

GOOD NEWS ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Acts 8:4–25

Key Verse: 8:12

“But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.”

What kingdom are you living in? We might answer, “I live in a democracy.” Some might shamelessly say, “I live in my own kingdom, on my own terms.” But the Bible says that, whether we realize it or not, we’re living in one of two kingdoms: it’s either the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of the evil one. How do we “get in” to these kingdoms? We “get in” to the evil kingdom through sin, deception and blindness. We “get in” to God’s kingdom through repentance, faith in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The good news is, God is inviting us all, no matter who we are, to his kingdom.¹ So, if we’re not in his kingdom, what’s holding us back? What obstacles are hindering us? May God speak to us through his word.

Acts 8–11 shows how God begins breaking down barriers to bring the good news of Jesus to more and more people. It begins after Stephen is stoned to death. A great persecution arises against the church in Jerusalem. The believers are all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria (8:1). The young man named Saul, who gave his approval to Stephen’s execution, continues ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he drags off men and women and commits them to prison (8:3). This is no mere psychological resistance. It’s real suffering, real loss, real danger to life itself.

In an environment so hostile to the gospel, what happens? Read verse 4. “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.” Wait. Why are these people not scared? Haven’t they had to run for their lives? Why haven’t they gone into hiding? Instead, they’re going around, “preaching the word.” The Greek word for “preaching” is literally “evangelizing,” repeated in verses 12, 25,

¹ The overarching theme of the Bible is that, despite the influence of evil kingdoms, God’s kingdom will prevail; cf. Rev.11:15; Dan.2:44; Matt.13:31–33.

35 and 40. Here in verse 4 it means “sharing the good news of the word.” It was not their plan, but it fulfilled God’s plan to send out his word from Jerusalem.²

But what is this “good news of the word”? It’s the word about Jesus. It’s Bible study that gets to the point. It’s the good news that Jesus died and rose again to forgive our sins and give us hope in heaven. It’s so simple, anyone can share it. The bad news is, Stephen had to die for this good news. These Christians had to scatter for it. But it’s still the best news. Why? Because what Jesus did gets at the root of all our problems—sin and death. Outwardly people look fine. But sin and death are still ruining lives today. Our sin causes us to go against God’s will. It corrupts our nature and leads to broken relationships. Worst of all, our sin alienates us from God. Ultimately, our sin leads to physical death, to judgment, and then, to eternal torment.³ Even if we’re clueless about these consequences, if we’re living under the power of sin and death we feel guilty, meaningless, and fearful. It’s why we all need to accept the good news about Jesus, and share it with others.

Verse 4 is quietly showing that even the threat of persecution, prison and death do not intimidate these scattered believers. Why not? Because they’ve just witnessed firsthand the courage of Stephen and his undying love for Jesus. Stephen’s passion and Christ-like character, even in death, has lit this evangelism like a wildfire. God still can use inspiring examples, and even harsh persecution, to revive our souls and give us a new heart, a new spirit, to get out and start telling people the good news about Jesus.

Look at verse 5. Where was Samaria? Originally it was Northern Israel, where most of the smaller tribes lived. But many centuries ago, a foreign empire had invaded Northern Israel, due to their rebellion against God. Many Jews there were forced to move elsewhere, and foreigners were brought in and forced to intermarry with those who remained. Their descendants, the Samaritans, were known as Jewish “half-breeds.” They still held onto the law of Moses, including the law of circumcision. But they created their own place of worship on Mount Gerazim and refused to go to worship in Jerusalem. So the Jews of Jerusalem despised them and wouldn’t even drink out of the same cup with them. During his earthly ministry, Jesus traveled through Samaria and ministered to a Samaritan

² Isa.2:3b.

³ Gen.6:12; Isa.59:2; Rom.6:23a; Heb.9:27; Luke 16:23,28; Rev.21:8.

woman.⁴ To illustrate the love of neighbor, he told a parable of “the good Samaritan.”⁵ Once, he healed ten lepers, and the only one who came back to thank him was a Samaritan.⁶ And now, as the gospel of Jesus begins to spread out from Jerusalem, the first place is Samaria.

Verse 5 also mentions Philip. He was one of the seven chosen to distribute food daily to widows. It was humble work. But like Stephen, Philip goes on to become an inspiring spiritual leader himself. Like Stephen, Philip was a Hellenistic Jew, more familiar living outside of Jewish culture, more aware and more open to different kinds of people. And for now, at least, Samaria is not a target of persecution. So Philip proclaims the Christ to the Samaritans. Actually, Samaritans didn’t like the promise that the Christ would come through David’s descendants,⁷ because they thought it would leave them out. They only liked God’s promise that he would send the Prophet like Moses,⁸ which they believed would include them. But the good news of the Christ is that he is for all peoples. Somehow, Philip has this conviction.

How do the Samaritans respond? Look at verses 6–8. What gets their attention is not just Philip’s message but the amazing things that start happening through him. Unclean spirits start coming out of many people, crying out with a loud voice. Many who are lame or paralyzed are suddenly healed. These miracles are not just spectacle; they verify that the good news of Jesus is true. The truth of Jesus and the blessings he brings still fill people with such joy.

Look at verses 9–11. Here’s a major obstacle to the spread of the gospel in Samaria. It’s one person: a man named Simon. He practiced magic in the city and impressed the people. He was always promoting himself as someone great. So people started saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” For a long time this Simon had amazed the Samaritans with his magic. It says from the least to the greatest, they all were kind of hypnotized by him. To help these Samaritans, Simon’s spell on them would have to be broken.

⁴ John 4:1–30.

⁵ Luke 10:25–37.

