

Beyond Jerusalem

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes we call it serendipity, other times a happy coincidence, and perhaps still other times we call it providence, but now and then in history, what started out looking like a random event ends up leading to something good. Alexander Graham Bell could not get his telephone invention to work until he accidentally spilled some acid on his equipment and suddenly it worked! In 1947, as an Arab shepherd pursued one of his stray goats, the shepherd nearly fell into a cave; a cave that ended up containing the first treasure trove of the Dead Sea scrolls. Spilled acid, a stray goat—strange things to lead to so much goodness, but it goes that way sometimes. It did in Acts Chapter 8 as well. The hammer of persecution fell hard on the early Church; that looked bad, but it led to something that was anything but bad. Today on *Groundwork*, we will explore what happened. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now our second of a planned six-part series that is going to look at events in the earliest days of the Church, and we are doing this across sort of the Epiphany season to sort of wonder: Are we still fulfilling the mission of Jesus today; which ultimately we know is a mission to all the earth.

DAVE BAST

It is, and we started with the wonderful story from Matthew 2 of the visit of the Magi to the child Jesus, coming and falling before him and opening and offering him their treasures: Gold and frankincense and myrrh, all probably symbolic for Matthew; and themselves symbolic of the wide range of peoples who would come—the gentile world that would be drawn to the Light of the world—Jesus, the Savior of the world; and that is really the theme of the book of Acts, too. The need, really, for the Church to understand its mission...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That is what we really want to think about.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are going to start to see that in this program from Acts Chapter 8, but before we get there, Dave, let's spend the first part of this program sort of laying the stage here—laying the groundwork—that is the name of our program—from other parts of the Bible that all along were sending signals that God's purpose is going to be global finally, and not just local. A lot of this, by the way, is going to seem like a history lesson, but ultimately before we are done here today, we are going to say this is not just a review of history, that review of history helps to give the Church its marching orders yet today, and we will end up concluding there in a little while; but first, let's look at some of the historical background—some of the early hints all through scripture that God has his eye on something beyond just a small group of people.

DAVE BAST

Right; and that phrase you just used, Scott... I think a lot of times many people feel like there is a change of plan that takes place between Malachi and Matthew; so in the Old Testament, God is the God of the Jews; God cares about Israel. Suddenly, in the New Testament, with the coming of Jesus, he cares about everybody, and that is a profound misreading of the story of the Bible as a whole, because the Bible is one story from beginning to end, and right from the start...right from the outset of the biblical story of salvation, which begins with Abraham, incidentally, God reveals his heart for the nations.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Genesis 12: ¹Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

DAVE BAST

So, right from the beginning we get this key promise that, although God is beginning with...somewhere...you have to start somewhere...

SCOTT HOEZEE

You have to start somewhere, yes.

DAVE BAST

So, he is starting with this one guy and his wife, and a few of their relatives: Abram and Sarai; nevertheless, right from the start, the endgame is going to reach out to every person on earth, to every ethnic group, to every nation, tribe, language, tongue; and that is God's great vision for diversity within the unity of the covenant people of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, that is right from the beginning. I mean, you take your marching orders from Genesis 12:1-3 and 4, which we just read; and yet, over time...and I guess this is a human tendency and it is something we are going to want to wonder about, as I said earlier, about ourselves even yet today...we have this human tendency that once you kind of have a good thing going, you kind of want to just keep it to yourself, and so also the people of Israel. It took a while, right? They were not a nation to be reckoned with until Exodus 1, where they are called a nation for the first time, but they are enslaved in Egypt; but they do become a nation. They are freed from slavery eventually. They eventually get to the Promised Land, and then they forget that God had said: You are here for everybody. And one of the great...we have looked at this before on *Groundwork*, one of the great examples of that is the figure of Jonah from the book of Jonah. God tells him to go preach repentance to some non-Israelites called the Ninevites, and Jonah refuses to go. He did not want to go preach. He was not afraid he would fail; he was afraid he would succeed, and that they would repent and God would let them into their covenant club, and Jonah did not want non-Israelites in the covenant club. So, Israel forgot.

