

Gospel Growth

DAVE BAST

In Acts 1:8, Jesus told his disciples just before he ascended into heaven that they would be witnesses to him in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. When we get to Acts Chapter 8, we see how the first Christians began to share the message of Christ with people outside the immediate community in Jerusalem. In keeping with Jesus' words of commissioning, Acts 8 shows them going with a Gospel message into Judea and Samaria; but you might be surprised what it took to get Jesus' followers to move out beyond their own home with the Gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are continuing, Dave, as you just mentioned, with our series of programs from many of the stories – we cannot hit all of them in this seven-part series – but we are picking up some of the key stories in the book of Acts; Luke's sequel to his Gospel, where he is sharing with us the earliest days of the Church; and so we have gone from the Day of Pentecost and the birthday of the Church in Acts 2; we have seen the Church grow; we saw a major bump in the road in our last program with the startling deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts Chapter 5; but now the story has continued. They have chosen deacons; they have realized that the work is so wonderfully rich and complex that the Apostles cannot do it all; but one of those earliest deacons was named Stephen; and Stephen was a man full of the Holy Spirit and full of God and just for that very reason a lot of people could not stand him, and they killed him. That happened in Acts Chapter 7. So Stephen becomes the first martyr, we often say, of the Church.

DAVE BAST

Right. Acts 7 is actually a very long chapter, and most of it is Stephen's testimony, which is a wonderful weaving together of the Old Testament story into the story of Jesus. The story of God runs straight through from Old Testament to New Testament; it does not begin with the Gospels; it does not begin with the appearance of Jesus.

So, Stephen really emphasizes that by re-telling Israel's story and then climaxing with his testimony to Jesus, and it enrages the leaders. They drag him out and they stone him to death – almost a spur of the moment type thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We might point out that the structure of the book of Acts is centered around sermons and speeches, and there are 28 chapters in Acts, and I think there are 28 speeches. There are almost as many speeches or sermons about the Gospel of Jesus Christ as there are chapters in this book, and Stephen's in Chapter 7 is one of the great ones.

DAVE BAST

This is really a bridge moment, and that is why we are emphasizing what happened to Stephen; and at the end of Chapter 7, it says that the people who were throwing the stones at Stephen, who killed him, laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Let's just file that one away. If you stay with us, we are going to see that young man again.

Reading on:

⁵⁹As they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He becomes kind of a prototype of the Christian martyr, dying faithfully, dying with forgiveness on his lips for his enemies; so he adds: ^{60b}Lord, do not hold this sin against them, and when he had said this, he fell asleep. ^{8:1}And Saul approved of their killing him. (That is how Chapter 8 begins.) On that day, a great persecution broke out against the Church in Jerusalem, and all except the Apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ²Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him, ³but Saul began to destroy the Church; going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. ⁴Now those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.

So, here is the Gospel going out in the person of Philip.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is one of the great ironies of Church history, and many have noted it before, and many of us have heard this mentioned in sermons on Acts 2, but the great irony of the early persecution of the Church is that if you hated the Church, persecution ended up making matters worse for you because it only spread. Like the person who once said: The Church is the anvil that has worn out many of history's best hammers. So here, the Church is persecuted, and so people flee for their lives, but they bring the Gospel with them.

It is very interesting that I was in Uganda, Africa, recently, and in Kampala, Uganda, there is a very large Catholic church on a martyrdom site in Uganda. For just a very brief time in the late 19th Century, the king of Uganda, or Buganda, as it was known, decided that he did not like Christians, and so they martyred a few people, including one particular man who took three days to die. They burned him very slowly to death – terrible story – but he finally died on June 3rd of that year in the late 19th Century. Well, now today, not only is there a huge church on that site and a very lovely shrine, but June 3rd is a national holiday and a million pilgrims every June 3rd from all over Africa, many from the Congo and Rwanda, they walk and they gather there for a large worship service – a million strong at the site where they killed one man to get rid of Christianity. It is a paradoxical effect, and it is the same thing here. They tried to wipe out the Church and it just spread instead.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it brings to mind the famous statement of the Church father, Tertullian, African Church father from the 3rd Century: The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. That has certainly been the case with Stephen; the very first martyr. So, the ordinary disciples are scattered abroad. It is very interesting – Luke says the Apostles stayed in Jerusalem; so, I do not know what is going on there with them. Didn't Jesus tell them to be his witnesses and go out? Eventually they would...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, they will.

