

Sermon Title: The Gospel Goes To Samaria
Scripture Text: Acts 8:1-5 (Acts #18)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 6-25-23

Please come and join me at Acts Chapter 8 this morning. And as we move into what is a new section of the Book of Acts, I want to give you just a real quick big-picture overview reminder of what it is that we are studying.

As you study the Bible, you start in Genesis and you go to Revelation—you have the progressive unfolding of the plan of God. He is the King of the Universe, He is the Creator of everything, He is the Judge of everything. It is one marvelous plan from beginning to end. It is one Author using 40 human authors to tell one story. And it's about the King—"the King of Kings, the Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15), the One who will come and reign in glory on the "throne of David" (Lk. 1:32), and then eventually take us to "the new heavens and new earth" (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). And it's one continuous, unbroken story, from beginning to end.

But along the way, there are some significant points of *discontinuity* within that massive, wonderful *continuity*. Things change. Before and after the Fall—that's a big deal. Before and after the Flood—that's a big deal. Before and after the Tower of Babel—that's a big deal. Before and after the Law—that's a big deal. Before and after Christ—that's the *biggest of all*. Before and after the Rapture, before and after the Second Coming, and up to the "new heavens and the new earth"—there are those points of change.

And in the Book of Acts, we are dealing with one of those points of change in the continuity of the unfolding of the plan of God. But the point of change is not a [snaps finger] point in time. In human reality, it doesn't just happen in an instant.

Now, we know that Jesus rendered the Old Covenant "obsolete" (Heb. 8:13) when He lifted that cup at the Passover and said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor. 11:25; NASB-1995—and throughout, unless otherwise noted). He announced the arrival of the "New Covenant" (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:7-12). But then it wasn't until the next day, when He was on the cross, and He said, "It is finished!" (Jn. 19:30), and the Temple curtain into the Holy of Holies "was torn in two" (Matt. 27:51)—now access to God is granted (Heb. 10:19-20).

But it wasn't really until He fulfilled the promise, "I will send My Spirit," that He began to build this new thing called the Church (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 12:13). And we have, in this case, a transition time. Jesus rendered the Old Covenant obsolete, so from that night in the upper room until the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, there was almost 40 years of transition in which the Old Covenant stuff was still going on, even though it was *absolutely* not effective; and if you believed what the Old Covenant taught you, you *would* come to the Savior (Deut. 18:15, 18-19; Is. 28:16; 53:11-12), and you would be a New Covenant believer.

So there is that transition with the Old phasing out, but the New has begun—and that began in Acts Chapter 2. And so, we have this time, then, in the Book of Acts: the history recorded of the almost 40 years of this new era—the era in which we now live, the era of "grace" (Rom. 6:14), the era of the Church (Col. 1:18, 24). And God is doing amazing things here.

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Well, even within the Book of Acts, we have some punctuations of change and development, if you will. And as we come to Chapter 8, it is one of those. Chapter 8 of Acts begins the second part of the inspired outline of this book, which comes from what Jesus said to the Apostles and the rest of His followers who were gathered in Jerusalem, just before He "ascended to the Father" (Jn. 20:17; cf. Acts 1:9; 2:33; 5:31; Eph. 1:20; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 1 Pet. 3:22).

Jesus described this era of the Kingdom of God, which is progressively being unfolded (e.g., Matt. 21:43; Lk. 13:28; Rev. 20:4-6); but in *this* era, the King is not physically present. We look forward to Him coming again (Rev. 22:20); we pray, "Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10); we are "waiting" for the King to return (1 Thess. 1:10; cf. Rev. 1:7).

But look at what He said—just as a reminder—Acts Chapter 1, Verses 6 through 8—"So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, 'Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?' " They thought the Kingdom was going to come, and He was going to reign on the throne of David (cf. Lk. 19:11; Zech. 14:8-9, 16-17). "He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.' "

We have been seeing astounding and glorious fruit in and around Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 2 through 7; and we have seen that despite Satan's relentless attacks through the unbelieving Jewish hierarchy known as the Sanhedrin, and even an attempt to corrupt from within through Ananias and Sapphira, the Gospel has reached well over *ten thousand* people. You had not only the population of Jerusalem, but for the Feast of Pentecost, *many* had come, and many stayed for weeks or months because of this new thing that was going on. And that earliest manifestation of what we now label "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:14), what we now understand as "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3)—it had an overwhelming impact.