DAVE BAST

They did, and as a result, God disciplined them—brought them through a conquest by the Babylonians, and they went into exile, and then the great prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, hold out hope for the people of a future restoration, which will also affect the nations, then. So, we have this wonderful passage, for example, from Isaiah 25:

⁶On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food...(for all peoples, notice)...a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines; rich food filled with marrow, well-aged wine strained clear; ⁷and he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples—the sheet that is spread over all nations. ⁸He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

So, this vision of the end times when the Messiah will come and Israel will be restored—redeemed—transformed, but the nations will be brought in, too, then; they will be included.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so God has that global vision first articulated to Abram way back in Genesis 12, now reminded...and that passage from Isaiah 25 is just one of many...we could multiply that from Isaiah, Jeremiah, many times over; and so it is no surprise that by the time the Messiah does get here, Jesus comes to the disciples and says: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you; and remember I am always with you to the end of the age. So, there it is again: All nations...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That book-ends the Gospel of Matthew.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and then we get to the book of Acts, which is going to be our focus for the remainder of this series, and in the very first chapter Jesus says one of the most important things in the whole book because it sets up the story of Acts. It could almost be the table of contents for Acts, in Acts 1:8, the risen Jesus, just before his ascension into heaven says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The nations, of course, representing the ends of the earth, but Judea and Samaria, that intervening territory near Jerusalem, but ethnically different, in the case of Samaria—religiously different. So, the beginning of going out and crossing cultural barriers...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And I think it is really significant, Scott, to contrast this with the vision we just saw in Isaiah, in the Old Testament...there were some changes with the New Testament...with the Gospel. In the Old Testament, the vision was that Israel would be established in the center of the world on the mountain of the Lord...on Mount Zion, and the nations would be attracted to it—they would be drawn to it...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But Jesus' coming turns that around...sort of inside out...and he wants his disciples to go out *from* Jerusalem...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Go get 'em...

DAVE BAST

Go get 'em, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But then there is a problem. So, these are their marching orders: You have got to get out of here, and from Jerusalem you have to go to Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth; and then after Pentecost, in the

book of Acts, nobody moves for a while. They stay in Jerusalem. It's a big city; there are a lot of people; there is a lot to do there, but they are not going out; but something is going to happen early in the book of Acts that will change that, and we will take that up next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are talking about the book of Acts, and the marching orders that Jesus gave. We have just seen those in Acts 1:8; and then if we think about the early chapters of Acts, in Chapter 2, that promised power of the Holy Spirit did come upon them on the Day of Pentecost, and the Church takes off like a rocket...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Three thousand people are converted on Pentecost Sunday by Peter's sermon; and then these wonderful, idyllic chapters where the Church is growing and they have everything in common and they are worshipping together, but it is all happening in Jerusalem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and one of the things that happens is that they decide that things are taking off so fast that they need extra help—the apostles need help—so they form the deaconate—the people who literally would wait on tables. The apostles were too busy preaching and writing sermons and praying, they did not have time to also take care of the widows and the orphans and the poor, so they appoint people like Stephen to take care of the poor; but then in Acts 7 something terrible happens. Stephen is murdered because of his faith, and that killing of Stephen is going to light a fire under some people, including somebody known as Saul of Tarsus, who sees the killing of Stephen, and he thinks: We are on a roll now. We can wipe the name of Jesus from the earth. We have to persecute these Christians; and so, they do, beginning in Acts 8.

DAVE BAST

Right; at the very end of Acts 7, Luke tells the story of Stephen's martyrdom in terms that bear some resemblance to Jesus. He also forgives his killers...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

He dies as a result of the stoning; and we are told that there is a young man named Saul who is holding the coats of the people throwing the rocks at Stephen; so, he is kind of a junior member of the mob that kills Stephen; and then in the very next verse, in Acts 8:1:

That day, a severe persecution began against the Church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. ²Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him, (and here comes Saul again) ³but Saul was ravaging the Church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women. He committed them to prison. ⁴Now those who were scattered went from place to place proclaiming the Word. ⁵Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. ⁶The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, ⁷for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The words that jump out of that passage are *Judea* and *Samaria*.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly where Jesus told them to go, but they had not yet. Maybe they were going to get around to it later, but they had not gone there yet; but now persecution is forcing everybody but the apostles, who stay hunkered down in Jerusalem...but people like Philip got out and about, and guess what? They took the Gospel with them, and they preached it even in Samaria, a place of great animosity between Jews and Samaritans generally, but now they are there...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly what Jesus wanted to happen is happening, and who knew that persecution would be the spark that would light that fire to get the Gospel going, but it did.

