

The Spread of the Gospel as Jesus Planned it

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, good morning, folks. As has been said, my name is Alistair. It's my privilege to be the assistant here. And this morning, my joy to guide us through Acts 8. So please do keep that passage open in front of you.

And I want to start off by asking you what catchphrase that you grew up watching TV and you hear that catchphrase and immediately you are reminded of watching a certain TV show or a movie. What's that one catchphrase in your mind? I'll give you a little insight into my childhood. It may or it probably may not surprise you that I was a bit of a weird kid.

So I grew up in the 90s, but one of my favorite TV shows to watch was actually called The A-Team. Not the new one, the old one. The A-Team. If you don't know what that is, it's a show from the 80s about four American army members who are wrongly accused of a crime, put in military prison, then they escape and become soldiers of fortune.

Basically, hired soldiers who do good stuff. They're not bad guys. And at the same time, they try to clear their own names. Now, I mention this show because one of the catchphrases in the series actually leads us well into thinking about Acts chapter 8.

[1 : 15] So Hannibal, the leader of the gang, at the end of every episode when things have gone well, he says this, I love it when a plan comes together.

I love it when a plan comes together. So come with me to The A-Team into Acts. And I'll show you why that catchphrase helpfully summarizes Acts chapter 8.

So I wonder if you remember way back in Acts chapter 1 verse 8, what Jesus promised to his disciples. Jesus says, But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Now, this morning, we see this promise being fulfilled. In Acts 1 to 7, Acts chapters 1 to 7, the gospel spreads in Jerusalem. In Acts chapters 8 to 12, the gospel spreads in Judea and Samaria like a ripple effect.

And then in chapters 13 to 28, it spreads to the rest of the world. The gospel spreads as Jesus planned it.

[2 : 26] As faithful men and women go and tell people about Jesus wherever they go and to whoever will listen. That same pattern is happening in the world today, right before our very eyes.

The gospel is spreading just as Jesus planned it. Now, I know the church feels small. It looks insignificant.

It doesn't seem to have any power. We can be overlooked. We can be mistreated. We can be neglected. But there should be no doubt at all in our minds that Jesus is at work today as the global church is growing.

In other words, the spread of the gospel just as Jesus planned it. So keep Acts 8 open in front of you. There's a lot in these verses that we just don't have time to get to.

If you have questions, I would love to chat to you afterwards or this week over a coffee. But I'd like us to look at this passage by thinking about the gospel going to an unlikely place and to unlikely people.

[3 : 38] So the first thing we see in this passage is the gospel going to an unlikely place in verses 1 to 8. So throughout the Bible, the gospel message has remained the same.

Humanity rebelled against God. We said, no, God, we don't want you. We want to be you. Humanity rebelled against God. We, from that moment on, it is very clear that we needed someone who was perfect.

Someone from outside of our world, outside of our mess, to step in and make things right between us and God again. And as we turn to the New Testament, the second half of the Bible, we read

about Jesus, who is God in the flesh.

Who came into our world to teach us about God the Father. To die on a cross, removing God's anger at sin and the rebellion of humanity.

And making it possible for us to be in a right relationship with God. And then he rose from the dead, proving that all he said was true and that he is God.

[4 : 44] That is the consistent message throughout scripture known as the gospel. So Jesus told his disciples what will happen in Acts chapter 1, that the gospel will spread.

And the following chapters describe that amazing growth of the early church. Thousands become Christians and join the church as they all spread the news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. But the repeated theme throughout the whole book of Acts is that the gospel grows as it is opposed. And this opposition culminated in chapter 7 with the first Christian martyr, Stephen.

Who was stoned because he challenged the religious leaders who killed Jesus and called them to repent. And look what happens in the aftermath of that tragic event.

Acts chapter 8 verse 1. Now this is a tragic thing.

[5 : 54] I'm sure it caused great pain in the church. Lives were uprooted. Families fleeing from persecution and the church being oppressed.

Now whilst it must have been terribly difficult for the believers. Ultimately, it was this persecution that brings about God's plan for the gospel to go to an unlikely place.

See, God can use suffering and persecution for his good plan. Look at all the horrible situations that have caused millions of refugees to spread all over the world.

It is heartbreaking. But some of these people were in countries where they would maybe never have heard about Jesus. But now they're in countries like Germany, Scotland and many, many others.