It was just as Jesus had said it would be, that same night that He announced the New Covenant. He said this in John 13:34-35—"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." *That* has been on display in Jerusalem—that *amazing* fellowship, that *astounding* caring for one another, was part of what attracted people to hear the message of the Gospel through the Apostles, and then through Stephen. And the miracles that God did through those same men validated that they *were* His messengers, and this *is* His message (cf. Acts 14:3; Heb. 2:3-4). And the love that the people showed demonstrated how changed lives lead to changed relationships. And God works through *all* of those things.

We also saw this, earlier: Chapter 6, Verse 7. This is right after they had chosen those seven men—primarily Greek speakers—to deal with the Greek-speaking widows among them. And it says: "The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

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That's quite a statement! There was a great contrast between the priests at the top of the food chain, so to speak—the murderous, hypocritical Sanhedrin, primarily "Sadducees" (Acts 5:17), the group dominated by "chief priests" (Acts 4:23); and they were the hierarchy that controlled the activities of the Temple—there was them, and then there were the everyday priests. Those "average" priests—the ones who did most of the work in the Temple—*they* began to see the message of the Gospel make its impact. They began to see this astounding contrast between the Christians—people whose lives they had *seen* transformed by this Savior—versus what their own leading priests, their bosses, were doing to them: arresting them, flogging them, throwing them in jail.

Well, the hatred by the Sanhedrin probably reached its crescendo when Stephen, one of those first seven deacons, was used by God to preach and do miracles, just like the Apostles. The Sanhedrin had not been able to stop the Apostles, no matter how hard they tried, and now many of their underlings were turning to Jesus, and now someone other than the Apostles takes center-stage—it was too much for them to bear, and we saw the overflow of that in Chapter 7. We saw how they railroaded Stephen to death by stoning; and they based it solely on the testimony of false witnesses about fabricated charges, and nothing resembling a fair hearing of the facts was ever involved. Chapter 7 is primarily what I call Stephen's "Best Last Words, Ever!"

I pointed something out to you back in Chapter 1, and I want to reconnect with it again now. I want to remind you that in those verses that we already read, if you notice, Jesus did not technically give them a *command* to take the Gospel anywhere; He gave them a *promise* that they *would* take the Gospel all over the world. Look again at Verse 8 of Chapter 1—"you *shall be* My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

Now, it's true, you can use a future tense like that—"you shall be My witnesses"—and you can use it in the sense of a gentle command, like some of the Ten Commandments: "You shall honor your father and your Mother." You can make it into a command, but in that passage [Acts Chapter 1], there is a contrast between things that are commanded and things that are stated as a fact, and Jesus said this is *going to happen*. As far as we can tell, there were no strategy meetings in the early Jerusalem church about how to evangelize the world. They simply proclaimed the Gospel where they were, and the impact of their ministry in their own city set in motion this cascading, wonderful spread of the Gospel; and God used that to fulfill the first part of His promise: "You *will be* My witnesses here in Jerusalem." He said that to a *small* group; now there are over ten thousand of them.

Now, it isn't *wrong* to strategize about world missions. It's not *wrong* to plan and prepare and train for evangelism. And for us, it is necessary if we are going to be as effective as possible in spreading the Gospel in the modern world, and we take that responsibility very seriously. But most of us don't go jump over cultural barriers to take the Gospel—that isn't God's plan for *most* of us. If we are not sent to a different culture, the best results that we have come from being faithful wherever we are. The body of Christ grows in concert with the testimony of local believers in a local church, and God is trustworthy to lead people and place them wherever He means for them to bear the most fruit.

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Now, in our passage for today, we are going to see the sovereign hand of God propel His people to the next phase of *His* plan. In Chapter 8, the Gospel jumps the first major barrier from one culture to another. From "Jerusalem," we are going to see the Gospel go to "all Judea and Samaria."

