

# THE GOSPEL BEGINS TO SPREAD BEYOND JERUSALEM

Acts 8:4–40

## Opening Thought

1) Think of a time in your life (maybe several occasions) when something bad—even a terrible circumstance—actually ended up turning out for good. What happened? How does recounting this experience affect you? Why?

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## Background of the Passage

Acts 1:8 is one of the—if not *the* single—most significant verses in the entire book. It not only serves as a blueprint for God’s global plan, it functions almost as a kind of outline for Luke’s inspired record. Chapters 1—7 detail the action of Christ’s witnesses in Jerusalem. Beginning with the persecution led by Saul in chapter 8, the gospel began to spread as commanded by Christ.

Luke recorded Philip’s trip into Samaria and his ministry there in order to reveal the marvelous truth that Jesus, the promised Jewish Messiah, was also the king and Savior of Gentiles. The message of Christ was and is a worldwide gospel. All nations and languages would be invited and included (see Isaiah 56:3; Daniel 7:14) in the kingdom of God.

Opposition to the gospel in the form of a sorcerer named Simon failed to halt Philip. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he performed miraculous signs to validate his message. The underlying truth of this section of Acts is clear: Nothing can stop God’s powerful and eternal plan to fill heaven with worshipers from “every nation and tribe and people and language” (Revelation 7:9).

The succeeding story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch provides a wonderful picture of God’s global love and His surprising plan to get the good news of Christ to those who have never heard. Philip was sovereignly instructed to suddenly leave a booming ministry in Samaria to go south into the desert. There he met a prominent official from the court of Candace, queen of Ethiopia, reading (but not understanding) the prophet Isaiah.

Philip was invited into the man’s carriage and was able to “[preach] Jesus to him” (verse 35). The man embraced the gospel, was baptized into the faith, and returned to Ethiopia rejoicing (presumably sharing what he had learned). Meanwhile Philip was instantly transported more than twenty miles away to the city of Azotus! Obviously God had prepared the hearts of people there to respond to the truth.

## Bible Passage

Read 8:4–40, noting the key words and definitions to the right of the passage.

### Acts 8:4–40

<sup>4</sup> *Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.*

<sup>5</sup> *Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.*

<sup>6</sup> *And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.*

<sup>7</sup> *For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.*

<sup>8</sup> *And there was great joy in that city.*

<sup>9</sup> *But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great,*

<sup>10</sup> *to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the great power of God.”*

<sup>11</sup> *And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time.*

<sup>12</sup> *But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized.*

<sup>13</sup> *Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.*

<sup>14</sup> *Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them,*

<sup>15</sup> *who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.*

<sup>16</sup> *For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.*

<sup>17</sup> *Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.*

<sup>18</sup> *And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money,*

<sup>19</sup> *saying, “Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”*

<sup>20</sup> *But Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!*

<sup>21</sup> *“You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God.*

<sup>22</sup> *“Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.*

<sup>23</sup> *“For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.”*

<sup>24</sup> *Then Simon answered and said, “Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me.”*

<sup>25</sup> *So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.*

<sup>26</sup> *Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, “Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is desert.*

<sup>27</sup> *So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship,*

<sup>28</sup> *was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet.*

<sup>29</sup> *Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.”*

<sup>30</sup> *So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”*

<sup>31</sup> *And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.*

<sup>32</sup> *The place in the Scripture which he read was this: “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.*

<sup>33</sup> *In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.”*

- 34 *So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?"*
- 35 *Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.*
- 36 *Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?"*
- 37 *Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."*
- 38 *So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.*
- 39 *Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.*
- 40 *But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea.*

*went everywhere* (v. 4)—a common expression in Acts for missionary efforts

*Philip* (v. 5)—the first missionary named in Scripture and the first person to be given the title "evangelist"

*Samaria* (v. 5)—the ancient capital of the northern kingdom of Israel; the inhabitants at the time (that is, the Samaritans) had a mixed ancestry, creating cultural and racial barriers between them and the pure-blooded Jews

*sorcery* (v. 9)—magic which originally referred to the Medo-Persians; a mixture of science and superstition, including astrology, divination, and the occult

*"This man is the great power of God"* (v. 11)—a claim to be united with God

*Simon ... believed ... was baptized* (v. 13)—As the narrative indicates, Simon's belief was motivated by purely selfish reasons and was not genuine saving faith.

