

Acts 8 sermon – Season two begins - Dave Newmarch

So we're back to Acts after a brief break of 4 weeks looking at Malachi. It's as though the second season of Acts has started. Remember we finished in chapter 7 with the killing of Stephen. And we start here in chapter 8 with two consequences: a great persecution breaks out and the Christians except for the apostles are scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Up till now the focus has been on Jerusalem and Jewish Christians. We've had individual stories of some of the leaders like Peter and John and Stephen. Now in this second season we get stories about people outside of Jerusalem, people who are not leaders in the church. They're individual stories; up till now the stories have been about the church as a whole, large numbers, an unnamed lame man who was healed. But now in the next 4 chapters we read about 5 different people and their encounters with God.

The 2 people today – 2 outcasts who are welcomed into the kingdom.

But let us just remember Jesus' words in Acts 1:8 – “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” Well the message has definitely gone out in Jerusalem. But there didn't seem to be any plans to take this message to Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth. But that's ok. God's got things in hand. There is the persecution that drives the believers out of Jerusalem. And wherever they go they spread the message.

So our story today centres on Philip, one of the 7 guys who were chosen for looking after the widows. Like Stephen, he's also got this gift of telling others about Jesus.

Philip is in Samaria. What's so remarkable about this? Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Samaria was smack in the middle of Palestine in the hilly country that separated Galilee and Judea where Jerusalem was.



Jews would go around Samaria in order to keep away from Samaritans. Although Samaritans worshipped God they were regarded as second rate believers, they were looked down on by the Jews. Many of you would remember the old hatreds that used to be in our society between Protestants and Catholics. This was tragically seen in Northern Ireland where they would kill each other. It was terrible.

About the closest we get to it here in Australia is State of Origin. The blues vs the Maroons. Some of you die-hard Blues supporters think you don't like the Queenslanders very much. Well that's nothing compared with Israelites and Samaritans.

Remember Jesus and the Samaritan woman? Remember how **John tells it?** Jesus unavoidably **has to travel through Samaria**. And he stops at a well. And asks a **Samaritan woman** for a drink. And John puts it this way... John 4 v 9...

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

And they didn't.

And now here's **Philip... preaching the gospel to them** in v.5-8

And doing **apostle-style miracles** in front of them.

And **worst of all... they listen.**

Read from verse 5:

Philip went down to a city **in Samaria** and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, **they all paid close attention to what he said.** With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So... there was great joy in that city.

See if you're a Jew, even if you're a **Jewish Christian...** this'll blow your mind - **God is at work in Samaria.** Just like he was in **Israel.** Healing cripples, driving out evil spirits. Paralysed people walking again. And Philip's **proclaiming the Christ** - in exactly the same way. And more than that - these Samaritans are **believing.**

And in verse 11, they **believe** Philip as he preaches the good news of the Kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ. And they're **baptised.**

And yet at this point, **the spirit doesn't come on them**

which you might be tempted to think is because these first **Samaritan Christians are somehow defective.**

But it's actually the exact **opposite.**

The Spirit doesn't come on them yet because **the apostles** are still sitting back at Head Office in Jerusalem. And they need to **be here in Samaria,** to be **part of it.**

God is doing something special here. Yes, they could have received the Holy Spirit just like the others in chapter 2, but they don't. It was important that the Jewish Christian leaders, Peter and John come down. Are they going to accept these Samaritan outcasts as brothers and sisters. They sure are!! They'll even lay hands on them, touch them. Yes, we'll bless you and pray for you just like we did the 7 Jews who were commissioned to look after the widows. It seems to me that it was more important, in God's economy, that the Samaritans and Jews were bound in unity, a new unity that could only come from knowing Jesus, and the work of the HS in their hearts. This was a new thing.

Some people say that this account shows that there is a kind of second blessing that we must receive. We get the Holy Spirit but then we need to get another kind of second blessing. This is not what this story is about. The normal thing is that when you repent and believe the Holy Spirit comes on you. Full stop. It's not like some have more of the spirit than others and somehow you have to ask for a top up. None of the New

Testament letters urge the seeking of a second blessing to solve any of the pastoral issues dealt with by the New Testament.

That's a bit like the story here of Simon the Sorcerer. But he actually wants to buy a franchise in the holy Spirit without being repentant at all. And that just doesn't work.

Simon's story – key takeaways –

1. Repentance is a turning from sin and a turning to God - people turn away from flashy and spectacular emptiness offered by Simon and turn to the Lord Jesus. The proclamation of Jesus & his kingdom is what changes people.
2. Simon's problem – didn't understand the nature of Christ's messiahship & role of the HS. – it's not about gaining control but about relinquishing control to God

The exciting thing for us in this first story is that Peter and John have now caught the vision of what Jesus wanted them to do, to preach the gospel to everyone, even the Samaritans. So in v.25, they're preaching the gospel where, "in many Samaritan villages". The outcaste Samaritans who have repented and believed are part of the one body of Christ. They're not inferior; the same Holy Spirit filled them and we were all eyewitnesses to this. God's doing great things as he orchestrates for the message to go out in ever increasing circles from Jerusalem.

See, this is no small event in the history of the church.

Application – what is God wanting to do in our hearts

Now at this point I want to pause and say, if the apostles had been reading their Old Testaments, none of this stuff would be surprising.

If the apostles had been reading **the book of Isaiah**, they'd have been **ready** for these **surprising new barrier breaking friendships**, like the Samaritans.

Because the Prophet Isaiah had mapped out **hundreds of years before** the difference that **the messiah** was going to make. The one he said would come as a **suffering servant**. The one who'd be **pierced** for the **transgressions of his people**. The one, he said, who'd have the **iniquities of us all** laid **right on him**. Isaiah 53.

