



“You Will Be My Witnesses in Jerusalem and in All Judea and Samaria...”

Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ

Acts 8:1-25

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It is no exaggeration to say that the martyrdom of Stephen was one of the greatest turning point in the history of the early church. The continuing effects of his courageous death for the sake of the gospel are still being felt in this earth today. Just imagine what it would have been like for the disciples, the emotions and the shockwaves that the death of Stephen sent throughout the church in Jerusalem. Here was this godly, powerful man with a deep knowledge of the OT, a passion for Christ, and a heart for his people who was cut down in the prime of his life. Near the end of His ministry in the flesh on this earth, the Lord Jesus Christ told His disciples these words: “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me.” (John 16:2–3, ESV) I’m certain the early disciples remembered that teaching, but it did not lessen the shock when Stephen, their most outstanding layman -- a man pious, strong and useful to the church -- was stoned to death by the Sanhedrin.

But as shocking as Stephen’s death was, his sacrifice would bear greater fruit than any of the Apostles or disciples could have imagined. While his death touched off the first widespread persecution of the church, it did something else as well. It led to the great missionary outreach of the people of God. Satan’s attempt to stamp out the fire of the gospel in this man only scattered the embers of the gospel fire and started new fires around the world.

I mentioned Tertullian last week, but I want to give you the fuller quotation from a treatise that he wrote during a similar time of great persecution of the church by the Romans. He wrote: “Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is proof we are innocent. The oftener we are mowed down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.” Stephen’s blood would be the seed for a sweeping revival, in of all places, Samaria. Let’s look at the immediate results of Stephen’s martyrdom as we see how this text moves from...

Persecution to Proclamation (1-8) Look at verses 1-3 with me: “And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” (Acts 8:1–3, ESV)

Luke describes the scene that followed the death of Stephen and what he describes is open season on the church. Stephen’s sermon established without question that the church was not merely some troublesome Jewish sect but an entirely separate movement. When Stephen was cut down for standing before the Sanhedrin and proclaiming that Jesus was the true temple of God, the only place that man could meet with God; that He had fulfilled in His flesh the fullness of the Law in every respect; that He was the true Messiah from heaven for whom the Jews had been waiting and whom they had rejected, that the time of the temple worship had passed once and for all, the toleration for these followers of Christ, whether in the synagogues or in the temple, had come to decisive end. This was the final and complete break with Judaism. Now the people of God were the hunted.

And the chief hunter was none other than Saul, who approved of the execution and immediately on the heels of Stephen’s death, began ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now listen, the idea is not that he just threw them in jail and threw away the key. No, Saul put them in prison for the express purpose of having them judged and put to death. Saul’s intent was to destroy, to ruin, and to rend the church. The word “ravage” is a word that speaks of sadistic cruelty and was used of an animal mangling its prey. And that is what Saul sought to do, to utterly destroy the church. Now, not all of the Jews were united in an uproar against the Christians. We read of devout men, devout Jews, who knew that the murder of Stephen was illegal and who gave to him a proper burial, themselves breaking the law by publically mourning a man who was put to death for blasphemy. But the vast majority of the city had turned on the church.

In the face of the threat a great many Christians fled the city and Acts 11 tells us that they fled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Not all of the church fled of course, Luke is using the word all as a figure of speech, but a great number ran from the chaos that was enveloping the

city. In contrast, the Apostles, feeling the weight of the responsibility of shepherding the church still in Jerusalem, and knowing too that God still required a witness in the darkness of Jerusalem, like faithful watchmen stayed at their post despite the growing threat to their lives. Make no mistake, however, the days of God's mighty working, the huge open air preaching of the gospel, the signs and wonders, the mass conversions and astonishing growth of the church had come to an end in Jerusalem. God