Now get your terms here: "Jerusalem" is a city, right? "Judea" is the surrounding area. If you want to make an analogy—"Boise" is a city; "Ada County" is a county larger than the city, and there is actually quite a bit of territory there. Well, the first jump was going outside the city limits of Jerusalem and into all of Judea, because people had to get out of the city, and you'll see why; and then to Samaria, and we'll talk about that in a few minutes.

You are going to see that God often uses unpleasant things, even things that we consider emergencies or tragedies—He uses them as catalysts to spreading the Gospel. He used a famine to get Jacob's family to Egypt where they could be preserved and protected. He used persecution to cause the spread of the Gospel and the growth of the Body of Christ. We have been sharing and praying for people in Ukraine and in areas around Ukraine where that horrible war is driving people away and just *ruining* their lives—and yet, the Gospel is *spreading* like crazy! Whole new churches have been formed from people that have become believers *since* they were driven out of their country! Now, that doesn't mean, "Oh, yeah, bomb them some more—that's good." But it means God is faithful to His promises.

So, what bad things in your life, as you look back, has God used "for" your "good" (Rom. 8:28), or to create new opportunities for you to proclaim Christ? We are going to see one of those today.

So let's get started. We'll call this: "The Gospel Goes To Samaria." I have a marvelous outline; it's printed in your notes; it is an accurate outline of the first 13 Verses. It's accurate—it's just too ambitious for where we are going to get today. But it is:

1. Providential Persecution (in the first three verses)
2. Powerful Preaching (verses 4 through 8)
3. Predictable Products (verses 9 through 13)

We'll get there, but we are only going to get about halfway this morning. We start with Providential Persecution.

Chapter 8, Verse 1. Some actually put the first line of this, the first sentence of this, as the end of Chapter 7; some manuscripts do that—it's an arbitrary chapter division. But it starts out: "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death." The "him" is Stephen, who was murdered at the end of Chapter 7.

Then we read: "And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him." That's Verse 2.

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There is a subtle point that I would like you to observe back in Chapter 7, Verse 58, just a little bit above this, again referring to Stephen: "When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul."

The main point there is: They murdered Stephen; that's the main thing going on. But the Holy Spirit made sure that Luke included the part about laying "their robes at the feet of Saul." Now, this was *not* just a case of, "Here, kid, watch our robes so we can hurl the stones more fiercely. We'll show you how this is done." That was why they took off their robes—so they could stone and murder more efficiently—but that's not *all* of this; there is an implication: The implication is that Saul was *behind* the murder of Stephen. He was *very much* a part of this plan.

Think back: Chapter 2, Chapter 4—we've seen among the early Christians that when there was a need, people would even sell property or liquidate other assets, and they would give generously to take care of the needs of their brothers and sisters; and it always said they would bring their offerings and "lay them at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:35). Now, they did not have a nice wooden offering box like we have in the back; they didn't even have a church building to do this. Did they literally come and lay their stuff on the ground in front of the Apostles? I don't know, but I do know that is a metaphor for symbolically saying, "We are putting this under your authority." To the Apostles, they're saying, "You are the ones in charge" as they bring the gifts, so they [the Apostles] were the ones who would ensure that the offerings were used as intended, and that is why they were laid at their feet.

So in *this* case, the implication would be: Saul was part of the murder of Stephen, and that is reinforced by saying, "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death." Saul is a *bad guy*, and he is going to cause *a lot* of pain to a lot of people.

Now, the connection from Stephen to Saul to the new man that Saul will become, Paul, is *profound*. There are going to be some times—in Chapter 9, we are going to see Saul's conversion when he became Paul; then there are two other places in Acts where Paul recounts his testimony; and in one of those, in Acts 22:20, we see Paul acknowledge that this connection with the death of Stephen made a big impact on *him*. This was when *his* persecution career was launched.

But from the brutal and death-dealing Saul, God formed the wonderful Apostle Paul. He used Paul to be His instrument to penetrate the whole Roman world with the Gospel, and that forever changed the course of *history*. And it began with this murder of Stephen.

