

O Church Arise: Through the Book of Acts

Philip the Evangelist (Acts 8)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on May 17, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ The book of Acts is such a helpful book to study for the Church today. It obviously gives us a glimpse into the life of the early church, which is so informative. These disciples were directly taught by the Lord Jesus himself. They were instructed on how to carry out life together as a Church on mission with a global God. We would do well to listen and follow in their steps.
 - ▶ **And what I appreciate is that there's no romanticized, utopian view of the church.** Luke didn't try to portray a community where everyone and everything was perfect and pristine. No, he painted a portrait of the church with warts and all. In chapter 5, we met a couple of hypocrites who were members of the first church in Jerusalem. They boldly lied to the church and to God.

- ❖ And as David noted last week, **here in the beginning of chapter 8 we learn that the early church had been sidelined and weren't on track with the mission God had given them.** That's not to say they weren't doing a lot of good ministry. We're told over and over again that they were boldly preaching Christ all over Jerusalem filling up the city with their teaching (5:28). Multitudes were being added to their number day by day (2:41, 47; 5:14; 6:1, 7).
 - ▶ But all of that was limited to one city, one territory, one culture. That kind of ministry/evangelism is good and important. No one should discourage or diminish that. But even still, at that point in time, the Church was off mission and needed to get back on.
 - The mission was clearly laid out in chapter 1:8, which many have described as table of contents of sorts. There Jesus tells his Church he's going to empower them by the Spirit of God to be his witnesses taking the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

- ❖ But so far ministry had been limited to Jerusalem and Judea. Granted, it was a lot of ministry. Thousands upon thousands were getting saved and baptized. They're joining the church and needing to be discipled. You could argue that there is enough work to be done right here. **We might want to put off Samaria and the ends of the earth for a while until we get more settled as a church.** That's how we often think.
 - ▶ But not God. That's not how God thinks when he sees lots of church growth and lots of ministry needs. He doesn't say, "Oh okay, you get a pass on the Great Commission. You should just focus on yourselves for a while. Don't worry about other cultures. Don't worry about the ends of the earth. Just take care of yourselves."
 - No, he sees church growth, he sees lots of new, hungry disciples, and he says, "Okay it's about time for you to be scattered, to be witnesses beyond your own culture or tribe, and go to the ends of the earth."

- ❖ My point is the church in Acts is similar to ours. There's a lot going on inside in our churches. Lots of discipling to be done. Lots of young believers to care for. Lots of marriages to be repaired. Lots of parents and families that need help. So much to the point that we hunker down and focus on legitimate needs. We focus on what's happening in our midst. **And give ourselves a pass when it comes to the mission of crossing over literal or figurative borders into cultures that fall outside of what we're used to or what we're comfortable with.**

- ❖ In the beginning of chapter 8, the early church was in the same predicament. And what we see God do among them is inspiring and instructive. I want to point out four things in our text: **1) A mission fanned by tribulation (vv1-3).** **2) A mission manned by nonprofessionals (vv4-8).** **3) A God that cannot be bribed (vv9-25).** and **4) A God that seeks out the outcast (vv26-40).**