And yet, what we need to see is that although this situation seems horrible from our perspective, God's sovereign hand was directing even this. God is at work:. Like Isaiah said: "O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you; I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure." (Isaiah 25:1, ESV) There was a divine purpose in this seeming chaos and we need to see it. It was never God's plan for the gospel to be shut up in Jerusalem. Beloved, in times of relative peace and prosperity, the church is often in danger of slipping into a sort of spiritual inertia, to grow lazy and content, too much at ease in this world that is not our home, to easily being sucked into the culture. It can become too easy for us in times of relative calm to spend all our energies debating the finer points of Reformed theology while the world is dying and souls are passing every second into eternal destruction. I am not saying that we should not carefully form our theology and doctrine rooted in the Word of God, but we cannot do it to the exclusion of taking that truth into this darkened world. The church lives in a very real tension – not in a bad sense. You know, on one hand, we must be sure that we are growing spiritually, caring for those in the body, serving and encouraging one another, worshipping, praying, and growing in grace. We must never neglect growing in grace.

On the other hand, the church does not just exist for its members. We are to be on mission in the world. We are to be a people with a passion for the souls of men that is manifest by our evangelism and mission labors. We proclaim the only hope for humanity and in order to make Christ known, we must get out of our church.

God made sure that the church had the proper balance and did not get stuck in Jerusalem. This persecution shook the church into action, moved them to take the gospel out of the comfortable confines of Jerusalem, in this case, and into Samaria and the ends of the earth. Amidst the horrors of the waves of persecution against Christ's followers, two wonderful things took place: the gospel invaded Samaria, fulfilling the second step in Christ's blueprint, and it went out with amazing spiritual power. Luke explains what happened next:

“Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.” (Acts 8:4, ESV) I want you to grasp the significance of this simple sentence. Think of how these men and women must have felt. They grieved the death of Stephen, grieved the breaking up of the fellowship in Jerusalem, loved ones and family members had been thrown into prison. They left behind homes and possessions, displaced from everything that was once familiar. What would they do? They could have complained over the situation, drafted a petition to the Sanhedrin, hidden somewhere and, in the words of our therapeutic and decidedly non-resilient age, “spent some time healing.” They could have denied the faith or at least not been so open about it. They could have done these things, but they didn’t. They went about preaching the word, preaching the gospel, preaching Christ and Him crucified. No cowering for these people, no record of complaints or whining, bemoaning the situation, instead a devoted determination to make the name of Christ known. They saw their circumstances as God positioning them to be used for his eternal purpose. We should all have that vision – as it regards our jobs, our neighborhoods, our schools, trials we face – God is positioning us for His eternal glory. Do we have that kind of vision? That is the first great lesson of this text – is our vision so full of Christ?

I want you to see that the first great missionary expansion was not accomplished by the Apostles but by lay men and women, by quote-unquote “ordinary Christians.” The Christian faith was not spread by the Apostles only, but by the whole church! And Luke wastes no time in telling us about the faithful witness of Philip in Samaria. “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 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. 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. So there was much joy in that city.” (Acts 8:5–8, ESV)

This doesn’t hit us like it should because we are not Jews. For Stephen to go to Samaria would be like Rand Paul going to the Democratic National Convention. The Jews and the Samaritans had a long-standing hatred of one another, centuries long in fact. Jews had no dealings with Samaritans, avoided them and their land like the plague. They considered them half-breeds, the product of the intermarriage of Jews with the other nations when Israel was taken into captivity in 722 BC. When the Jews later came back to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity, the Samaritans offered to help rebuild the temple, but the Jews rejected them. The Samaritans then rejected Jerusalem as the center of worship and built their own Temple on Mt Gerazim in Samaria and followed only the first five books of the Bible. By this time that Philip, Samaria was all darkness, rife with idolatry and occultic practices, so why in the world would Stephen go to the capital city of Samaria? Why not go somewhere more “open to the gospel?”

Why would Stephen go to Samaria? First, because Jesus said to -- “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) It was the command of Christ. He went to Samaria because they were sinners in need of a Savior. Sin made them guilty and abominable in the sight of the holy God, without the hope of salvation on their own, defiled in thought, word and action, under the penalty of eternal death. They were sinners like us, like Philip, who needed a Savior.

