

Acts 8:1-25

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[0:00] If you go to Chiswick Roundabout, you know where that is, Chiswick Roundabout, and you get on the M4 and you travel 123 miles, you will see a sign which says, Croeso i Gymru, welcome to Wales.

On the other side of that sign, the sun shines. You're in a different realm. You're in a different world. There's a different language. People are warm and friendly and kind and very bad at rugby at the moment.

You're crossing the border. You go across the Seven Bridge, you see the sign, welcome to Wales, Croeso i Gymru. You're in a different world.

But lots of you probably didn't even notice it when you were driving. Lots of you will be thinking, it's no big deal. You drive along the M4, you go past that sign, you don't think about it. It's a border, but does it make a massive difference?

Well, in Acts chapter 8, the good news of the Lord Jesus and the Gospel is about to cross a great border.

[1:27] It's about to cross a great line, a significant boundary. It's about to go into Samaria. And that isn't really like going on the M4 and crossing into Wales. It's a great leap.

And so, if you'll turn, if you haven't already, to Acts chapter 8 in your Bibles. Because what you have after the death and resurrection and the ascension of the Lord Jesus into heaven and the proclamation of the Lord Jesus in the city of Jerusalem and Judea, what you have in this book of Acts is the progress and the advance of that Gospel to the ends of the earth.

How are there a body of people in West Ealing this morning from all parts of the world worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ? And the book of Acts explains that to you. And one of the first big steps is when the Gospel goes out from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria.

The Gospel got bloody in Jerusalem. Acts chapter 7 talks about the stoning of Stephen. And it's at that point, in the aftermath of his death, when he's brutally stoned to death, that great persecution arose.

And everyone, Luke says, apart from the apostles, was scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. And the church left. People were dying for their faith. People's lives were at risk.

[3:00] And so they fled. And the main truth of this passage it's putting before us is that the Gospel advances, whether you like it or not. And the Gospel advances.

And it will either deliver you or it will reveal you. And so three Ps this morning. First of all, the progress of the Gospel. Look at verses 4 to 8.

The progress of the Gospel. It says, those who were injured to them, they're scattered. And they went about preaching the word. And Philip went down to a city of Samaria and he proclaimed to them the Christ.

The King. The Lord Jesus. And the crowds, with one accord, they paid attention to what was being said. And there was great joy and so on. The progress of the Gospel. And that's really interesting because if you look at verse 1 and verse 3, in the aftermath of Stephen's death, there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem.

They're scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the Twelve. And it talks about this guy, Saul, who was in on Stephen's death. And he began to lay waste to the church.

[4:16] He entered into houses. He pulled off mums and dads, husbands and wives. And he took them and delivered them over to prison. It's a brutal thing. And the interesting thing here is that Luke says, those in verse 1, they're scattered abroad.

And when they were scattered, they went everywhere. What? What? Verse 4, preaching the word. So Saul scattered the church. But when you scattered the church of Jesus Christ in persecution,

what do you do?

You scatter the Gospel. And I think Saul would have been really upset with himself if he'd realized that actually he's only helping Jesus' program. If you go back to the start of Acts, do you remember that?

Chapter 1 and verse 8. Jesus said to the apostles in chapter 1 and verse 8, You will be my witnesses. And what are the stages? Chapter 1 verse 8.

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea. And then Samaria. And then finally to the ends of the earth. And so Acts chapter 8.

[5 : 25] The Gospel, the good news, is spreading around the world. Because of the persecution of Saul. The Gospel is going into Samaria. Saul was only ever aiding Jesus' program.

But the point you see is this. Scatter the church. And you scatter the Gospel. That's the way the Gospel advances.

And if you look through history, that's always been the way. In the late 1520s, before the Reformation in Scotland, before John Knox ever arose to lead it, there was a man by the name of Patrick Hamilton.

And Patrick Hamilton had been abroad. He came back to his native Scotland. And he understood the good news of the Lord Jesus. He'd received the grace of God.

He was studying the Bible. He came back to Scotland because he wanted people to hear. He wanted people to understand. He wanted people to know the Lord Jesus. Well, the Archbishop and others made him feel welcome under the pretense of friendship.