Because Isaiah said things like **this**, 52:10:

All the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

Or this, 55:4-5: See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples. Surely, you will summon nations that you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you because of the Lord your God.

And Isaiah also said this as he **looked ahead** to this coming time of **radical change**. See, in Israel if you were a foreigner you could **come to the temple**. But only to the outer court. Kind of like if you imagine our church building here as a temple, you've got the **carpark** that's the outer court, you've got the Preschool playground outside that's the inner court, then the **door**. And you're in.

In Israel if you were a foreigner... in Israel if you were **physically imperfect...** like a eunuch; in Israel if you were **unclean** you could come to the temple **and you'd have to stand in the carpark**.

But look what Isaiah's saying. As he looks forward to the time when the **suffering servant messiah comes**, because **he changes everything**. Isaiah 56Vs. 3:

Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely exclude me from his people. And let not any eunuch complain, I am only a dry tree'...

Because Isaiah says, when that day comes, you'll be **invited in**.

And it **won't just be for Israel** but for **anyone** who wants to **bind themselves to the Lord**. Even if you're a **eunuch**, or a foreigner, no matter who you are.

And guys like the apostles and like Philip should have **known that**. And probably did. But if they didn't, **Philip's about to get a very concrete lesson**.

Because what do you know, in v.26 **here comes** not just a **foreigner but a eunuch as well**. Two for the price of one.

The **angel** says to Philip, head down to the Jerusalem Gaza road.

And what do you know, here's one coming now!

An Ethiopian. African.. A servant in the court of Queen Candace. And a eunuch, he's been castrated, deliberately made to be unable to have kids, locked into service to the royal family.

Now he's a foreigner. But he's been to Jerusalem to **worship in the temple's outer court**. Because that's as far as they'll let him in.

And now he's on his way home, **sitting in his chariot**, and he's **reading out loud from the prophet Isaiah**. And the Spirit says to Philip, verse 29, **go to that chariot and stay near it**.

The guy's reading Isaiah 53. The **suffering servant**. Led like a lamb to the slaughter.

And Philip says to him **let me explain** because this is great news for people **just like you**, once excluded. "Let me invite you into a whole new age. Of **sins forgiven for everyone**. Let me tell you about **Jesus**. Who invites people like you in from the **carpark** not just to the playground outside but to a **seat right up the front**."

Verse 35. Philip begins with that **very passage of scripture** and tells him the good news about Jesus.

Begins there, but I'll bet you anything he doesn't stop until he gets to that bit a couple of chapters later. Isaiah 56, verse 3:

*Let no **foreigner** who has bound himself to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely exclude me from his people. And let not any **eunuch** complain, I am only a dry tree'...*

And the eunuch says, **here's some water**. Why can't you **baptise me**? How about you **ceremonially accept me** as a **part of the church**: as a subject and servant of **king Jesus**.

And they go down into the water, verse 38, and Philip **baptises him**; and then the **Spirit of the Lord** suddenly takes Philip away. And the eunuch... goes on his way rejoicing.

While the Spirit takes Philip on a preaching tour to **Caesarea**.

Now here's the thing. Here's the **change of eras**.

Unlikely Friends

Israel, in the Old Testament, was all about **exclusion**.

It was all about being **one nation**; especially set apart for God. And everyone else **shut outside**.

And those days are over because the **kingdom of Jesus is bigger than that**.

And so we're tracking the story here in Acts of how that **era of change** plays out. Samaritans. Once out, **now in**.

Ethiopians. Once in the carpark, now in the front row.

Eunuch. Once, **barren** and **excluded**, now **enfolded** and **fruitful** in a better way. The outcastes are being welcomed in. ANYONE can come in.

That's something that **took a while to sink in**. In fact, right through the New Testament it runs like a **fault line**. An ongoing argument, a **debate** over whether you had to be **Jewish first** to be **really included**. A hesitation to say and to demonstrate that **when the spirit includes you**, then **the church should as well** no matter where you've come from. No matter **what your social background** or your **racial background** or anything else. **Included in Christ**. As Paul puts it, **one in spirit and purpose**.

Which means church should always be a place of most **unlikely friendships**. A community where you grow to know and to love people who are **most unlike you** because of your common bond in **Jesus**. I love our church. There are many people who are caring and giving. And I think many people here feel included.

And God's put us here in our community as his lights. I was encouraged when someone told me a story about Sam Chan. He lived at Croydon. He was walking on his street and came across
Who are the outcastes in our community? How would God have us reach them, show love to them, welcome them in? As we think about our church moving forward we may not have the resources of other churches but we have love and acceptance to give.

As I walked around the shops the other day, an unusual experience for me, I noticed just how many people from different nationalities there are in our community. In my street my neighbours are Fijian Indians across the road, Sri Lankans, Filipino, Samoans, Sudanese as well as the white skins from Europe. Many different nationalities. In our Preschool there are probably 20 different nationalities. 44% of the population of Blacktown council area were born overseas – almost half. They're recent arrivals.

We're trying a Study Centre next week to try and reach some of our community but you know everyone one of us can be like Sam Chan and get to know our neighbours. Join in with them with what they're doing; Invite them in, have appropriate social distance, but let's be open to where God might be leading us. We could be led to the most unlikely people to tell them about Jesus. Remember, the great evangelist of Acts is God himself. His angel gives Philip his direction. He prepares the Ethiopian, who just happened to be reading the great messianic passage of Isaiah 53. He appoints him to hear the message. He brings about his response.