And Christians are caring for them. Sharing the gospel with them. And there are wonderful stories of asylum seekers and refugees coming to know Jesus.

[6 : 59] God can use suffering for his good plan and the good of his people. And that's what's happening here in Acts chapter 8.

As the persecution amps up, Christians are scattered. But look at how God uses it in verse 4.

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

But before you switch off and think that sharing Jesus is only for the professional Christians. For those of us who preach. The original word used there in the Greek is *gospeling*.

So basically, everywhere Christians went, they gossiped the gospel. Everywhere they went, they told everyone about Jesus. And in verse 5, we meet Philip, who takes the gospel to Samaria, a very unlikely place.

See, for Jesus to tell his Israelite disciples in Acts 1 to take the gospel to Samaria and beyond was a pretty out there idea. Jews did not mix with Samaritans.

[8 : 10] So in the Old Testament, the people of Israel were made up of 12 tribes. But at one point in history, they split and 12 tribes went to the north. They were known as the northern kingdom, the nation of Israel.

And then two tribes were in the south, known as Judah. Judah was the more faithful of the two nations and had the temple so that they could worship God as he said they should in the Old Testament.

The northern kingdom of Israel, which would later be known as Samaria, they were a nation that included idolatry and false worship and mixed it in with their Jewish roots.

And as it went on, both sides of the border saw themselves as the true people of God. And that tension just rose and rose and fighting and hatred took over.

And so for Jesus to say in Acts 1 verse 8 that the gospel will go to the Samaritans and beyond is a very uncomfortable idea. Because Samaria was a very unlikely place for the gospel to find good soil.

[9 : 16] But Philip becomes one of the first Christians to go to Samaria. Like Stephen, the first martyr from Acts 7, he was empowered by the spirit to perform signs and wonders.

And these signs were witnesses to the gospel that he preached. This is something new. The gospel was spreading into new and unlikely places and people, different people were becoming Christians.

And so in verse 14, the apostles Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem to Samaria to see what's going on. Now they weren't there to act like some kind of spiritual bodyguards to wrestle the

gospel back so that only the Jews could hear about Jesus.

But they were sent as representatives of the church to see that the Samaritans had become Christians. And then to welcome those who had previously been excluded from the kingdom of God in as brothers and sisters in Jesus.

They were sent to approve the genuineness of the Samaritans' faith. They acted a bit like a reverse kind of welcoming party at the airport. You know those moments you've come back from a time abroad, the door opens, you see family members with a big welcome home sign and balloons, maybe even some flowers.

[10:38] They are there to welcome you home, physically back into the family after a time away. Well, Peter and John were there to welcome these new Christians from Samaria into the church with open arms and with great joy.

But at verse 15, it gets a little bit tricky and we need to stop for a second. Read it with me. When they arrived, that's Peter and John, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them.

They had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now here's where we need to do a little bit of work.

See, Acts chapters 1 to 10 is the beginning of the church. It is the beginning of something new in God's grand plan. The things that happen in Acts 1 to 10 are the foundation of the church and not necessarily normative for what happens in the rest of church history.

So, for example, the Bible makes it clear that when a person becomes a Christian, they receive the Holy Spirit. No exceptions. Every Christian has the Holy Spirit within them.

[11:59] It's the work of the Spirit in our lives that helps us grow, helps us mature in our faith and become more like Jesus. So why is there a difference here? Did the Samaritans have the Holy Spirit?

Well, yes, they did. Every Christian does. But God was waiting for the arrival of the apostles before the Holy Spirit acted in power for all to see.

So that the apostles knew that the Samaritans were now welcomed into the church as brothers and sisters in Jesus. So the presence of the apostles, when the Holy Spirit moves with power among the Samaritans, shows everyone there that there is no distinction between Jew, the Jewish and the Samaritan Christians.

They believe the same gospel. God works in the same way. This happened to them in Acts chapter 2. It proves for all to see that the same gospel of Jesus goes to unlikely places.

Now we understand that on paper. We know that the message of Jesus is for all kinds of places, but do we actually live it? What is the Samaria equivalent for you?

[13:17] What's that one place you really don't want to go and share the gospel? Maybe it is the Muslim country that has a reputation of mistreating and oppressing Christians.

Maybe you think, well, they're not going to respond to the gospel anyway, so there's no point praying for them. There's no point sending people there. Or maybe it's the housing scheme that's on your doorstep.

