and sisters into the family of God. The Apostles witnessed the falling of the Holy Spirit on the Samaritans because only a report from the Apostles would enable the church in Jerusalem to believe that these former heretics were now really and truly part of the family of God. And, in God's incredible providence, which Apostle accompanied Peter to Samaria?

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and **John** (Acts 8:14 ESV)

This is the same John who was ready to pray the fire of judgement down on the Samaritans in Luke 9. Here, he is used by God to usher in the fire of the Spirit for his new brothers and sisters.

How incredible is this story?! How wise is our God?! How powerful is this gospel?! It heals generational wounds, and it overcomes old hostilities! It turns enemies into brothers and sisters!

In this sinful and broken world, there are deep-rooted hurts and long-standing differences that seem all but insurmountable. Aren't there? But God can turn mountains into mole hills.

How will the gospel ever be received by an indigenous community in our nation that feels so betrayed by the church? I have no idea, but I know that God can make a way.

How will we minister to a generation that looks at Christianity and sees nothing more than bigotry and prejudice? I have no idea, but I know that God can make a way.

What about those swaths of people who have left the faith because they were so disillusioned by the hypocrisy, and the legalism, and the scandal that they suffered through? How will we tell them about the hope that we have when they see the church as a den of lions? God can make a way.

Let this story remind you that our God is the HEALER of generational wounds, the RESTORER of the disenfranchised, and the REDEEMER of the world! I don't know HOW He will do it, but I know that He CAN do it! And that is all that we need to know. Some of you need to be reminded this morning of the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Does your spouse have a heart of stone? Does your sister's blood boil when you mention the church? Does your son think that you're nothing more than a homophobe? Does it seem like all is hopeless? Does it feel like the story is over? Is it hard to even muster the faith to pray?

Hear me this morning, GOD IS NOT DONE!

When Stephen was pelted with stones, it looked like the enemy had dealt a death blow, but in fact, he had actually UNLOCKED the hearts of the Samaritans and UNLEASHED the people of God into the world!

It looks hopeless sometimes. I know that. I FEEL that.

But let's stop listening to our feelings this morning. What do we KNOW? What do we learn here?

The Gospel is POWERFUL! Do you still believe that? If you don't then ask Him for more faith this morning. The Gospel IS powerful!

As we proclaim it, the powers that seem so intimidating will be displaced; new fellowship and community will be created; old hostilities that seemed all but insurmountable will be overcome. That's what God did! That's what God is doing! That's what God will do! Amen? Amen. Let's pray together.