

Church 2.0

“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)

Breaking New Ground¹

February 26th, 2023 Acts 8:4-25 Rev. Steve Paul

I invite you to open God’s Word to Acts chapter 8. On page 916 in the church Bible.

Moments before Jesus (our crucified, risen King) ascended to heaven, he spoke these parting words to his followers:

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.” (Acts 1:8 ESV)

God’s long-standing promise of rescue through Jesus has always had that end in mind—the end of the earth. This blessing wasn’t intended just for Abraham and his kin, but for “all the families of the earth,” every ethnicity, every nation. Here, **Jesus laid out that plan**, in terms you can plot on a map. In concentric circles. In waves rolling out from Jerusalem. **To go global.**

In chapter 2 it happens. **Right on plan.** The Holy Spirit came like “a mighty rushing wind” on believers in Jerusalem as promised. Like an earthquake no Richter scale can register, God’s personal power shook the epicentre of Jewish worship. The good news of Jesus, on the lips of unschooled, ordinary men who’d been *with* Jesus—now powered by the Spirit of Jesus *within* them—echoed through the temple courts, reverberating to thousands of Jewish devotees who had come from all over the globe, transforming them into true followers of Jesus.

Many of those new Christians were Greek-speaking Jews from all over the empire. Far from home, they weren’t true blue Hebrew-speaking Jews. They were misfits, out-of-

¹ I’m indebted to Pastors Paul Carter and Levi Denbok for this title and outline.

towners. So many of them converted to Christ, the apostles had to scramble to structure adequate care for them, and that's how Stephen and Philip come into view in Luke's account. They're 2 of the Greek-speaking leaders chosen for the task. (Bookmark that fact for later.)

But Stephen—Spirit-filled, Scripture-saturated Stephen—steps up, and infuriates the Jewish Sanhedrin, when he dares tell them where they got Jesus wrong. And it gets him killed.

That's not how it was supposed to go, is it? A key Christian leader killed? What a setback!

But, is it?

^{1b} 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. (Acts 8:1b ESV)

Something in your head should go DING! This is how Jesus said it would go ... from Jerusalem, into all Judea and Samaria. **Right on plan!** But, by persecution?

Last week Pastor Paul helped us see that Stephen's story is INTENTIONAL, to remind us that this kind of pressure, yes! persecution are a normal part of God's perfect plan. Persecution is no impediment to God's plan, it's a propellant! And today, we get to see how. We get to watch

What happens when the good news of Jesus breaks new ground.

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

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

²⁵ 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.

So, what happens when the good news of Jesus breaks new ground?

Did you pick up on the powers at play through this passage? It’s as though a bomb went off in Jerusalem. And in v 4 we read

⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. (Acts 8:4 ESV)

That scattering (Luke picks his word carefully) isn’t like an IED scattering lifeless debris to the wind, it’s like the wind scattering life-giving seeds. It’s like our word disseminated—seeds are tucked into it. As Saul (the key player in the persecution) turns up the heat meant to sear and scorch Christians into silence, they flee, taking the most precious thing with them they can think of—the life-giving good news of Jesus. They’re not

refugees on the run. They're ambassadors on triumphant parade for Jesus (cf 2 Cor 2:14).

G Campbell Morgan writes,

"The one thing persecution can never do for a true witness, is to blur the vision of Christ, or change the loyalty of the witness to Him. Persecuted and driven out, [Christ] yet held His throne in them; and secured their loyalty, for He never parted company with them ..."²

How? By His Spirit within them.

It was true of Stephen—loyal to death. It's true of Philip—loyal on the run.

How do you react when God allows a painful disruption or a difficult dislocation in your routine? Interest rates go up; you have no choice but to sell your home. You get sick and land in the hospital. You age and are moved into a retirement home. In the short time I've been at Cornerstone, I've watched two dear believers, who rather than reeling with, "How can this be good? Where are you, God?", are leaning into God's plan. Their hardship is a catalyst, accelerating their allegiance for Him. **Right on plan.**

One of them, from his hospital bed, reminded me of these lines:

Living for Jesus a life that is true, striving to please him in all that I do;
yielding allegiance glad-hearted and free, this is the pathway of blessing for me!
Oh Jesus Lord and Saviour, I give myself to Thee,
for Thou in Thy atonement didst give thyself for me.
I own no other master, my heart shall be Thy throne.
My heart I give henceforth to live, O Christ for Thee alone."³

The Greek-speaking Jewish Christians were scattered like seeds. Luke follows Philip into Samaria. He doesn't go into hiding, he preaches Jesus, their long-needed rescue from God. And as he does ... watch ... watch what happens when the good news of Jesus breaks new ground:

² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 202-203.