The high-rise flats in your area. Maybe it's the deprived communities that run up and down our country. You see them as a hard place to witness in. And so you just want to avoid them at all costs.

Maybe it's the workplace. You want to compartmentalize your life. You don't really want to mix faith and work. And so you buckle down.

You hide your faith. And you don't share the gospel. But by creating little Samarias in our mind, places that we don't want to share the gospel, we are being disobedient.

[14:20] We're not called to be a people who choose where to take the gospel. We are called to be a people who take the gospel wherever we go. That is how Jesus' plan unfolds.

Now for some, that does mean going abroad. But at the very least, for every single Christian here, it means going into your local community and being a light for Jesus Christ. We need to trust in God's plan.

Be faithful in our sharing and have confidence that God will complete his work. We can trust in the power of the gospel to transform lives, even in the most unlikely of places.

So think about where your own Samaria is and submit to Jesus' plan and go and share the gospel. The true, the everlasting hope.

Have it on your lips. Spread it freely for all to hear. It is your job to share the gospel, not to hide it. The good news of Jesus goes to all places, even those that seem unlikely to us.

[15:36] And then the second thing we see in this passage is the gospel going to an unlikely people. The gospel is now on Simon in verses 9 to 25 and the Ethiopian eunuch in verse 26 to 40.

And these two people are put in contrast with each other because both hear the same gospel, that unchanging message of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But they respond differently. One responds with pride and basically says, give me influence and power for self-promotion. Or the other responds in humility and says, teach me so that I may know Jesus more.

So let's meet Simon in verses 29 to, in verse 9 to 25, sorry, first. He's described as a sorcerer. Now we don't know exactly what that means and it's not really the main point of the passage.

The main point of the passage is that Simon has made a name for himself. Verse 11 says that he's gathered quite a following. He's known for having some kind of power and has gone to his head.

[16:56] In verse 13, we see that Simon himself believed after hearing the gospel from Philip. But look at the end of verse 13. It says, Simon followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

Now throughout the New Testament, the priority of every faithful person is to preach the gospel. The response of the unfaithful.

Is to focus on the miracles that authenticate the message at the neglect of listening to the gospel itself. We don't really know if Simon was really a Christian.

But we see the problem of his pride in verse 18. Read it with me. When Simon saw the spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles hands, he offered them money and said, Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.

Now do you see what's going on? Simon. Like a toddler who sees a flashy new toy in the hand of another child, he wants it. And he's going to do everything he can to get it.

[18:09] Simon wants the power that the apostles have, but he wants the power for his own gain and fame. Rather than for the fame of Jesus. Simon's emphasis is on himself.

And so Peter in verse 20 sees his unchanged heart and that is full of pride and Peter warns him to repent. Peter says in verse 21 that Simon's heart is not right with God.

Simon is a man of pride who says, Give me influence and power that I can be great. And we don't know the end of Simon's story.

We don't know if his response in verse 24 is genuine repentance. And I think Luke has intentionally left it hanging in the air. So that we can see that sharp contrast between Simon and the eunuch.

Between pride and humility. The two responses to the gospel that happen today as well. And so the response of the Ethiopian eunuch is in verse 26 to 40.

[19:15] In his humility, he says, Teach me more so that I may know Jesus. In verse 26, Philip is told to go to a road that leads to Gaza.

Now Gaza is a remote place, the last stop before you hit the desert. It's like one of those towns on a long road trip that has a sign saying last petrol station for 200 miles.

There is nothing special about this place except for what God has planned to do there. So Philip goes and on his way meets a eunuch from Ethiopia.

He was a high ranking servant for the queen of Ethiopia, a man who was an outsider. Normally described as a God fearing Gentile. Someone from outwith the nation of Israel who recognized the God of Israel as their God.

But who couldn't become a convert to Judaism. And he couldn't because he was a eunuch. Verse 27 tells us that this man went to the temple in Jerusalem to worship and returning home.

[20:22] He was reading the book of Isaiah. So we see he is eager to learn. Eager to devour God's word. And Philip, hearing that the man was reading Isaiah, asks in verse 30, Do you understand what you're reading?

And he doesn't. So they basically start a one-to-one together. He was reading from Isaiah 53, which is a wonderful promise from the Old Testament about who Jesus would be and what he would do.

That Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice. The one who humbled himself and became nothing. The one who was humiliated and killed so that sinful people like this eunuch, like you, like me, could be made right with God.