DAVE BAST

Tradition says that they all ended up going out to the ends of the earth, many of them; but it is ordinary Christians who are scattered, who are running away, and running especially from Saul, who is going around trying to round them up; and Philip, this deacon – you alluded to Acts 6, where the choosing of the deacons is described – and these were primarily people who were supposed to look after the widows and the people with financial needs. They handled the money of the church and distributed it; but clearly, they were able to

preach, too. They were not just the people counting the offering. So, Philip is an evangelist and he is going out, and he goes to Samaria; now, I think it is really significant – I mentioned Acts 1:8 in the introduction to the program, where Jesus says: You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea – right around Jerusalem – and then Samaria, which is different racially somewhat and culturally and religiously – and then to the ends of the earth. That really is a table of contents.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it is like Luke's checklist. Okay, Jerusalem; check, been there. Judea – the area around Jerusalem; check. Next up, Samaria; check. Very soon, in our next program, we are going to look at when Saul, who is referred to here, becomes converted to the Apostle Paul, and that will be the next box to check: the ends of the earth. Paul will eventually go, and the other Apostles with him, to what was then the known world – to Greece and to Turkey and to Asia Minor, as it was known then. So literally we are watching the Church move from point to point on the map; the very points that were laid out for us early in the chapter. It is like in those old movies when an airplane goes and they have a red line across the map. That is sort of what the Church is doing; following the red line of the Holy Spirit here.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and that is why it is emphasized here in Chapter 8 that now they are going to Samaria; and it is really only here that it talks about that, and I think the reason is exactly as you said; it is the checklist, and not only the checklist of the book of Acts and the early Church; I happen to believe that this is the checklist for every biblical congregation. That we need to be concerned about reaching our own Jerusalem, and then reaching out across some boundaries to Samaria, but all the way to the ends of the earth. Somehow, in some way, shape, or form; but something else is going to happen in this chapter, and it really is an interesting story that we are going to look at in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and Dave, today we have been – as part of our series on Acts, we are digging into Acts 8; and we have seen in the earlier part of this program, as the Church has been persecuted, people scatter and they bring the Gospel with them. Philip, now, has gone to Samaria. So, let's just read a little bit – we will summarize a little bit from Acts 8:9-25.

So, Philip goes to Samaria and meets a man named Simon who was a sorcerer. He was a magician – perhaps dabbling in the dark arts and some demonic stuff, we would believe; but this man hears Philip preach and becomes converted. He becomes baptized, and people were astonished. The Apostles – now, we mentioned in the earlier program – they did not scatter initially. They stayed in Jerusalem, but once they get wind of what Philip is doing in Samaria, Peter and some others leave Jerusalem and they go and Peter starts doing some amazing things.

DAVE BAST

They are going to check it out. They are going to see: What is going on here?

SCOTT HOEZEE

What is going on?

DAVE BAST

Is this consistent with our... yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Peter comes and he places his hands on people. They receive the Spirit; and then we pick it up at verse 18 of Acts 8:

When Simon (Simon the sorcerer here, now) when Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying of the Apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I

lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” ²⁰Peter answered, “May your money perish with you because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money. ²¹You have no part or share in this ministry because your heart is not right before God. ²²Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. ²³For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin. ²⁴Then Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.” ²⁵ And after they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel in many Samaritan villages.
So, that is an interesting story.

DAVE BAST

Another weird one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Another strange one. We do not even know what happened to Simon ultimately. They just leave him off; but he saw this power, so he had been converted...

DAVE BAST

Yes, was he, though?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, was he all the way?

DAVE BAST

You kind of wonder.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is rather mysterious as to – or maybe it is a sign that all of us have growing to do in the faith – so, he did believe; it is not like he did not really believe, and yet, Paul will eventually write about this – the old self, as Paul will call it – sometimes still has its kicks, and Simon’s old self was still thinking: Well, if you see something that works. He probably made his living all along doing magic tricks.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, right; yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here is another magic trick. Tell me the secret. How do you do that card trick?

DAVE BAST

Yes, he had set himself up as a wonder worker, and actually called himself – they called him Simon the Great.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, Simon Magus.