[6 : 26] And they pretended they wanted to confer with him about this new teaching and so on. They tricked him. Then they tried him. They condemned him as a heretic. And then they burned him at the stake.

And on the day when Patrick Hamilton walked to the stake, the kind of kindling, the faggots to light the fire were damp. They wouldn't kindle.

So for six hours, this poor guy, Patrick Hamilton, was roasted to death, really, then burnt to death. But there was one of the Archbishop's friends, one of his counsellors, who counselled the Archbishop.

And he said this, What's he saying there?

He's saying this, that you cannot stamp out the gospel of Jesus Christ. You cannot stamp out the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[7 : 38] In fact, you will only advance his course. And that's so often the case, isn't it? And so we rejoice to have, and brothers and sisters from Iran who are here with us this morning, we love having you as part of our church family.

What is happening in Iran? What has happened in the last 20 to 30 years? That the regime there have tried to stamp out the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And what has happened? It has flourished.

And it has spread. And it's so often the case, isn't it? That in the suffering of God's people, the gospel makes progress. The suffering of the church will never lead to the silencing of the church. And there's a spillover, isn't there, into our lives today. That just as the early believers were scattered abroad in suffering and persecution, and the gospel was scattered, and so some of you here this morning, you have suffered.

You've suffered individually and personally and in your families. And maybe you don't understand that suffering. And maybe you don't see any rationale for that suffering.

[8 : 51] But that suffering has not destroyed your faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, you've been upheld in it. And for some reason, your suffering has not driven you away from Jesus.

Actually, it's driven you closer to the Lord Jesus. And it's strengthened Christ's grip on you. And so the progress of the gospel. Secondly, you see the power of the gospel.

Look at verses 9 to 12. Luke there pictures the power of the gospel. There's two aspects of what the good news of the Lord Jesus does for you.

And the first aspect is this. It's the liberty and the freedom that the gospel gives. The liberty and the freedom that the gospel gives in delivering you from false.

From falsehoods. There's a man named Simon in the city. He'd previously practiced magic in the city. I don't know what you think of when you hear the word magic.

[9 : 53] For those of my age, you think of Paul Daniels, don't you? Saturday night TV. Or you think of a man with a top hat pulling a rabbit out of it. Saying abracadabra with a little wand. But that isn't the case here.

Here is somebody who's seeking to control events. It's the occult. Think of sorcery. This guy has astounded the people in Samaria.

They looked on him from the lowest to the greatest. And they said this guy is great. And he wasn't some kind of sideline. Working out of a shop front on the Xbridge Road doing psychic readings. No, Simon's act was a class act. And it says, doesn't it? From the least to the greatest. They all paid attention to him. In fact, they say this man is the power of God that is called great.

Simon is respected. He had Samaria in his grip. And they said this man is the power of God. He'd manifested. He'd shown in some way a supernatural power.

[10 : 58] And they were in his grip. And you might be sitting there and you think, oh, it's so primitive, isn't it? A primitive ancient world.

We're not like that today. We're so sophisticated. That can't happen today. But I think you go through the last century and you find this sort of thing. People in bondage to someone who exercises authority and power over them.

Blind to their faults. And they put their hope in their leaders. At Mussolini, his secretary was standing in the background.

When Mussolini, in 1936, was standing on the balcony in Rome. And the crowd were cheering for him. The throng in crowds were adoring him.

Mussolini had been victorious in Abyssinia and Ethiopia. And at that point, Mussolini, the Italian dictator, was at the height of his powers and success. He was called back to the balcony for the applause 42 times.

[12 : 11] The crowd was cheering him, going wild. And he stood there on the balcony in Rome with his hands stretched out, receiving the adoration. Motionless, looking at the crowd.

His party secretary was watching him from behind him. And one of the men from Mussolini's entourage said to his party secretary, He's like a god. And Mussolini's party secretary said, He is god.

He is god. The people were bound. And gripped by. And held by him. And that's what Simon had in Samaria.

This city was in his grip from the least to the greatest. But do you see there's deliverance? Look at verse 12. But when they believed Philip, as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, a crucified carpenter from the back end of nowhere, Nazareth, who'd risen from the dead, they were baptised, both men and women, when they believed Philip's word. And suddenly there is liberty, and there is freedom, and there's release from Simon's bondage. What was it that Philip preached?