*as yet ... upon none of them* (v. 16)—Used by some to argue that Christians receive the Holy Spirit subsequent to salvation, this view fails to take into account the fact that these incidents took place during a transitional period in church history in which confirmation by the apostles was necessary to verify inclusion of a new group of people into the church (in this instance, nothing less than a divine sign would convince Jewish believers that the detested Samaritans were also part of God's plan for the church).

*laid hands on them* (v. 17) —indicating apostolic authority and confirmation

*received the Holy Spirit* (v. 17)—likely a replication of the events from Pentecost (that is, speaking in tongues) in order to show unmistakably that the way of salvation was open to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews

*Gaza* (v. 26)—one of the five cities of the Philistines

*eunuch* (v. 27)—This term can refer either to one who had been emasculated or, in more general terms, to a government official. He may have functioned as a kind of Treasury Secretary or Minister of Finance for Candace, the queen mother of Ethiopia.

*The place ... he read* (v. 32) —Isaiah 53:7–8

*of whom does the prophet say this ...?* (v. 34)—The man's confusion was understandable; even the Jewish rabbis argued about the interpretation of this passage.

*caught Philip away* (v. 39) —snatched away in miraculous fashion, just as Elijah and Ezekiel had been in the Old Testament

## Understanding the Text

2) What does it mean that the believers “went everywhere” preaching the word?

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(verses to consider: 9:32; 13:6; 14:24; 15:3, 41; 16:6; 18:23; 19:1, 21; 20:2)

3) Based on the record of chapter 8, was Simon a true Christian or not? What obstacles (internal and external) would he have needed to move beyond in order to come to saving faith?

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4) How did Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch come about? What was Philip’s response? What does this passage demonstrate about Spirit-led evangelism?

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## Cross Reference

Read Matthew 13:1–23

## Exploring the Meaning

5) How does the parable of the soils in Matthew 13 illustrate the varying reactions to the gospel that are reported in chapter 8?

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6) What events in chapter 8 suggest satanic opposition to the spread of the gospel? In other words, what demonic and worldly roadblocks did the believers encounter as they took the gospel into Samaritan territory?

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7) Some well-meaning Christians point to chapter 8 as proof that believers need to seek a second blessing. By this they mean that believers need to be baptized in the Holy Spirit at some point following salvation. Why is this erroneous?

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(verses to consider: Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13)

## Summing Up ...

“God often accomplishes His sovereign work through human instruments (see 2:4, 14; 4:8, 31; 6:3–8; 7:55; 8:17; 10:1–48; 16:25–34). Like a master sculptor, He takes otherwise useless and inconsequential tools and uses them to create a masterpiece. There is a prerequisite, however, for being used by God. Paul writes, ‘Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work’ (2 Timothy 2:20–21). God uses holy tools to do His work.” —*John MacArthur*

## Reflecting on the Text

8) How is Simon’s story a sober warning to all in the church who claim to be believers in Christ?

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9) Why do you think God called Philip away from a thriving ministry to many and sent him to speak to one solitary individual in the desert? What are the implications of this divine act for your own life?

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10) As a child of God who has been commanded to make disciples of all nations, how specifically do you sense God is leading you to share the gospel this week? What can you do to become a more effective witness?

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## Recording Your Thoughts

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**For further study, see the following passages:**

Deuteronomy 18:9–12

1 Kings 18:12

Isaiah 53:7–8

Ezekiel 3:12, 14

Luke 24:25–27

John 2:23–24

John 4:9

John 5:39, 46

Acts 19:1–7

Acts 21:8–9

Romans 8:9

Romans 10:12–15

1 Corinthians 12:13

Ephesians 6:10–17

Revelation 9:21