³ Lyrics by Thomas O. Chisholm. Music by C. Harold Lowden.

1. It displaces lesser powers.

The miracles Philip is doing make it clear that this is God at work through Philip. They cause the crowds to sit up and pay attention to the good things Philip is saying about Jesus. What grabs their attention? (v7) Demonic powers are so forcibly expelled they're shrieking. (By whose greater power?) Powerless limbs bulge again with life and strength. (By whose greater power?) And best of all (v12) spiritually blind eyes are opened to believe the good news. They turn to Jesus and are baptized, showing that their guilt is gone, that Jesus is their life (By whose greater power?)

No wonder v8 reports,

⁸So there was much joy in that city. (Acts 8:8 ESV)

Why? Because

... where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom! (2 Corinthians 3:17b ESV)

God's Spirit outpowers Satan, brings health in decay, and removes guilt forever. Remember what your first breath of fresh air felt like as a new believer? Remember how much clearer and brighter all of life looked? Some of you do! You've told me so.

BUT! ... says v9. CONTRAST THAT God-shaped joy the gospel has just made on the Samaritan city, with the dent it makes on an ambitious man named Simon. Simon is the town sorcerer, the local witch doctor, the occultic power broker in town. He's hooked on the demon drug of selfish ambition. He's addicted to accolades: (see v10?) *"This man is the power of God that is called Great"* they all said ... before. Simon was full of himself. He loved making people twitch with fear. But even he (v13 says) believes, is baptized and continues with Philip. See that?

But something seems off. He seems more amazed, taken by the "cool tricks" Philip can do than he is truly taken by Jesus! That comes clear when (in v19) he offers Peter and John money to buy the rights to distribute the Holy Spirit. That sounds so crass! Simon, do you really think God's Spirit no more than a commodity to buy into and broker? A magic wand to wave however you want? NO! says Peter (v21), ²¹*You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.*

Simon's heart problem was idolatry. He was entrenched in greed—that lesser power lured his heart and ruled his soul—even though the good news of Jesus ... the free gift of God's Spirit was right at hand to displace it.

Child of God, what lesser power lures you and still wants to rule you?

- Is it your tendency to please people? You long to look good in the eyes of the world?
- Is it a destructive habit, that corrosive affection you keep scrolling back to online?
- Is it your spouse or boss or friend pressuring you to dilute the truth, to back off on your convictions, or to muffle your clear love for Jesus?

Whatever it might be, KNOW THIS: Greater is He that is in you than ... any lesser power, any lesser affection, any lesser lure ... that wants to suck you into its gravitational pull. God's Spirit is in you to stoke your highest affection for Jesus and so expel any destructive ones.

When the good news of Jesus breaks new ground, it displaces lesser powers.

It does more than that.

2. It creates a new community.

News of the joy pulsing from Samaria carried far and wide.

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

The news hits Jerusalem, and they ask, "Could this be real?" Is God at work there? On the wrong side of the tracks? So they send Peter and John to check it out.

Something in those verses should strike you as odd. Do you see it? Why does the Spirit come on the Samaritans only after Peter and John arrive. Why the delay?

If you know your New Testament, you know that normally the Holy Spirit indwells believers at the time of their conversion. He makes His home in all those He regenerates. He's the deposit, God's guarantee that He will finish what He starts in every believer.

The apostle Paul makes this clear in Romans 8:9,

⁹You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (Romans 8:9 ESV)

There's no such thing as a Spirit-less Christian. The Spirit comes to dwell in the true believer at the time of our conversion.

So, why the difference here? Why the delay in Samaria?