DAVE BAST

One interesting little footnote: Both Stephen—the first martyr—and Philip—the first evangelist that were shown outside of Jerusalem—were deacons, among the six chosen to that office, both of them have Greek names. So, although they are Jewish, there is a pointer here to the fact that they may have been from a Greek speaking area. They were sort of bicultural maybe we would say in our terms. So, we see these Jewish Christians, who have a sense of concern, a sense of passion for non-Jews to hear the Gospel, and out goes Philip, and he does that very thing. He begins to replicate the ministry of Jesus in Samaria.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Acts 8 makes it very clear that one of the people who quite literally chased Philip away to Samaria is this Saul...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This Saul of Tarsus. Now, very soon, in the very next chapter in Acts, Saul is going to turn into Paul. Jesus is going to get Saul on his side after all, and then Saul-Paul will have the great zeal to go reach out to the gentiles and to non-Jews; but ironically, what Saul does not realize already in Acts 8, is that God is already using him. It is kind of a left-handed way to do it, but by the fierceness of Saul's persecution, he is scattering the Church, and guess what, that is scattering the Gospel; the very thing Saul is trying to wipe out, he is actually causing to spread. That is not what he intended to do—that is what *God* intended to do. So, God is going to use Saul—then later Paul—in very clever ways to do exactly what he has always wanted to do, get the Gospel to all nations.

DAVE BAST

You know, one of the great messages of the Bible is summed up in Joseph's word to his brothers: You meant it for evil, but God intended it for good; and we see that played out again and again, especially in the story of the early Church and the first Christians, and Jesus' story, for that matter.

So, Peter on Pentecost says: You killed him, but God had a plan, and used that to bring salvation to the world. Saul...obviously he is on the rise as a Pharisee in his career. He has been promoted to chief persecutor of the early Church, and he means it because he thinks he is serving God. It visits evil upon the first Christians, but God uses that to get them out of... It reminds me of a book title by Rebecca Manley Pippert about evangelism: *Out of the Saltshaker*...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

You know, you are the salt of the earth, but we like to sit safely in the saltshaker, and so, God uses this persecution to sort of drive people out. They have to leave their homes. They become refugees!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, but...

DAVE BAST

And yet, they bring the Gospel wherever they go.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Philip brings it to Samaria; and the verse we read a little while ago, the last thing was that great joy and rejoicing gripped the city; and for Luke, if you can go back to Luke's gospel, whenever you read about rejoicing, that is a symbol for salvation. These people are saved, and that, if we were to read a little bit more into Acts 8, that actually gets Peter and John out of Jerusalem. They hear Philip is doing great things in Samaria so they say: Let's check it out. So they now leave Jerusalem, too—the first of the apostles to venture far and beyond, and they do indeed see the unleashing of the power of the Holy Spirit on these new believers in Samaria; and then they in turn rejoice. So, the ball is getting rolling now through unintended means, right? The persecution was not meant to spread the Gospel, it was meant to stamp it out, but it did not work. It reminds me of that saying, Dave, that the Church is the anvil that has worn out many of history's hammers. The harder you pound away at the Church, the more it seems to grow; and that certainly happens here.

DAVE BAST

But there is one more incident in Acts 8, in the second part of the chapter, that reinforces the message of Epiphany—of the Church going out with the Gospel for the world—and we will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and let's listen to what happens next in Acts Chapter 8, beginning at verse 26: Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a wilderness road. ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the Prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹He replied, "How can I unless someone guides me?" and he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So now Philip, who had through persecution been driven to Samaria, now the Spirit directly communicates to him and says: Go out a little bit more. And I just noticed this now when you were reading it, Dave, that Luke includes that line about the road from Jerusalem to Gaza: This is a wilderness road; and in the Bible the wilderness always kind of stands for that territory otherwise consumed by evil, but that the prophets always said: The wilderness will bloom. The wilderness will change through the Word of the Lord coming to it; and so here he goes on a wilderness road and finds an eager pupil—an eager student. Somebody who somehow

acquired a scroll with the Prophet Isaiah. He has no idea what it means, and he invites Philip to explain it to him, which of course, Philip will do; and what that means, since we have been looking in this program about the spread of the Gospel, that means when this man returns home to Ethiopia, the Gospel is going to go with him, all the way, deep into Africa. That is a long way from Jerusalem now...