What would he preach to them? He preached to them Christ and since they believed the first five books of the Bible, he probably started with the first promise of the gospel in Genesis 3 and then moved on the promise of Moses in Deuteronomy 18 of the prophet like Moses, but far greater than Moses, who would be the true Savior of His people. He didn't come bringing the powerless message of racial reconciliation or mutual tolerance, but the sin shattering, life-giving message of Jesus Christ. He could stand before them and say, “The prophet that Moses has spoken of has come and I am His ambassador and a trophy of His grace. He is God's Son, the true Messiah whose name is Jesus Christ and by His holy life, His atoning sacrificial death, and His glorious resurrection, He has broken the power of sin, the power of death, torn down the wall of hostility between God and man, satisfied God's wrath against sin, poured out His blood to redeem and reconcile a people to God, forever defeating the powers of darkness. He has lived the life we could not live, paid with His death the debt we could not pay, rose from the dead to declare His victory and Lordship over all and has ascended to the right hand of God from which he will come one day to judge the living and dead by His gospel. Repent and believe in Jesus Christ!”

What did God do? He gave the Samaritans ears to hear, eyes to see, riveted their attention on the preaching of Philip, rent their hearts and brought revival to Samaria, working by His Spirit through the faithfulness of Philip to cast out unclean spirits and heal the broken as a picture of the unconquerable power of God and His gospel to heal and save lost souls. A revival broke out and joy filled the city. As their souls are saved and their bodies are healed, it was like a glimpse of heaven, of the new earth and the new heavens come down by the power of the Holy Spirit and there's great rejoicing and there's joy! It could not be contained, the outshining of the inward work of God in the heart.

See this with me, and this is the second great lesson – Philip does not allow prejudice to get in the way of preaching the gospel. Let that be a lesson to us. How often do we allow prejudice of any kind – social, economic, racial, ethnic, religious, moral, or political – keep us from sharing the gospel as we should. Philip will not allow prejudice to silence him.

This display of the glorious power of God through the preaching of His Christ drew attention. It drew the attention of Simon Magus and of the Apostles. Look first at

The Apparent Conversion of Simon the Great (9-13) Look at it with me: “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. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. 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. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.” (Acts 8:9–13, ESV) Do you see what is going on here? People who had once been held under the sway of Satan , who had been under the sway of this practitioner of magic – don’t think slight of hand and card tricks, think sorcery, demonic practices, Long-Island medium kind of stuff, lying signs and wonders – they are being saved and delivered from demonic oppression and the guy who had been Satan’s main agent of spiritual deception and oppression takes notice.

Just a word about the description that is given of Simon here because it is noteworthy. He is the quintessential tool of Satan. He was a practitioner of magic, of the dark arts, of a pseudo-religion that amazed people but left them in bondage to sin, entertained but not delivered, amazed but not redeemed. He said of himself that he was someone great – a self-promoter, drawing attention to himself and away from the true God, seeking power and fame and importance in the lives of the people. And it worked. They said of him, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” He put himself forward as a pseudo-Christ, as the power and wisdom of God, and gladly received the praise and really the worship of the Samaritans. He is the classic tool of Satan.

When the people 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, Simon lost his audience and became intrigued by all that was going on and coming and listening to Philip preach and seeing what Philip was doing, Simon seemed to believe, seemed to be converted. In a sense he did believe – that is, he saw the power of God with his own eyes and believed in his mind that it was real – and he even submitted to baptism and attached himself at the hip to Philip, being amazed at all that Philip was able to do. If this were all that we knew of Simon, we would have concluded that he was truly saved. But there is a great deal more to the story. But not only did the work of God through Philip get the attention of Simon Magus, it got the attention of the Apostles as well and we see them coming to confirm the works of God in Samaria.