Remember that the boundary line between Judea and Samaria was barricaded by centuries of bad blood. We'll come back to that, but for now let's just say it was implausible, impossible ... saying there was any such thing as a "Good Samaritan"... was unthinkable! God Himself never cross that barrier! But God was! **Right on plan.**

And to put His stamp of approval (His exclamation mark!) on this, He did something of a Samaritan Pentecost. "My rescue work is meant to result in one new community—ONE. Not two parallel ones. Not two separate ones, still splintered by rejection and prejudice. But one redeemed humanity. One resplendent bride."

1 Corinthians 12:13 says it like this:

¹³For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:13 ESV)

That's stunning! Think of it! Only God can take people that only ever loved Reggae, or Country & Western, or Opera, or Yodeling—however diverse, whatever our origin, whatever rift dissects us—only He can transform us so our strongest beat, our highest harmony is Jesus.

That's what God was putting on display in Samaria. God's Spirit is our glue. In Him, we are ONE.

But are we, church?

Is that what we display on 265 Coldwater Road and throughout our region? Our world is hostile, splintered, wounded and lonely. Do we show that God's love has been poured into our hearts by His Spirit so that AS ONE we cry out "Abba, you're our Father!" We belong to you. We belong to each other.

Do you see how stunning and winsome this kind of belonging is to a desperately lonely world?

When the good news of Jesus breaks new ground, it creates CHRIST'S CHURCH, a new community. There's nothing like it on the planet!

And that's because,

3. It buries old hostilities.

The bad blood between Samaritans and Jews had boiled for centuries! The Samaritans were a racial and religious mashup. Like today's Christian cults, the Samaritans clung to just enough BIBLE (spun their way), and threw in pinches of paganism as well. To the Jew, they were idolatrous half-breeds, ethnically polluted, religiously confused, and morally debased.⁴ No decent Jew travelling from Galilee to Judea would soil his soul by stepping foot in Samaria. They'd add miles to their journey and take the long way around instead.

Once, in Luke 9, Jesus decided to go through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem. He sent an advance party to get a BnB ready for him. When the Samaritans found out he was headed to Jerusalem, they closed their hotel. James and John heard that, and went, ⁵⁴ *"Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"*

These rejects deserve the ultimate rejection, Lord! Even the disciples weren't immune to the hostility.

But who did God propel out of Jerusalem, to bring the good news of Jesus to these 'rejects'? Another reject. A Greek-speaking misfit.

One commentator writes:

⁴ Swindoll, *Living Insights NT Commentary*, Acts, p142.

“... God in his providence used as their evangelist the Hellenist Philip, who shared their fate of being rejected at Jerusalem; and the Samaritans received him and accepted his message.”⁵ (R. Longenecker, Acts, p 359)

Right on plan!

And who else did God use to authenticate that social rejects like the Samaritans really are WELCOME in His rescue plan? John, the guy who said, “I think we ought to nuke them, Lord.” What a change in John! On his way back to Jerusalem, we can see him (see v25?) ... *preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans*. You think he was sold on God’s plan?

Are you?

Can you imagine a day when God empowers you, propels you to cross a hostile boundary with the fragrance of Christ, propelled by pain or loss or disruption to find that His Spirit is gloriously at work through the good news of Jesus! Oh God, shape us more like that.

3 years ago, my friend Matthew came to visit our church one Sunday morning. Years earlier, Matthew had urged us to consider a 30-day daily prayer time for the Muslim world, during Ramadan, the month that Muslims fast. We took him up on the challenge and had for about 3 years. I wanted Matthew to see something of what God had done in answer to prayer. “Matthew, I’d like you to meet my brother Fatih. Fatih and his family are former Sunni Muslims from Syria. They now worship and serve Jesus here with us!” And, “Matthew, meet my sister Fereshte. She and her family are former Shiih Muslims from Iran. They now worship and serve Jesus here with us!” Matthew had tears in his eyes. Do you understand the magnitude of this? Ancient hostilities should be entrenched here! Remember the Iran/Iraq war? But for Matthew, it was bigger than that: “Steve, just this week, I was sharing the good news of Jesus with a Muslim friend in the city. He said to me, “Matthew, if you can show me a place where a Sunni and a Shiih are worshipping God together, I will worship that God!”

⁵ Richard N. Longenecker, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Acts, p. 359.

That God is our Lord Jesus Christ! Who by His Spirit, displaces lesser powers, creates a new community of joy, and buries hostilities forever! Do you know Him? Do you treasure Him?

Let's pray.