⁶ Luke 17:16.

⁷ 2 Sam.7:12–13.

⁸ Deut.18:15.

But how could that happen? It's through the power of the gospel. Read verse 12. "But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women." Philip's simple gospel message about Jesus and his kingdom is far superior to Simon's power over people. Most likely, Simon's "magic" was just tricks that seemed impressive and made people afraid of him. But Philip's message is about the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the name above all names.⁹ The name of Jesus is the only name in all the world that gives people salvation (4:12). And Philip's message of good news about the kingdom of God is not just theory; it's accompanied by a power that brings people deep inner healing. Philip's ministry is just like that of Jesus while he was on earth. Jesus always proclaimed the kingdom of God and healed the sick. His healing illustrated what the kingdom of God is like. It's a kingdom where the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind are welcomed and healed; it's a kingdom where all the entitled and self-righteous will be shocked to discover that they are in fact "cast out."¹⁰ It's not a kingdom where people are subjugated by human power and ruled by phony, egotistical people. It's a kingdom where all those who receive God's grace, are healed in their souls, set free, and full of joy are welcome.

Verse 12 says that when people believe Philip's message, they are baptized, both men and women. In the gospel of Jesus, women are included as equals, not marginalized. These people are baptized because now they have personal faith in Jesus as their Christ, their King. Their baptisms express their new life commitment—to follow Jesus as their Savior and King and leave their old lives behind. We all need to make this same commitment of faith. And something interesting happens. Look at verse 13. Simon himself seems to convert to Christianity and starts following Philip. Of course he's impressed with the signs and great miracles God does through him. But not all is as it seems.

Look at verse 14. This is the first time Acts shows how God continues to use his people in Jerusalem to support what he is doing elsewhere.¹¹ The author Luke is showing that when Christianity spreads, it doesn't morph into something other than the original gospel. The number of Christians in Jerusalem is now much smaller, but they send their two top leaders, Peter and John, to see about

⁹ Phil.2:9.

¹⁰ Luke 7:22; 14:13,21; 13:28–30.

¹¹ Cf. 11:22; 12:25; 15:2,4; 16:2; 21:17.

the ministry in Samaria. And what do they find? Look at verses 15–17. There was just one thing lacking: people had not received the Spirit. Did Philip miss this? The verses don't actually say. It may be that God, in his sovereign wisdom, withheld the Spirit until the apostles came, to teach both parties something. God wanted Jewish Christians to witness the Samaritans receiving the Spirit, so that they would finally welcome them as equals. And God wanted Samaritan Christians to experience the Spirit being given through Peter and John, so that they would let go of their old resentments and really unite with Jewish Christians.¹² These Samaritan Christians don't have to go to the Jerusalem temple to worship. Yet they are fully Christian because they have Jesus, who is our true temple, and they have the Holy Spirit.¹³ Jesus still unites all God's people, all who've accepted the good news and received the Holy Spirit.

Look at verses 18–19. Simon has been baptized and is following Philip, but now we see his unchanged nature. He's asking to buy the ability to give people the Holy Spirit. Read verses 20–21. God again uses Peter, a shepherd like Jesus, to rebuke a person whose heart is not right (5:1–11). Simon's story shows us that we all need to receive the gospel so deeply that it actually changes our hope, our worldview, and what we love. If we say we believe in Jesus but are still in love with money and power, we're in grave spiritual danger.

Read verse 22. Simon had been living for a long time as a showman. But now Peter is helping this man look honestly into his own soul. He's already said "your heart is not right before God" (21b); now he says "this wickedness of yours." And he goes deeper, mentioning "the intent of your heart." What's going on in Simon's heart? Read verse 23. The phrase "the gall of bitterness" is an idiom that literally means Simon is envious, jealous of others' power. The other phrase, "the bond of iniquity" literally means "tied to injustice." "Iniquity" is not just sinful desires, but injustice. Basically, it seems Simon has formed the bad habit of cheating to get whatever he wants. These rebukes may seem negative, but Peter is trying to help this man repent and receive God's forgiveness. How does he respond? Look at verse 24. This doesn't sound like repentance. He's not even praying for himself. But who knows? Luke leaves Simon's story open-ended, as a warning to us. He's telling us that just outward baptism and hanging out with

¹² The prophet Ezekiel had predicted that the Messiah's coming would finally unite all God's people (Eze.37:15–28).

¹³ John 2:19,22; 4:20–24.

Christians can't really solve the problems within us. We need real repentance, honest turning to Jesus, and turning away from our old habits of heart, really crying out to Jesus for his forgiveness and help.

Philip's message is "good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (12). But most people can't see this good news; it's "veiled" from them. The Bible says "the god of this world has blinded" their minds. What can we do? To share the gospel, we don't have to be sneaky or cunning, or tamper with God's word to get people to do what we want. We just need to openly state the truth, depending on God to work. And we need not to proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as servants for Jesus' sake. When we do, the light of God's glory in Christ will shine in us, and through us, to others.¹⁴

Today's passage shows us that when we live in a worldly kingdom, we become addicted to money and power like Simon. Or we become full of unclean spirits, powerlessness, and have no joy. We can even be ruled by fraudulent, spiritually sick leaders. But in God's kingdom, we can be set free, full of forgiveness and joy, and truly one, because we're ruled by our King Jesus. Colossians 1:13–14 reads, "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Praise God for the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ and the beautiful kingdom he gives us by his grace. Read verse 12 again. May God help us accept this good news, heal us deep within, and use us to share about the kingdom of God through Jesus with people living in darkness.

¹⁴ 2 Cor.4:2–6.