The Apostles' Confirmation (14-17) Luke writes: "Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:14–17, ESV) The Apostles in Jerusalem heard about the revival taking place in Samaria and immediately they dispatched Peter and John to see what was going on. It makes sense. The Apostles were the appointed guardians of the gospel, the shepherds of the church, responsible for safe-guarding the truth of the gospel. Here is the first report of the gospel at work outside of Jerusalem and so they go to check it out and when they get to Samaria, they find out that these people have truly come to faith in Christ. And so according to God's plan, Peter and John came and laid hands on the Samaritan believers and prayed that they would receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit. I find it divinely ironic that one of the Apostles who had wanted to call out to God to pour fire from heaven on the Samaritans in Luke 9 – John -- is now sent by God to call down the Spirit from heaven on the very same people. But Peter and John do. They pray to God and the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit in fullness.

A couple of things – first – what does this mean? Well, certainly we have to say that the Holy Spirit was already at work among the Samaritans. No-one believes, no one truly repents, no one is saved without the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. He was already doing signs and wonders through Philip. So what does it mean that the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit? It was similar to what took place with the Apostles in Jerusalem at Pentecost. Pentecost was a unique moment in redemptive history. It was not that the Holy Spirit was not at work in the Apostles before Pentecost, but at Pentecost they received the Spirit of God in fullness – His power, His gifts, His sealing, His indwelling. That is what it means to receive the Spirit of God

and it only could happen for the Apostles after Christ ascended into heaven and sent the Spirit as He promised: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:16–17, ESV) Now we know that is not the norm for today. We receive the fullness of the Spirit when we trust in Christ for salvation, right?

So the second question is, why did it happen this way with the Samaritans and why were the Apostles involved? Well, just as Pentecost was unique, so Samaria is unique. Samaria stands as the first testimony to the power of the gospel in the lives of those who are not fully ethnic or religious Jews. You have to understand; this is the first time the gospel has gone out beyond Jerusalem and not just to anyone but to the Samaritans. The Jews and the Samaritans had a long-standing rift that could have resulted in a Samaritan church and a Jewish church, right? But the true body of Christ will not be divided like that. And so in God’s wisdom, just as He will later do with the Gentiles, the Apostles witness the power of God to make of two different groups, one body in Christ.

For the Apostles, to behold as the Samaritans received the fullness of the Spirit, shows them that these new believers must be received as full-fledged members of the church on equal standing with the Jews who had been saved by grace. And for the Samaritan believers, they needed the affirmation and confirmation that, as Paul would later write, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28, ESV) Who better to confirm their standing than these Apostles. The delay in the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit was by divine design, as a demonstration of the fellowship and solidarity and a public sign to the whole church as well as to the Samaritans themselves that they were indeed bona fide Christians, received into the redeemed community on precisely the same terms as the Jewish converts – by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. In the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Samaritans, one person was conspicuously left out – Simon Magus. And in the rest of this text we see

Satan’s Imposter Revealed (18-25) Pick it up in verse 18. Having been left out of what had just taken place, we read of Simon: “Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, 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) His true

colors are beginning to show. I'm not sure what took place when the Spirit was given to the Samaritans by the laying on of the Apostle's hands, what manifestations took place, but instantly Simon wants this power. It was a dazzling, irresistible display of power. He sees Peter and John as extraordinary practitioners of religious magic and he must have what they have and he is willing to pay for it. Peter's response is bold, direct, condemnatory and unmeasured. "But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God." (Acts 8:20–21, ESV)

Beloved, you have to see and feel the intensity of Peter's response to Simon. Literally what Peter says is this, and don't be offended by this: "You and your money be damned to hell!" No one could ever imagine a preacher speaking like this today. We would want him censured immediately or to issue an apology. But Peter is bold and blunt for a reason. He has discerned Simon's true character. He is a false professor, a tare among wheat, a lying deceiver. He has no part, no part in the Apostle's ministry, and no lot, no part of the Holy Spirit. He is an instrument of Satan still. His heart is not right before God. He is still in his sins.

We have to see what is really going on here. This is yet another attack by Satan on the church. So far we have seen him use persecution, jailing and beating. We have seen him use spiritual hypocrisy in Ananias and Sapphira. We have seen him use distraction and discord. We have seen him use murder to attack the church and now he tries to destroy the church, through Simon, in two ways.