A Mission Fanned by Tribulation

- ❖ The first thing we see in chapter 8 is a church on a mission that's fanned by tribulation. **Tribulation and persecution doesn't put the mission out. It just fans it even hotter and further away from the source.** Last week we looked at Stephen and now we're turning to Philip. We were introduced to both in chapter 6. They're presented as men full of the Spirit. Both were instrumental in healing division and bringing the church back into communion.
- ❖ **But these two men in particular were also instrumental in bringing the church back on mission to go beyond the comforts and familiarity of Jerusalem.** Stephen contributed through bold witnessing and martyrdom. Philip, through bold preaching and missionary work.
 - ▶ Chapter 7 ends with Stephen's execution and chapter 8 begins with Saul's approval. *"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."*
- ❖ Stephen's martyrdom had three effects. **First, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem.** Stephen's death was like the match that lit a powder keg of persecution. And at the center of it all was this brilliant, young scribe named Saul of Tarsus who was as cruel towards Christians as he was zealous for the law. That word there for "*ravaging the church*" in v3 is said to be a strong word that refers to a brutal and sadistic cruelty. He was going house to house ripping Christians from their families and dragging them off to prison.
- ❖ **Second, this great persecution led to a great dispersion.** Believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Persecution ironically got the church back on mission. It accelerated the church's detachment from the temple in Jerusalem. Which had to happen quickly so that these Jewish Christians would not be tempted to keep the temple in the center of their faith.
 - ▶ God uses even persecution to disperses his people away from the temple because Christianity is not temple-centered. It's Jesus-centered. **Jesus is the new temple where you go to meet with God, were you go to find atonement for your sins.** That's the message, the witness, they're supposed to be giving throughout the region of Samaria to the ends of the earth. God is going to make sure they get back on mission.
- ❖ So the first effect of Stephen's martyrdom is a great persecution, which leads to, second, a great dispersion. **And a great dispersion leads to, third, great evangelism.** Look at v4. "*Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.*" Preaching the word here has nothing to do with a pulpit. It's just talking about sharing the good news. The Greek word is better translated *gospelling* or *good-newsing*. It's used five times in this chapter (8:4, 12, 25, 35, 40). These scattered sheep went about *gospelling*. Good-newsing. All over Samaria.

- ❖ Just think about it. The last thing the devil wants is the gospel making inroads into new territory, new cultures. So he does his worst in trying to stamp out the church. **But have you ever tried to stamp out a brush fire?** You end up spreading the sparks further and further. That's what's happening here. Satan didn't realize the mission of the Church is fanned by tribulation. More tribulation makes the gospel grow even more out of control.
 - ▶ Before we move on, just a word of caution. I think most of us would want our church to be on mission with our global God. **We pray for HCC to be even more mission-minded. But I think we'd do well to pause and give more careful thought to what that might mean and what that might bring.** If our comfort and security are paramount, then it's not worth it, considering all the trouble being on mission will likely bring. But if God and his kingdom's cause matter most, then let's do this.

A Mission Manned by Nonprofessionals

- ❖ So we see a mission fanned by tribulation, and second, a mission manned by nonprofessionals. This point is so crucial to the Church's mission. **You simply won't experience catalytic growth if you leave all the gospel work to the professionals or in this case, in Acts 8, to the apostles.** Here we're told in v1 that when this great scattering took place, the apostles stayed behind in Jerusalem. That means all those who were *gospelling* throughout Samaria were nonapostles. They were ordinary believers. Laymen. Nonprofessionals.
 - ▶ Now the apostles stayed behind – not because they refused to get on mission – but because they refused to abandon their posts. **The fact is some needed to scatter but some needed to stay.** Some need to cross cultures to evangelize the nations. While some need to stay in our culture to evangelize our neighbors. It's not a question of which is more important but of which are you called to do.
- ❖ But my main point here is to highlight the fact that the Church's mission is *not* designed in such a way that you end up having only professionals in the game to do the *gospelling* while lay believers simply support from the sidelines with their prayers and offerings.
 - ▶ What we see here in Acts is sadly so different than what's going on in many churches today. **There's been a wholesale professionalism of gospel ministry.** There's this great quote from Will Metzger's book on evangelism. *"In our world probably 99.9 percent of all Christians are not in the ministry. Unless everyone engages in evangelism – praying, initiating and fervently speaking the gospel – not much will happen. New birth into God's kingdom usually involves people as spiritual midwives."*¹
- ❖ Spiritual midwives. Nonphysicians. Nonprofessionals. But still leading people to a new birth. Do you get the analogy? Those scattered about in v4 preaching the word, *gospelling* wherever they went, weren't professionals. They were ordinary believers. They didn't work for a church or a Christian ministry. They didn't have a seminary degree. They were just Christians, filled with the Spirit, on a mission, with a message on their lips.

¹ Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth 4th ed.*, 21-22.