Stephen is a *marvelous* example. You know, God used Stephen in unique ways as a representative of Christ, but there are a lot of comparisons to Jesus: As Jesus was filled with "the Spirit" (Acts 10:38), so was Stephen (Acts 6:5). The words "full of grace" apply to both Jesus and Stephen (Jn. 1:14; Acts 6:8). Jesus confronted the religious establishment of His day: He mainly taking on the Pharisees, the most legalistic ones. So did Stephen confront the religious establishment: he confronted the mainly aristocratic, pompous Sadducees. The Jews used lying witnesses against both Jesus and Stephen.

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They were both subjected to a kangaroo court where truth was *never* in play. Both were executed, though not guilty of the crimes they were accused of. Both were accused of blasphemy. Both were taken outside the city limits of Jerusalem to their death. Both were buried by sympathetic friends. And both of them prayed for their executioners to be saved. I don't think there is any example in the Bible more like Jesus than Stephen.

It was a dark day when Jesus died—in His case, literally three hours of darkness in the afternoon. But the triumph came when He was raised from the dead. And we are studying the glorious beginnings of the Church on the preaching of the Savior who was crucified and buried and rose again—we are seeing that here in the Book of Acts. And as wonderful as it was to have seen thousands turn to Christ in Jerusalem, it was another dark day when Stephen was murdered.

And then, as we saw, "Some devout men buried Stephen"—and here is another little tidbit the Holy Spirit made sure was here—"and made loud lamentation over him." Why that little comment: "made loud lamentation over him"? Well, it means they loved Stephen. It means they thought this was wrong. But we know that, according to Jewish law—as it was eventually codified in a massive collection of writings known as the Mishnah—this is not from the Old Testament, but we know that Jewish law prohibited any public mourning whenever a criminal was executed. So, the Sanhedrin had declared Stephen to be a criminal worthy of death, so when there was "loud lamentation" over his death, that was a public protest against the Sanhedrin. They were saying, basically, "Nah, we are not buying this."

Now, it was surely not only a sad day when Stephen was killed, it was also the beginning of fearful times for Christians. And I said it was a dark day when Jesus was killed—but three days later, He rose from the grave, and we have seen the long-term effect of that. Well, *here*, we are going to take a little while to see the glorious things that happened after Stephen's death. It was the beginning of some fearful times for those Christians in Jerusalem.

Chapter 8, Verse 3—"But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."

Now, again, in the retelling of his story in Chapters 22 and 26, Paul is going to explain that his actions in "ravaging the church" were fully sanctioned by, and done fully under the authority of and with the blessing of the Sanhedrin. He is going to explain in one of those places that he was "furiously enraged" with the Christians (26:11), and he said that he *always* voted for their deaths whenever the opportunities came (26:10). This is one angry, murderous man (cf. Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:13).

The word translated "ravaging" is one of those really interesting words. You know, there are some Bible words that are really fascinating and tell a great story, but this is one of those that is interesting because it is used only once in the New Testament—this is the *only place* it occurs. So if you want to do a word study on this word, it will be over really quick—one occurrence, and it is translated "ravaging."

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But obviously, the word was known to Luke, who wrote this book; and Luke knew that his readers, Romans, understood this. So we look to see: How was this word used outside of the Bible? And we find that it was used for the destruction of a city—"ravaging" a city, leaving it in ruins. It was also used for mangling by a wild best. It was Saul's desire—it was his *tireless* quest—to rip the Church apart. So far, the persecution had always been aimed at the leadership—the Apostles; and then Stephen, who was a close associate of the Apostles. Now, Saul is going from "house to house" to root out Christians. Think: Nazi Germany, or the Soviet Union, or North Korea, or what is going on now at the hands of some of the Fulani Muslims in Africa. "House to house," ripping people away—men and women *equally* mistreated and imprisoned. Saul's purpose was Satan's purpose: the total destruction of the Church, and the extermination of every follower of Jesus Christ. Now, I have read the rest of the Book—God wins. But oh, the enemies are serious.