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You want to talk about all the nations of the earth and the ends of the earth, Ethiopia was close to the ends of the earth in the minds of most people then, but that is going to happen now.

DAVE BAST

And I think it is worth pointing out that this man is an African...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

He is not white-skinned. He is a eunuch, who would have been barred from the Temple because of that, and yet he is drawn to Israel's God. He is reading the Prophet Isaiah; specifically, Isaiah 53, about the one by whose stripes we are healed, and Philip tells him about Jesus; and that is really what is going on from the very start in the Christian movement. People who may be drawn to God, maybe in some way worshippers of God nevertheless need to hear about Jesus; and people of every race...people from every place; and it happens in very unusual ways. God uses these different movements—in this case, the Spirit is somehow moving Philip around. How did that happen? Who knows? It is kind of mysterious, because Philip, after this story, he just sort of disappears.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, yes; let's read that. So, the Ethiopian eunuch comes to believe in Jesus, and so Philip sees no reason not to baptize him. There is a pool or a pond or something. So Philip baptizes him, and then we read this: ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The eunuch saw him no more, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus; and as he was passing through that region, he proclaimed the Good News to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

So, things are really moving fast now. I do not know what that means; if the Spirit beamed him up like on Star Trek or something, but somehow Philip was physically whisked away. The eunuch went on his way rejoicing (by the way, again, in Luke that means he is saved), and now we are in a whole new place.

DAVE BAST

Yes, in Caesarea, the capital of Judea, and the Spirit is using all these different things. He is using persecution to push Christians out of their comfort zone; he is somehow directing Philip to go talk to black men and Roman officials in Caesarea and everyone in between; and I just wonder if God might be doing something like that today. God loves irony. God loves to use things that seem to us to be painful experiences or terrible things that no good can come from it, and yet, he gets his purposes fulfilled in that way. You know, frankly Scott, I think that in the whole debate we are having in our country today about immigration and the way some Christians are kind of up in arms, or seem to be about that, you know, so many people in Latin America are Evangelicals—fervent Evangelicals. Wouldn't it be ironic if God is sending those people to the US to re-evangelize Americans who have kind of abandoned the faith? God is capable—perfectly capable of using things like that to get his Church built.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; well, and we know the majority of the Christian Church now is below the equator. It is from the global south, and these believers are coming north into secularized Europe, parts of secularized America and

Canada, and they are bringing the Gospel with them; and of course, the question is then, are we open to them...to welcome them...to listen to them...to learn from them; or like the earliest Church that just sort of initially stayed in Jerusalem, stuck with what was familiar, we all like to stay in our comfort zones, and even the apostles... In fact, we are going to see more of this in this series. The apostles are going to have some real growing pains that we are going to see in future programs, because it was not that easy for them to accept that these gentiles are going to be full believers along with them. We certainly have that today; and yes, sometimes we feel under duress in the Church today. There seems to be a growing secularism; more and more people who check the box *none* when asked on surveys: What is your religious affiliation? And we feel like the Church is losing some traction; but again, as you said, Dave, maybe...as it was in Acts, that the persecution is what led to the growth...maybe some of the hard things the Church is experiencing today will be used by the Spirit, if only, as you said, we are willing to get out of the saltshaker and become part of what Philip did and others did in bringing the Gospel to all nations, and to all peoples, including those very different from us.

DAVE BAST

And I also wonder if there is something for me here personally to think about? How God might use a painful experience in my life...maybe even some kind of tragedy...to make me somehow a more effective witness for him. I think that can happen too. I think it does often happen, and we may not enjoy it, but we can be used if we are open to it.

Well, thanks for listening to our *Groundwork* program today, and digging into scripture with us. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee. We hope you will join us again next time as we study another dramatic event that influenced the spread of the Gospel and the growth of the Church beyond the confines of Jerusalem. We will be looking at Acts Chapter 13 in our next program. Connect with us on our website at groundworkonline.com to let us know what you are thinking.

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Printed on June 3, 2026