- ❖ I've been so encouraged by *Hope Church* here in Houston. One of their pastors, Daniel Rieke, spoke at our last CCF retreat and will be guest preaching here in August. What impresses me about this community of believers is that out of their 97 members, 13 are actively engaged in global missions. That's over a tenth of their membership serving overseas!
 - ▶ But what's even more impressive and inspiring is that 8 of those 13 did not join the church with any thought of going to the mission field. They didn't dream of being a missionary since they were kids. No, they were just ordinary believers with regular jobs and families. But in sitting under the preached word of God and by the work of the Spirit of God, they heard a call to leave the familiarity of their Jerusalem and Judea and to go to their Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

- ❖ That's really inspiring, but honestly we don't have to look to other churches to find great examples of ordinary believers (nonprofessionals) on mission for God. I think of one of our elders, **John Joe**, who is part-physician, part-entrepreneur but wholly a missionary at heart. He doesn't work for a church or a ministry, but he does use his training, his vocation, his business as a means of missionary work and activity among the nations. And he's been inspiring a generation of younger physicians and entrepreneurs among us to think and live the same.

- ❖ If you want to get on mission with God, you don't have to give up your profession/career to work for a church or a ministry or become a traditional missionary working for an agency. **There are so many strategic ways of leveraging your training, your position, your career to work in a global context, in a strategic global city where there's greater access and contact with unreached and unengaged people groups.**

- ❖ Most churches want their college students and young professionals to settle down in their city, to plant deep roots, and stick around for the long haul. **But we want to be a church that casts a global vision for those same students and young professionals to heed God if he calls them to scatter into Samaria and to the ends of the earth.**
 - ▶ Because we know the Great Commission won't be fulfilled just by pastors and traditional missionaries. It'll take every believer among us to get on mission with our global God. It means wherever he scatters you, you go about *gospelling* and giving witness to who he is and what he has done for us.

A God That Cannot Be Bribed

- ❖ That leads to our next two points. Who is this God that calls on a mission aimed at the very ends of the earth? As we continue in chapter 8, we encounter a God that cannot be bribed. In other words, he's impartial. He doesn't play favorites.
 - ▶ **He receives people into his kingdom irrespective of ethnicity, culture, or socio-economic status.** If you simply receive his Son Jesus by faith, he receives you and pours out his Spirit upon you. The impartiality of God is highlighted as Philip crosses over into new territory, Samaritan territory. *"⁵Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. ⁶And 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."*

- ❖ To appreciate the significance of this moment in the history of the Church, you have to understand the cultural and religious chasm that divided Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans were descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel, which was obliterated and dispersed centuries before. Those who remained had intermarried with foreigners who moved in and settled the land. **So to a Jew, a Samaritan is not a true Israelite. He's a half-breed.**
 - ▶ **And what's worse, he's a heretic.** The Samaritans eventually constructed their own temple on Mt. Gerizim rivaling the one in Jerusalem on Mt. Zion. They also rejected the Jewish Scriptures except for the books of Moses. No wonder they didn't get along.
- ❖ For the gospel to penetrate into Samaritan culture and win Samaritan converts was a huge deal. **At this point in church history, things could have gone one way or the other. Instead of one church united in the Spirit, we could've had two completely separate churches.** Both believing in Jesus, but one with a greater claim of legitimacy. There could've been a Jewish church (the mother church) and a Samaritan church (a distant stepchild).
 - ▶ I believe to avoid this tragic outcome, the Samaritan are genuinely converted and baptized with water, but the baptism of the Spirit is withheld until the apostles arrive to see for themselves what's happening. *"¹⁴Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, ¹⁵who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit."*
- ❖ **Some theological traditions have tried to interpret what happened here in Samaria as paradigmatic for how to understand Christian salvation.** They'll argue that salvation takes place in two stages. In the first stage you're converted (regenerated). You become a Christian. But at a later date, there's a second stage where you're baptized by the Spirit. You receive a second blessing. Some would even suggest that the Spirit can only be imparted by authorized figures in the church who stand in the line of the apostles (i.e. bishops, etc).
- ❖ But I think these traditions fail to appreciate the uniqueness of this moment. The gospel had just crossed a significant cultural divide. **There was a pressing need to demonstrate what was happening among the Samaritans is no different than what occurred among the Jews.** The apostles needed to see the same Spirit being poured out, so they'd be absolutely convinced that there was no difference between a Jewish church and a Samaritan church.
 - ▶ This was a unique event in church history. The normative pattern is conversion and Spirit baptism happening together in one stage (cf. 2:38). So don't expect this event to repeat today any more than you'd expect the events of Pentecost to repeat again.
- ❖ Now what I really want to draw your attention to here is the story involving Simon. We're told that before Philip's arrival, the Samaritans were enamored by this practitioner of magic. He grabbed their attention by amazing them with magic. But then it says in v12 when Philip arrived preaching the good news, the people's attention is shifted to Christ. They believed and were baptized.