The persecution here is going to be used by God to result in scattering the Church throughout the regions of—brace yourselves—"Judea and Samaria," just as God promised. It would be hard to imagine how terrible you would have felt if you loved Jesus, if you were one of His followers, and you witnessed Him going to the Cross. It would be hard to imagine how terrible you would have felt if you were part of that *thriving*, bustling church in Jerusalem in those first months after the arrival of the Holy Spirit, *and then* you witness the arrest and murder of Deacon Stephen—that would have been rough.

But take a step back, and see this in light of the plan of God: It was His intention to spread the Gospel to the rest of Judea, then to Samaria, and then more beyond that. You see, the Gospel is similar to a virus, in one respect. I don't know if you have ever heard of a virus—little things that go around. You have to be exposed to someone who has the virus in order to be infected by it. Well, this was the unfolding plan of God: In His providence, He used the evil, murderous enemies of Christ as unwitting tools to get His people to places where others could be "infected" with the Gospel.

You can't help but think of what Joseph said to his brothers. Remember, they were going to kill him, and then they bargained down to, "Well, let's just sell him," and they sold him into slavery, then they lied to their father about it; and eventually, they wind up coming to Joseph to ask for food in Egypt, not realizing that is Joseph. We've just been through that in our daily e-mails in Genesis. But these famous words that Joseph said to his brothers: Genesis 50, Verse 20—"As for you, you meant evil against me..." He didn't just say, "Aw, that's okay. Everybody makes mistakes." No, he said, "You were evil. You did *wrong* against me!" There was no mincing of that, no softening of that. But the sentence goes on: "but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."

Now, it's really interesting that the same man who was doing that "ravaging" of the church—he would eventually be the one whom God used to write some of your favorite words in the Bible. It's the New Testament version of Genesis Chapter 50, Verse 20: It's Romans 8:28—"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." God accomplishes "His" good "purpose" for all of His people! (cf. Eph. 1:11; Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 4:18; Jude 24)

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How sad for those people who had to flee for their lives! I can't *imagine* how they must have missed basking in "the apostles' doctrine" day in and day out (Acts 2:42, NKJV), and how they missed the sweet fellowship that they had enjoyed. But this was God's plan: He used even the most evil schemes to arrange for His plans to be unveiled, and for the Gospel to spread (cf. Prov. 16:9; 20:24; 21:1, 30; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; Rom. 11:33-36). It's like those horrors being inflicted on Ukraine—they *really are* horrible! But God is building the Church in new places, even through that.

If you belong to Jesus Christ by faith, keep the right perspective: If you lose your job, God's hand is upon that whole situation! If you lose your health, God is at work through it. And it is "for" your "good"! If your loved one is suffering, God intends to use that situation for His glory and for your greater maturity in Christ. If you are discouraged, if you are weary, if you are frustrated—you are *biblical*. Romans Chapter 8—"we...groan" living in this fallen world (vs. 23). But never forget that God has a glorious, eternal purpose for *whatever* you are going through (cf. Deut. 8:16).

More words written by the Apostle Paul apply here: Second Corinthians 4:16-18. In the context, he is recounting some of the things that he has suffered for Christ and for the sake of the Gospel; and he says: "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying..." I used to read that phrase by faith; now, I *know* it's true from experience. "Though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison..."

And you say, "Well, wait a second, that's not about me. I know how fast 'momentary' is! *This* has been lasting for *weeks*; it has been going on for *months*! We have been taking care of great grandma for a year and a half, now! And what do you mean, "light affliction"—I can't even *walk*! What do you mean, "momentary, light affliction"? Well, "momentary" in relationship to eternity; "light" in relationship to the "eternal weight of glory." For Verse 18—"while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

So now, look at the outwardly tragic situation of Stephen's murder through the eyes of faith: God was at work, and Stephen's death led immediately to Providential Persecution. And *that* led to Powerful Preaching.

Just what *happens* when people who are totally devoted to Jesus Christ get relocated, whether it's by their choice or it's enforced on them by persecution or economic necessity or whatever? Well, what happens is, they take the Gospel with them! Look there at Verse 4—"Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word."