DAVE BAST

He is known as Simon Magus – the magician, or the magi – one of the magi sorts of guys. Simon is a Jewish name, so you wonder about that. Samaria is an area where there are people of mixed background and mixed religious – we call it syncretism when there is a mixture of faith and other religions. Simon is a great example of that. He is going to be a Christian sort of, but he continues to keep one foot in the black magic camp or the sorcery – the witchcraft, witch doctor stuff.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He wants to make a big impression. He still wants a little razzle-dazzle for his stage show and he sees Peter laying his hands on people and wow, they get a jolt of the Spirit – it is an eye-popping trick, he almost regards it as. Of course, it is no trick at all, it is a miracle and it is a working of God, but he says: Well, boy, if there is a trick to that trick...I'll buy it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; hey, Peter! I can just see him drawing Peter aside: One religious profession to another, Peter. As a colleague, let me just give you something if you enable me to have that kind of visible power. And Peter shrinks back in horror. In fact, this has given a name – Simon has given his name to one of the really dangerous sins that has afflicted the Church. It is called Simony, which is the buying and selling of religious office or position or power.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Any time in history ever since, if there was any hint – and there was some of this in the Reformation era, the pre-reformation era, when the Church would sometimes sell indulgences. If you give a good donation to the church, we will give you a piece of paper that says your sins are forgiven; and that kind of thing has been chalked up as the sin of Simony; that we are in the for-profit business here, and we will sell God to you. That is a very grave sin for all kinds of reasons, but certainly when the early Church was getting rolling here and one of the things that upset Peter so much is that you cannot really proclaim the free grace of God and the forgiveness of your sins through the complete sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and also be in the business of making money off of it because that is the opposite of grace.

DAVE BAST

It is one of the things that are most offensive to non-Christians – really, to real Christians as well – the idea of somebody making money from trafficking in religion or in spiritual power. It is what gives us such a bad taste when we see some of the carryings on of, maybe, flamboyant faith healers or others like that; or if we look back in history and see the stories of how even popes bought their office with millions of gold pieces; and we naturally shrink in horror from that because, as you said, God's grace is free; Paul gloried in the fact that he would regularly serve people free of charge even though he was entitled – you should support Gospel ministers, he says, legitimately – the Church should support its leadership – but Paul would often go the extra step and work, but with his own hands.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, tent making.

DAVE BAST

Just so that he could say: Hey, I did not charge you anything. I did this freely because the Gospel is free. It is an especially evil thing when Simony creeps in.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, the good news – again, we do not really find out what happens to him at this point in the story – but, the good news is that the happy part of this part of Acts 8 is that he gets cut to the heart. Peter rebukes him.

DAVE BAST

You would think that if anybody were going to be struck dead like Ananias and Sapphira, it would have been this Simon, but apparently not.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He begs for forgiveness and we will assume he got it, and so the rebuke was effective, which is also a sign, by the way, that sometimes grace comes to us in the form of a rebuke. So, Simon is rebuked, but then repents, and we will assume that his conversion took and that he became a good follower of Jesus; but not the

only one. In fact, in Acts 8, we have been following Philip around; the Apostles have gone back to Samaria now, but Philip has another interesting encounter coming up, and we will see that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*. Today, we are digging into Acts Chapter 8; we have already seen how the Gospel has come to Samaria as a result of persecution in Jerusalem; how Simon the magician is converted, sort of, and then is rebuked by Peter. And now we come to the last story in this very interesting chapter, and it is back to Philip – Philip the evangelist, the deacon – and Luke says that the Spirit sent Philip somehow, or told him to go out to a road in the desert leading from Jerusalem down to Gaza, and as he goes out there he meets this Ethiopian eunuch. This man has been in Jerusalem worshiping. He is a God-fearer, maybe even – he is attracted to Judaism – and an important person; a person of wealth:

³⁰Philip runs up and hears the man reading from the book of Isaiah, and he asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (Apparently it was a wagon of some kind. He is reading Isaiah 53 – wonderful, familiar verses.) ³⁴And then the eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about; himself or someone else?” ³⁵And Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the Good News about Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then subsequent to that we are told that as they travelled along and they came to some water. ^{36b}And the eunuch said, “Look, here is some water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” ³⁸He gave orders to stop the chariot. Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away and the eunuch did not see him again, but he went on his way rejoicing. That is a great line: He went on his way rejoicing. The story ends with the joy.