[13 : 37] They believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. So what is the kingdom of God?

Well, among other things, it begins with the kingship of God. That God rules, and that God reigns in our world. And he is proclaiming the kingship of God, that God is king.

And people who believe that enter into and submit under God's kingship for their own lives. And he proclaimed the name of Jesus Christ.

What does that mean? It at least means this, the authority of Jesus Christ. And they believed what Philip said. And they enter under the authority of Jesus Christ.

They say, you are God, you are Lord, and we are not. And they submit to his lordship. And they come under his dominance. And they come and they submit themselves to the authority of Jesus Christ.

[14 : 50] And when they do that, they are liberated. They are free. They're free from Simon's clutches. Because they've come under a new jurisdiction, under a new kingship, under a new regime.

Think of the musical, think of the film, The Sound of Music. I don't really know that film very well. But do you remember the Von Trapps family? At the end of the film, they make their exit away, don't they, from the pursuit of the Nazis from Austria to Switzerland.

There's some nun, isn't there, if I remember rightly, who pulls part of the engine out of the Nazis' car. And the last scene is them coming up the mountain, out of Austria, into Switzerland.

And what are they like? Really depressed? Really down at heart to be leaving Nazi Austria? No, they're not, are they? The Von Trapps, they are rejoicing. Why? Because they're now in Switzerland. They're under a new jurisdiction. They've entered a new sphere. And so now, the Nazis no longer have any dominance over them.

[16:06] The Nazis no longer have any authority over them. They don't have any control over them. In that neutral country, they are free. They're under a new jurisdiction. And when the people of Samaria came under the authority and the kingship of God, and they put themselves under the authority of Jesus, they moved from Simon's dominance to a new jurisdiction and a new management.

That was symbolised and that was signified by the fact that they were baptised. Both men and women. And if you've been baptised, do you remember what the formula is that is used when you're baptised?

I baptised you into the name. I baptised you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And it means that you've come under new ownership.

And that's precisely what happened with these people. And so the power of the good news of the Lord Jesus brought freedom, liberty, and deliverance from falsehood and from lies that had bound them for years.

And that still happens today. When the power of the gospel is understood and let loose, people are delivered from falsehood.

[17:29] And that's happening all over the world, isn't it? Think of the land of China, isn't it? Where the authorities have tried to stamp out Christianity. And millions of people have been converted over the last 20, 30, 40 years.

It's happening here, the power of being delivered. And so what I'm trying to say to you this, is what we're about in this church, the good news of the Lord Jesus, it's not merely a concept.

It's not merely that we would just do our best and try to make healing a better place. The gospel of the Lord Jesus is not just an idea, it is the power of God to salvation that changes lives.

Leon Morris tells the story of an alcoholic who was brought to Christ. He became a Christian and some of his drinking mates mocked him and they ridiculed him and they were amused and they said to this guy, does that mean you believe the Bible and all that stuff?

You don't really think that Jesus turned water into wine, do you? And the alcoholic who was converted said, well I really don't know about that but I do know one thing that in my house Jesus has changed beer into furniture.

[18:48] And that's the power of the gospel. And you might think, well that's not really happening here is it? But I beg to differ with you, I could walk around this room and I could stop at seats and I don't know all of your individual stories but I could stop at some seats and I could point at some people and they could stand up and they could still be racked with lots of problems and they're not free of all their problems but they could testify that the gospel of Jesus Christ has power to change their lives and to deliver from guilt and to deliver from falsehood and that they were trapped but Jesus has delivered them and made them free.

The progress of the gospel. The power of the gospel and the power is shown not only that it delivers from falsehood but it gives unity, that's the other power.

It delivers from divisions. You see that in verses 14 to 17 of Acts chapter 8 which is a strange passage in many ways. Sort of verse 14 and 15. Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, big shock, they sent to them Peter and John.

They sent to them the kind of official big cheeses and they came down and they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. And verse 16 records that there's something apparently abnormal in the way that he recounts it.

there's something abnormal. Verse 16, for the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them but they'd only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. So you'd assume if you've been reading Acts and tracking Acts with us over these few months that Acts 2:38 you would assume that nothing really necessarily had to be done in addition to them for them to receive the Holy Spirit God's indwelling presence.