They were not cowering in fear. Oh, trust me: *It hurt*. It was discouraging. It was frustrating. It was painful. It was unnerving. But they did not cower in fear. They didn't go out and set up cloisters where they could hide out and be isolated from the big bad world. They weren't organizing protests. They weren't demanding rights. They went about living their lives and talking about their risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

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From the middle of Chapter 6 through the end of Chapter 7, we followed that wonderful but very brief ministry of Deacon Stephen, one of those first seven. Now, we pick up the story through *another* one of those seven who was chosen back in Chapter 6. We meet him in Verse 5—"Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them."

The central role now shifts to Philip. Now, this is *not* Philip the Apostle. There are two different Philips, [actually] there are more than two. This is Philip the Deacon. We know that by two pieces of evidence. Number 1: "They were all scattered...except the apostles" (vs. 1). Now, that doesn't mean *every single person* was scattered, and the church in Jerusalem went from 15,000 down to 12. What it means is that the Apostles stayed there and anchored there; they continued to preach and to teach. The church in Jerusalem never died; it was a powerful influence. We are going to see a lot more about it in the Book of Acts. But the Apostles stayed there.

And we are also told, up in Acts Chapter 21, Verse 8, that Philip was called "one of the seven." Well, if you know "the twelve" (Lk. 8:1; 9:1, 12; 18:31; Acts 6:2; Jn. 6:70, etc.) and somebody is "one of the twelve" (Mk. 14:20; Jn. 20:24, etc.), we are talking about the Apostles. "The seven" is the group of the first deacons (Acts 6:3).

And by the way, another little tidbit: Philip is the first one in the New Testament to be given the title "evangelist" (21:8). He was the one doing evangelism—preaching the Gospel.

I want to pick this apart a little bit. And this was the point at which I realized that we are *not* going to finish the outline that I targeted for today, so we'll carry it over to next time. Don't worry—you'll be home before dinner. Pick it apart a little bit. Notice, it says: "Philip went down to the city of Samaria..." I always tell you that when you see geographical references in your Bible, it is helpful to go look at the maps in the back of your Bible, and see where things are. And you're going to say, "Well, that's wrong! It says 'Philip went *down* to the city of Samaria,' but the city of Samaria is 40 miles *north* of Jerusalem; you would say he went *up*. I mean, if you live in Boise, Idaho, you're not saying, 'I'm going *up* to San Diego,' or 'I'm going *down* to Canada.' You know, 'north' is 'up.'" Well, unless your map is a *topographical* map, you *will* have that confusion. But in the Bible, it always says people go "up" to Jerusalem, and people go "down" *from* Jerusalem, no matter which direction they are coming and going to or from, because Jerusalem is at the highest point for many miles in all directions—so you always go "up" to Jerusalem.

Now, you need to understand some things about Samaria if you are going to get all that God intends for you from this chapter, so I'll give you a little "summary-ah" of Samaria, and you'll understand it.

The city of Samaria, as I said, was about 40 miles north of Jerusalem. It had been the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel after the kingdom was divided, following the time of Solomon. The *city* of Samaria was founded by a man named "Omri"—you can read about that in First Kings 16:23-24.

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The Northern Kingdom had a series of kings, and none of them were ever anything good, spiritually. After well over a century of idolatry and disobeying God in the Northern Kingdom, the city of Samaria and that whole region of the Northern Kingdom were overrun and taken over by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Two important dates to remember: 722 B.C.—the Northern Kingdom is inverted by the Assyrians; 586 B.C.—the Southern Kingdom is taken over by the Babylonians after Babylon conquered Assyria in that time in between. So, 722 B.C. was the end of the Northern Kingdom. The Southern Kingdom—also called "Judah"—lasted until 586 B.C., and then they were carried off to Babylon.

Now, the Assyrians were *particularly despicable* as a culture (cf. Jon. 1:2; Nah. 3:1-7). They *loved* forcing people to *move*. It is unnerving to uproot people; they liked doing that. They also loved killing people, but that's another thing. They moved many from what had been the Northern Kingdom of Israel to other lands they had conquered, *and* they moved people from other nations they had conquered into the region that had been the Northern Kingdom, that came to be called "Samaria." Many of the Jews who remained there intermarried with those who were imported by the Assyrians, and the resulting mix of intermarriages between Jews and Gentiles became known as the "Samaritans."