So, this is a fascinating story. One of the things I love about this story, Dave, and you see this all over the book of Acts, is if Acts were a movie we would keep fading to different scenes with the word *meanwhile* appearing on the screen: Meanwhile, the Spirit of God is busy all over the place. You cannot believe where the Spirit of God is. He is never just exactly where you think he is going to be. Now all of a sudden he is out in the middle of nowhere working in the heart of this African man from Ethiopia who is a eunuch, so he is an outsider to Israel; he is an outsider to the faith. Being a eunuch, there were some Old Testament restrictions on contact with eunuchs for reasons we do not really have time to go into, but he is an outsider – a classic outsider – and lo and behold, the Holy Spirit is working right in his heart and brings Philip right next to his chariot at exactly the right moment.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is a great story of crossing more boundaries. It really takes some doing to get us out of our comfort zone and that is what Acts 8 is really all about; getting us out of our comfort zone; dealing with different kinds of people.

I can just imagine the Apostle saying: Yes, Jesus said Jerusalem, Samaria, ends of the earth, but we have a lot of work left here in Jerusalem; we just barely scratched the surface. Look, the Church is growing; such potential here. Obviously the Spirit is moving here. We need to stay here and focus. You can just hear that argument, can't you? And meanwhile, the Spirit says: No, no; no, I want you jumping over; I want you reaching out; I want you taking chances and risks; so the Spirit sends Philip to find this guy; out in the middle of the wilderness, a guy who really does not belong for a lot of reasons, and yet who is reading the word.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I sort of imagine Philip seeing – so, the Spirit has led him out to this road – and I sort of imagine Philip seeing him from a distance and keeping his distance. Oh, I do not dare! This looks like a high official. He is foreign looking. He is rich. Not my kind of people. Not anybody I have ever talked to. And so, I imagine Philip being shy and so the Spirit has to get into his face and say: No, no, no; go to that chariot and stay near

it. Then we are told – talk about obedience – Philip runs to the chariot just in time to hear this man reading aloud from Isaiah and wondering what it means. I do not know where this guy got the scroll – the Ethiopian eunuch. They were not exactly a dime a dozen in those days.

DAVE BAST

He is an educated man. He is probably reading Greek – the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Septuagint.

DAVE BAST

And here is a wonderful vignette of the Church's ministry, too. It is the ministry of the Word. What are we really about, those of us who are privileged to be called to what we casually say is fulltime Christian ministry? Not that we are all not full time in serving in some way; but what we are called to do is the ministry of the Word because this guy is reading along and Philip says: Well, hey, how are you doing? Do you understand what you are reading? And the guy says, "How can I unless someone explains it?" That is exactly...

SCOTT HOEZEE

People all through history have said exactly that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. Just explain the Bible.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, Philip does, and basically connects the dots to Jesus once again. Of course, they are reading from what we now call the Old Testament. It was the only scripture they had at the time. They did not have a New Testament yet. But here is another example. So we have seen Peter and his Pentecost sermon; we have seen Stephen and his final sermon and speech before he was martyred connecting the Old Testament dots, and now Philip does the same thing. He says: Look, the person he is talking about – this Isaiah prophet – Jesus – and let me tell you about him. So he does, and without hesitation the man says: I am in. There is a pond over there. Maybe some muddy water standing in some marshy area, who knows what it was. They were in a desert area; it could not have been much water; but Philip baptizes him and promptly disappears – odd part of the story – who knows why that is there. Philip just disappears from sight; but he goes on his way rejoicing. It is just a sign. Dave, we have been saying this whole chapter was about the harder the world tried to squash the Church, the more it squirted away from them and spread. So, here is a great example of this isolated guy from a different part of the world – in Africa – than the Apostles were used to dealing with, and yet, the Spirit is there and things are on the move.

DAVE BAST

Well, and the Spirit is the hero, too, because the Spirit brings Philip to him. The Spirit had inspired the words of Isaiah when they were first written centuries earlier. The Spirit took what Philip said – a simple witness to Jesus – it was really the Spirit who opened the guy's eyes, not Philip. He was the tool; he was the instrument; but it is the Holy Spirit, the Acts of the Holy Spirit that we are reading about in this wonderful book.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always like to know how we can help you continue to dig into the scriptures. So visit groundworkonline.com and tell us topics or passages that you would like to hear next on *Groundwork*.

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Printed on July 22, 2025