- ❖ In v13 it even says Simon believed and was baptized. **But we quickly learn that his faith was disingenuous and baptizing him was a mistake.** Because the moment he sees Peter and John lay their hands on believers and the Holy Spirit pour out, he asks, "How much?" How much will it cost to get that kind of power? Peter immediately rebukes him and declares that Simon's heart is not right before God.
- ❖ As we said before, Luke is not shy to record the mistakes of the early church. There's no romanticized portrait. Philip got it wrong when he baptized Simon. The man wasn't a genuine believer. There was no indication of repentance in him. There was no turning away from magic, from essentially his attempts to manipulate the divine.
 - ▶ **Magic in those days was not pulling a rabbit out of a hat.** Magic involved using potions or amulets but especially invoking incantations aimed at manipulating spiritual forces into bringing down blessing or curse.
- ❖ That sounds so primitive to us. But honestly, don't we do the same? **Don't we essentially practice a form of magic (though we'd never call it that)?** We often treat prayer like a magical incantation. We have to say the right words and end with "in Jesus's name" or it won't work. We have to perform certain rites to get God to bless us or to have access to his power.
 - ▶ Peter rebukes Simon – and us – for thinking we can manipulate God. For thinking we purchase the gift of God (v20) with either money or merit. You can't put God in your debt. **The gospel reality is that every single one of us is in debt to him because of our sin.**
 - But the good news that Philip preached to the Samaritans – the good news we need to hear today – is that God sent his Son Jesus Christ to pay that debt for us through death on the cross. That's your only hope. That's your only confidence.
- ❖ **Nothing you do can manipulate him into doing something for you.** He can't be bribed. He's impartial. The only way to get your heart right with God and to have the Spirit's power working in your life is to freely receive his gift by faith alone.
 - ▶ **That right there is a message that transcends any cultural divides. It speaks to human nature as a whole and not just to one particular culture.** You can preach that good news to Jews, to Samaritans, to Gentiles, to Americans, to Chinese, to rich, to poor. Because we're all equally indebted to God, and we all equally find our hope in God's gift of salvation freely accomplished by the Son and freely applied by the Spirit.

A God That Seeks Out the Outcast

- ❖ There's one last encounter that Philip has in chapter 8 and one more thing we learn about God. He's a God that seeks out the outcast. We see this in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch starting in v26. **This man was clearly searching for God, but in many ways God was really the one searching for him.**
 - ▶ When I started to study this I thought it was strange that God would take Philip away from Samaria where there were so many people and so much ministry to be done and to send him down a road described as "*a desert place*" (v26).

- ❖ **It just reminds us that there will be times in life when God is going to lead us down paths that seem pointless and off track.** In the end, we have to trust his wisdom. He knows what he's doing, especially when we don't.
 - ▶ So for Philip he might be a bit confused at first as to why God would lead him to a desert place, but then the answer literally crosses his path. The Spirit of the Lord leads him into what's essentially is the first recorded instance of personal evangelism.