The Jews—their kingdom had been deported to Babylon; they spent 70 years there, and they came back—they, for the most part, *did not* intermarry; they remained more pure, but the Jews then regarded the Samaritans as unclean half-breed sellouts. It was pure racism, based upon genetics.

Not only had they disobeyed by "intermarrying" with the foreigners (Deut. 7:3-4), they also messed up the religious part of it into a syncretistic mess. Second Kings 17:33 says, "They feared the Lord (Yahweh) and served their own gods according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had been carried away into exile" (cf. Jer. 7:9-10; Zeph. 1:5; Acts 7:42-43). So, they had smorgasbord religion: "Yahweh—oh, yeah, we really like Him! He's the *main* God. But, hey, if you like something different, go for it! We'll just mix it all. You can worship anything you want, any way you want." (e.g., 1 Kings 12:26-33)

There was a tremendous amount of antipathy between the Samaritans and the Israelites. When the Israelites—the Southern Kingdom folks—were allowed to return to the Land under Ezra and Nehemiah, the problems between the Samaritans and the Jews boiled to the surface. When some Samaritans offered to help rebuild the Temple—when Ezra brought his group back—they were summarily rejected. Even though they *claimed* to be worshippers of the true God, Israel would have nothing to do with them (Ezra 4:1-3).

That hostility between the Jews and Samaritans became entrenched, and it grew worse and worse between the close of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament; so we have this summary statement from the Apostle John in John Chapter 4, Verse 9. This is when Jesus visited Samaria. John just put this in there for his readers who were not familiar with the history. John 4:9—"Jews have no dealings with Samaritans."

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It was so bad that, for most Jews, if they were going to travel between Jerusalem and Nazareth [in Galilee], they would not just take the straight line; they would add about 30 percent to their trip: They would not go straight north, they would go to the east and they would cross the Jordan River, go up the other side of the Jordan River, and cross the Jordan River again, just so they never stepped on Samaritan dirt. That's how much they hated Samaritans (cf. Lk. 9:51-53).

That's why it was *monumental* that Jesus chose to make the first announcement that He was the Messiah *to a Samaritan—in Samaria!* (Jn. 4:25-26) And worse yet, in the eyes of His culture, He did it for a Samaritan *woman!* And Samaritans, even though they had corrupted everything pretty badly, they were *still* looking forward to the Messiah; and so, Jesus just used that opportunity to show that, yes, He came to the House of Israel—but He made a commitment to the whole world, and to sinners in general (cf. Is. 49:6).

So, "Philip went down to the city of Samaria." Why? Well, we can make a couple of decent guesses; we are not told exactly, for sure. Probably, Philip had been part of that original "hundred and twenty" when the Holy Spirit came (Acts 1:15); if not, he was around very soon after that. And it is likely that he heard—and maybe he actually paid attention—when Jesus said, "You shall be My witnesses...in...Samaria" (vs. 8). Well, if that's the case, good on Philip! I'm glad he went there!

There is another possible factor: We know that Philip and those other six deacons were chosen primarily to minister to "the Hellenistic Jews" (Acts 6:1). Remember that word? "Hellenistic" means Greek-speaking, not native Aramaic-speakers. And so, Philip probably was not from Jerusalem, originally; and it might be, then, that by his own experience, maybe he had a soft spot for people who felt like outsiders. You see, that was the issue when they chose the deacons: "The Hellenistic widows aren't getting their fair share in the daily care of the widows," and so they appointed some Greek-speakers to address that issue.

Now, this is a completely awkward place to leave off, but we are going to stop here. We are going to come back next time. But what gems might we gather from this? I decided to say, "Let's get some gems," so I picked up a list of precious gems, just to be cute and cuddly. There is no symbolic reference to *any* of these things. And I'm not saying one is more valuable than another, because I don't know which one is most valuable, anyway, except probably diamonds. Okay, never mind.