This eunuch hears the message of Jesus and he believes and is baptized. So taking our bird's eye view of this chapter, this teaches us that the gospel is for all kinds of people and their responses will be different.

Some will respond with pride and reject Jesus. Whilst others will repent with humility and follow him. [21 : 35] See, it would have been comfortable for the apostles and Christians to stay in Jerusalem. To witness to those they rub shoulders with every day. People from their own culture.

People from their own background. People who spoke their own language. People within their comfort zone. People who spoke their own language. People who spoke their own language. But that's not Jesus' plan.

See, Jesus' plan is for the world to hear about him. And that requires God's people to intentionally take the gospel everywhere they go to all kinds of places and to all kinds of people.

The gospel doesn't call you to a comfortable life. It calls you to go. The Samaritans. Simon the sorcerer. The Ethiopian eunuch.

All of these were unexpected recipients of the gospel. And what does this mean for us today? For the Christian, it means that you have a duty before God the Father to carry out Jesus' plan to share the gospel with all kinds of people.

[22 : 44] Not only those you click with or you're comfortable around. Not only those who look like, who sound like, and who act like you.

But if we're honest, we're apathetic. We don't have a sense of urgency that people are dying without a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. And they're going to hell for eternity without him.

Or we're afraid of how people will respond. And so we get very selective about who we're going to share the gospel with. Maybe you think that the hardcore atheist at uni won't believe in Jesus anyway.

So there's no point going to the trouble of having an argument with them. It'll just get uncomfortable. We think that our family members already know what we believe.

So we don't really need to tell them again. We think that our co-worker who walks around with a rainbow lanyard is obviously going to be offended by what the Bible says.

[23 : 50] And so we don't want to share the gospel with them. We walk past people every day on the streets, in work, at home, who are dying without a saving knowledge of Jesus.

And we have been placed there to share the gospel with them. We are tasked to take the gospel to all people. It is not for us to decide beforehand how they will respond.

Some will respond with pride. Others with humility. But your call to go is still the same. Take the gospel to all kinds of people in all kinds of places.

Even if it's very unlikely that it will change anything in your mind. We leave the response in God's hands. Because he is faithful. If you're here and you're not a Christian, maybe you think this message of Jesus isn't for you.

This message is for all to hear. And the offer is here for you to repent and believe in Jesus, to have that right relationship with God. The message we believe as a church and are holding out to you right now is the same message that Philip preached here in Acts.

[25 : 12] But your response is important. Will you respond out of pride and reject Jesus? Or will you respond out of humility and ask to know more?

If you do want to know more, I would love to chat with you afterwards, to read the Bible with you, to pray with you after this service. Acts 8 teaches us that the gospel is for all kinds of places and all kinds of people, even the ones we think are unlikely.

And I think back to the A-team and Hannibal's catchphrase of, I love it when a plan comes together. This chapter is an example of the spread of the gospel just as Jesus planned it. As ordinary men and women take the gospel to all kinds of places and all kinds of people.

Now let me give you an example of this in my own life and we'll end with this. My grandpa was an elder in the Church of Scotland for many, many years.

[26 : 19] He was not a Christian. He was quite suspicious of the gospel. And as me and my family moved when I was a child to the mission field, he was very skeptical of the gospel because he saw the gospel as the thing that stole his family away.

In his mind, the gospel was the thing that took his family to a country that he knew nothing about. He was hard into the gospel.

But for over 25 years, for over 25 years, my mom prayed every day that he would come to know Jesus.

It was unlikely. But we didn't give up. And by God's grace, three years ago, a matter of weeks before he died, I was able to share the message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, that only hope, only true hope, is found in him.

That day, my grandpa humbled himself and put his trust in Jesus.

[28 : 02] But I'll be honest, I didn't want to share the gospel with him initially because it would be uncomfortable. It would be scary. But I'm so glad I did.

Because now I know that I will see him again as we stand in the presence of Christ forever. There will be people in your life like that.

Don't hold back the gospel. But take it wherever you go and to whoever you speak to because that is how the gospel spreads just as Jesus planned it.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us a task, that you have invited us into your plan for this world to know about Jesus.

Forgive us for the times where we hold that message to ourselves and Lord, give us boldness, give us strength, give us opportunities to speak about Jesus with those around us, to call people to repentance and into true life that is only found in you.

[29 : 26] Father, even this week, we ask that we would all be able to have just one conversation where we can point people to Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

Amen.