- ❖ What do we know about this man? We learn in v27 he's an Ethiopian. He was African. Don't imagine the current location of Ethiopia. We're talking about the ancient land of Cush. Think modern-day Sudan. It was about 1,500 miles from Jerusalem and would've been considered the furthestmost boundaries of the Roman Empire. **It was the edge of the known world.**
 - ▶ Now in those days, most traveled by foot. The rich rode donkeys. Military officers rode horses. And only the rich and powerful rode in chariots. We're told he was a eunuch. He was castrated, most likely intentionally, in order to serve in the palace, usually the royal women. In this case Candace, which is actually not a personal name but an honorific title for the Queen Mother. It says he managed all her treasure.

- ❖ **So we're dealing with a powerful man in high position with lots of influence, and yet he's empty inside.** Something leads him to travel 1,500 miles to Jerusalem to look for God. V27 says he went to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. But it's not clear what he had in mind because, whether he knew it or not, eunuchs can't step foot in the temple courts (Deut. 23:1).
 - ▶ Imagine how deflated he must be. **He came all this way to worship God, but when he arrives he's told he's not welcomed.** He must have felt so humiliated. And yet he hasn't given up his search. He's reading Isaiah 53:7-8.
 - *"³²Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."³⁴*

- ❖ So here's this eunuch reading about this Suffering Servant (who we know is Jesus) being led to slaughter like a lamb, taking on humiliation. Humiliation! **This Messiah is dying our death and bearing our humiliation. What a fitting verse for this eunuch to be reading!** It's like the Spirit is tossing Philip a slow-pitch softball. We can only wish to have divine encounters of evangelism so perfectly set up. Look at v34. *"³⁴And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus."*

- ❖ I can only imagine what passages Philip must have taken him to. I wonder if he showed him **Isaiah 11:11** where the prophet predicts that Cushites will one day enter the kingdom. Or if he took him to **Isaiah 56:3-5** where it proclaims hope for the eunuch, the so-called "*dry tree*". It says there that the day is coming when eunuchs will be welcomed into God's house (Isa. 56:5).

- ▶ And how awesome it must have been for Philip to show this Gentile, this eunuch, this outcast, that God has been seeking you out and now welcomes you into the true house/temple. Into relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ❖ The eunuch hears this amazing news. He hears this gospel and truly believes. He's immediately converted, and then he sees water and says to Philip, "What prevents me from being baptized?" What hinders me? What barriers are there? And the answer is: None!
 - ▶ In the gospel there are no barriers keeping anyone from the kingdom. **All are welcome so long as they go through the door called Christ leaving their sins and their old life outside at the foot of that door.**
- ❖ This begs the question: If we have this amazing gospel that issues forth an invitation to all peoples regardless of your culture or language, regardless of how you lean politically, regardless of your level of education, if you're rich or poor, if you're mainstream or an outcast – if there are no such hindrances or barriers to our mission – **then why are we content to remain in strongly homogeneous circles and to focus our mission and ministry just there?**
 - ▶ I know the rationale. We look at our lives, our church, and we see lots of ministry still to be done. There's a lot of good gospel work among our people, our tribe. That's why we've narrowed our focus.
 - But do you see now that this is exactly what the first disciples could've said. They could've justified staying in Jerusalem and focusing their ministry among fellow Jews and Judeans. But instead of giving them a pass, God subjects them to the fires of persecution and scatters them to the ends of the earth.
- ❖ Church, let's not try his patience. Let's not wait till that point before we start moving out from what's familiar and comfortable. Let's start going to Samaria and the ends of the earth.
 - ▶ Think about this. ***Who would be Samaritans for us?*** Those with whom we sharply disagree. Those with whom we clash culturally, ideologically, theologically. ***And who would be the eunuch?*** Those who are those considered undesirable, unwelcomed. *Is our gospel big enough for them?*
- ❖ For 1st-century people, it would've blown their minds to see Jews and Samaritans worshipping side by side the same Lord and filled with the same Spirit. They would've been speechless to see a eunuch worshipping in their midst. They'd drawn the only possible explanation: **God is in this place.** Church, join me in praying that soon the same dynamics will be reflected in our congregation, and we'll have 21st-century people drawing the same conclusion about us.