In our passage, there is the sapphire gem of God's "sovereignty" (Ps. 103:19; 119:91b). He is in *perfect* control of this whole situation (Eph. 1:11b). He is in perfect control of *your* life, just as He was the early days of the Church (Ps. 37:23-24, 28, 39-40; Prov. 2:8b; 20:24; Jn. 6:39; Rom. 8:31-39; Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 4:18; Jude 24). And just as He was in perfect control then, He is in perfect control of the affairs of the nations today (Dan. 4:35; Acts 17:26). *God is sovereign!*

If you don't believe God is sovereign, *you don't know God!* And if you don't believe He is sovereign, why in the world would you worship Him?—because *He can't fix things unless He is in control!* He is *sovereign*. What a *glorious* truth!

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And then there is the emerald gem of God's goodness. God is *always* perfectly good, *all* the time, in *every* situation (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 25:8; 92:15; 119:68; Dan. 4:37; 1 Jn. 1:5). He knows "the end from the beginning" (Is. 46:10), so you can rest *fully* assured that He will "cause all things to work together for" your "good" (Rom. 8:28)—even what hurts (cf. Deut. 8:16; Jas. 1:2-3). He is *good*, even in the midst of this *messed up world*!

Then there's the diamond gem of God's providence. His sovereignty, plus His goodness, plus His power, equals the fact that in the midst of all the machinations of the fallen world—all the Sauls of the world, all the Assyrians of the world, all the Babylonians of the world, all the evil people of the world—He is in control (Prov. 16:9; 19:21; 20:24; 21:1). His will is being played out for His "glory" (Rom. 11:36; Rev. 4:11). And as we see that unfolded, we call that His "providence." He *provides* His plan in the midst of all of this stuff (Ps. 33:10-11; Prov. 21:30; Lam. 3:37).

Then there's the ruby gem of the "power" of the "Gospel" (1 Thess. 1:5; cf. 2:13). Wherever God's people go, for whatever earthly reasons they go, by whatever earthly means they get there, the Gospel continues to spread as His people are His faithful witnesses (Col. 1:5-6).

The most literal translation of the Great Commission would be something like: "Having gone among all the nations, make disciples" (Matt. 28:19). The *command* is "make disciples." The *going* part is an aorist participle. *Oh*, don't you *love* aorist participles! Doesn't that just make your soul melt? No, it doesn't. But what it means is: The command is, wherever you go, *you* are the disciple-maker! Take the Gospel with you *wherever you go* (Mk. 16:15; cf. Acts 17:30; 26:25; 1 Thess. 3:23; 1 Tim. 2:3-5; Titus 2:11; 2 Pet. 3:9; Rev. 5:9). Now, if God puts it on your heart to have a desire to jump over a cultural boundary and take the Gospel, well, to Him be the glory! Go for it! We'll do our best to support you and help you with that. But the gem is "the power" of "the Gospel...for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).

And there's one more: The pearl gem of the example of Philip. Stephen—well, *he* was a gem on his own. But Philip—he took the Gospel to people who *probably* felt left out. They *knew* the Jews *hated them*. So here comes a Jew *from Jerusalem*, coming down and giving them the most life-changing message *ever*!

My friend, wherever God places you, *that* is where He intends to use you! So, ask Him for wisdom: "How might I glorify You in the midst of this? Father, how, in this situation, do You want *me* to become more like Your Son—more holy for Your glory?" (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4; 4:24; Heb. 12:10; 1 Pet. 2:21-22)

Let's pray:

Oh, Father, thank You for this portion of Your Word. Thank You for the Gospel going to Samaria. As You said, that is the next step in Your plan. And here we sit, centuries later and thousands of miles away, in the next phase of Your plan. Oh, how we thank You for the faithfulness of those who took the wonderful Gospel of the death, burial, and

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resurrection of the only Savior—the only mediator between God and man—Your Son, Jesus Christ. And that message has been passed down: one person at a time, generation through generation, through all of the centuries, to us. It is too glorious for us to adequately put into words, but we say, "Thank You!" And we pray that You will give us the wisdom to see, with the eyes of faith, Your hand upon our lives; and then, use us for Your glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.