

Acts 8:4-8

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The believers who fled Jerusalem have not ceased preaching the gospel. Philip the Deacon preaches Christ to the Samaritans and heals their demoniacs and paralytics. The Samaritans are full of joy in response to the Good News and the miracle-working.

Despite the “great persecution” which Saul the Pharisee was advancing against the church (v. 1), causing a mass exodus of believers from the city of Jerusalem, the spread of the Gospel did not stop. In some sense, this bad circumstance (the “great persecution”) created a wonderful opportunity for the Gospel to spread beyond Jerusalem’s city limits. (Judea was the southern part of Israel, and Samaria the northern.) This was just what Jesus had told the apostles to do, to spread the Gospel to Judea, Samaria, and even the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Now the people of Judea and Samaria were hearing the good news about the Messiah: *Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.*

Did these *scattered* disciples lay low for a while? Did they change the gospel to make it more palatable and less offensive? Did they wait a couple of months until Saul calmed down? No. Even in light of Stephen’s brutal death, they were not deterred from continuing to preach the gospel. This paved the way for God’s grace (“favor”) to come to the Gentiles.

One believer, *Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.* This Philip was evidently not Philip the Apostle, since the text tells us that the apostles remained in Jerusalem (v. 1). This Philip seems to be Philip the Deacon named among the first seven deacons in Acts 6:5, later called Philip the Evangelist (Acts 21:8). He probably knew Stephen well, since they both served as Deacons together.

It is notable that Philip, as a Jew, decides to go to the Samaritans and preach the Gospel to them. This is counterintuitive to the Jews, who did not associate with the Samaritans (John 4:9). But it was consistent with Jesus’s example of preaching to the Samaritan woman (John 4:9-10).

The reason for this animosity of Jews toward Samaritans is due to the fragmenting of the Promised Land into two kingdoms in the 10th century BC, when 10 of the tribes broke off, forming the northern Kingdom of Samaria (also called Israel), while the remaining two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, formed the southern kingdom of Judah.

Philip began preaching in the *city of Samaria*, the ancient capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. The *city of Samaria* was built by King Omri of Israel (1 Kings 16:24), was later conquered by the Assyrians (2 Kings 17:6), and then rebuilt by Herod the Great. When Samaria was captured by the Assyrians in 722 BC, the Israelites were carried off into exile. The few remaining Israelites intermarried with Gentiles, which violated the Mosaic Law. They also began worshipping on Mt. Gerizim (instead of in Jerusalem, as God had directed) and only taught the five books of Moses (the Pentateuch) as God’s Word, ignoring the remainder of the Old Testament.

These things made the Samaritans odious to the Jews. They would have nothing to do with them, and even considered them enemies. John Hyrcanus, the Prince and High Priest of Judea and one of the Maccabees, invaded Samaria and destroyed their temple on Mt. Gerizim around 110 B.C., just over a century before the birth of Jesus. The Samaritans were, at the time, forced to convert back to Judaism, since they were considered heretics.

The Jews' relations with the Samaritans were still hateful and ugly during the time of Christ. Some of Jesus' enemies tried to spread a lie that He was a Samaritan by birth (John 8:48). This would have been considered a vicious smear. But Jesus elevated the dignity of the Samaritans and humanized them by casting a Samaritan as the hero of His parable, known as "The Good Samaritan."

When Jesus taught the parable of the "Good Samaritan," He was exercising hyperbole to make a point, because to a Jew "good" and "Samaritan" were opposites. This parable told the story of how a Jewish man left for dead on the side of the road was avoided by a priest and a Levite, who chose not to help him, but a Samaritan man showed mercy and charity by doctoring the man and paying for his recovery. Therefore, the parable concludes that the high-ranking Jews did not keep the second greatest command of the Law; it was the Samaritan who kept the second greatest command, which is to love your neighbor.

Culturally, the Jews of Judea and Galilee looked down upon the Samaritans as impure, half-Gentiles. Jesus showed them that they were to be considered "neighbors" in the second greatest command.

In another instance, Jesus wanted to stay in a Samaritan village, but the Samaritans rejected Him. The apostles James and John asked Jesus if they should call down fire from Heaven to destroy the village for insulting Jesus (and, possibly, due to their prejudice toward Samaritans in general). Jesus responds that He has a better plan for the Samaritans, saying, "the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:56)

And now Philip the Evangelist goes to what was considered a heretical people group, which he has probably been trained to hate all his life. But he wants to share the good news with them, just as Christ commanded (Acts 1:8).

Philip's ministry was met with success: *The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip.* He drew *crowds* of people, all united in *one accord* to hear the gospel (good news). They *were giving* special attention to *Philip* due to *the signs which he was performing*. The signs were miracles of healing. In *Samaria*, there were *many people who had unclean spirits*. They were possessed by demons. Demons did much to harm the people they inhabited, causing foaming of the mouth, teeth clenching, stiffening of the body (Mark 9:17-29), violent superhuman strength able to break chains, cutting of their host's body with stones (Mark 5:1-20), muteness and deafness (Matthew 12:22), and so on. Philip cast out the Samaritans' *unclean spirits*, and the demons *were coming out of* the afflicted by *shouting with a loud voice*.

Philip also *healed many* people who were simply physically disabled, the *paralyzed and lame*. By the power of Jesus, they could walk, could stand, could move their limbs freely.

Due to these wonderful miracles of relief and restoration, *there was much rejoicing in that city*. The Samaritans received Philip and the good news of Jesus with grateful hearts.

Biblical Text

⁴Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. ⁶The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. ⁷For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. ⁸So there was much rejoicing in that city.