First, Satan uses Simon to put before Peter and John the temptation to prostitute the gospel and the things of God for their personal financial gain, to use the gospel for unjust gain, to commercialize the gospel and to sell the gifts of God at a price.

Second, Satan uses Simon to try to pervert the gospel of grace by turning the gift of God into something that can be purchased, something that can be attained by human means, something that can be earned. Simon's request was a direct attack on the character and person of God, of the purity of His gospel, on the wonder of His redeeming, steadfast love. The grace of God cannot be purchased, cannot be earned or merited. God cannot be bought. He cannot be used like a commodity. He cannot be manipulated. God will not be mocked. He is the Lord to whom

belongs all glory. You come to God on His terms alone and for His glory alone or you will never know God.

Well did Simon earn this rebuke from Peter! Ever since that day, the attempt to turn the spiritual into the commercial, to sell the things of God, and especially to purchase position and power in the church has been called by the term “simony.”

Though in this case the imposter is revealed, the spirit of Simon Magus is still alive and well in churches today. We see it in the religious charlatans of our day who make merchandise of the Kingdom of God, not just the obvious ones on TBN and the like, but the purveyors of “Jesus junk,” the myriad of men and women who get rich off of books and videos that are nothing more than human wisdom masquerading as a word from God. We see it this spirit in the multitudes of people who have professed a faith in Christ but who are void of the presence and power of the Spirit, people who have joined themselves to the church for the atmosphere and not for Christ, who are drawn to the church by programs and food giveaways or to please a girlfriend or boyfriend, or spouse, or for business gain but not for Jesus, who join themselves to church and who have in the atmosphere of the church have “been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,” (Hebrews 6:4–5, ESV) but who have never truly known Christ. We see the spirit alive and well in the hearts of those who come to church to try to bargain with God and use God? They think that if they can show a little religion in their lives that God will make them feel better, be healthier, make their families get along better, cause them to prosper, that God will be obligated to give to them all their desires godly or not. We see this spirit in men who preach to gain notoriety, those who serve with an eye toward advancement, and those who put on godly airs for what gain they can receive from others. It is this spirit of Simon Magus by which the church has been rendered weak and ineffective, more than any other, by unregenerate people coming in and taking on the outer garments of Christianity, calling themselves Christians, but remaining still unchanged in heart and life. That has ruined more churches than anything else possibly could. This spirit is much alive in the church today and the only way that it can be put to death is by heeding the words that Peter spoke to Simon.

“Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”” (Acts 8:22–23, ESV) Peter, after issuing a blistering denunciation of Simon, yet leaves him with words of grace. Repent and pray to God to forgive the intent, the wicked

motive of your unclean heart. You are still in the gall of bitterness – still in a horrific condition and in the bondage of iniquity. Don't misunderstand beloved, those words "if possible" do not refer to the willingness of God to forgive but rather to whether or not Simon would truly repent. Unfortunately for Simon, there seems to be no desire in him to do so.

"And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.'" (Acts 8:24, ESV) He's almost dismissive of Peter, not realizing the grave condition that his soul is in. He puts it off on Peter, refuses to act personally. I have often seen that response in others and it is a chilling sight...

This passage that we have looked at this morning holds a great number of lessons for us. Do we believe in the power of the gospel? Do we see hold in proper balance the need to grow in grace in the fellowship of the saints and to make the grace of God known in the world of darkness? Do we see all the circumstances of our lives as the hand of God positioning us giving us an opportunity in determined devotion to make the name of Christ known? Do we allow prejudice to get in the way of proclaiming Christ? Do we proclaim the gospel or do we shrink from Christ to preach some spiritualized pablum or some other worthless remedy to the death of sin in the human soul? Are we genuine in our faith and trust in Christ and do our lives show it? Is the spirit of Simon Magus infecting our own lives? Of what must we repent and pray that God would forgive the intent of our hearts. These are things we must truly consider, not observe and pass by. May God give us the faithfulness, the sensitivity of soul, and the courage to do so. God bless you, beloved.

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