[20:51] From Acts chapter 10 the Holy Spirit came when Peter was preaching to Cornelius and yet here it's abnormal. You've got this apparent difference where there's no visible evidence that these Samaritan believers these outsiders had received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And so Peter and John come down from Jerusalem and they place their hands on them and they begin receiving the Holy Spirit. How could you tell that? Well there's a visible sign isn't it? They speak in other languages. The apostles did that on the day of Pentecost if you remember. There was some visible token that they'd received the Holy Spirit. Now why would that happen? Why did God apparently withhold this gift from some of the believers for a while? It's unusual it's abnormal. And so we go back isn't it?

When the gospel went into Samaria it's not just kind of crossing over the Severn Bridge from the border from England into Wales. What's happening here is that the gospel the good news is going over this massive religious chasm this social chasm this racial chasm so you remember in John chapter 4 there's this giant rift there's this hatred between Jews and Samaritans there's a parable Jesus tells of the good Samaritan it was an impossibility in Jewish eyes but now the good news of the Lord Jesus has gone into Samaria and in the wisdom of God he's delayed this visible token at least of the spirit to the Samaritan believer and so the Jews come from Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit is given and they can validate by personal witness that what the Samaritans have received is the gospel of the

[22 : 44] Lord Jesus Christ and they are given the gift of the spirit that Peter and John the kind of officials would be able to say yes they really did but it's also a way in which the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem can show a visible token of unity they're bound together with these Samaritan believers Jews and Samaritans may not get along they may fight they may actually detest each other and look down on one another but in the church of Jesus Christ Jewish Christians from Jerusalem and Samaritan believers are bound together in a unity that the gospel has brought about naturally they may be hostile but in the gospel there's a unity and Luke is saying this gospel restores and brings unity and we can go into that further and we can say that the gospel of

God today does that and so in this church family and in any church family where the gospel is you'll not only be set free from bondage but you will be bound to one another united together I don't think you and I can really imagine the rift culturally racially religiously that there was between Jews and Samaritans and yet can you see what we're being told we're being told that the gospel of Jesus has such power that it unites people like that people who have Jesus in common and who have the Holy Spirit in common and I know that the Christian church in this country is often accused of being cleekish and full of factions and divided but you know something my experience is this that when you look around this group there are people naturally who I would never choose to be friends with and it's the same for you I mean there are some pretty diverse creatures here this morning with diverse personalities if I can put it like that and the only reason that we are together in the same professing body is because we share the same

Lord and we've received the same spirit and lots of times that's where the similarity ends and it is the power of the gospel that does that the progress of the gospel the power of the gospel and then briefly and thirdly the perversion of the gospel verse 13 can you see what Simon does and this guy this magic man verse 13 he believes and he is baptized and he joins the church but apparently he's a fake it was a profession that on the surface looked authentic but it wasn't real Jesus says about John says about Jesus in John chapter 2 that when Jesus was at the Passover in Jerusalem many believed in him when they saw the amazing things he was doing but Jesus did not entrust himself to them and literally

Jesus did not believe them because he knew all men he knew what was in a man and in other words John was saying they believed these people when they saw Jesus acts but it was with a superficial faith it wasn't real and Jesus did not commit himself to them because he knew that their apparent faith was fake Simon says when he sees this laying on of the apostles hands when he sees them given the Holy Spirit he says I want to do that and he says to Peter he offers him money can I give you some money so I can get that power in other words he's thinking that Christianity the Holy Spirit was a toy that I can use and God is a commodity that I can somehow market and it will lead to the furthering of my aims and my prestige and so on and Peter sees right through it doesn't he and he says take your silver and your gold do what you want with it your heart is not right before God

Simon and he commands him to repent to turn around and pray to the Lord if it's possible that this sin of what you've done may be forgiven you can you see and what Simon is doing it's a perversion of the gospel Simon wanted to use the gospel and we immediately think don't we tell you evangelists you know those those people that they use Christianity for their own ends for politicians

that use the Christianity and they try to kind of win the Christian vote by playing it that's what we think of but actually we need to turn this on ourselves because you don't have to be on TV or in a pulpit to be a fake you can pervert the gospel just like Simon did in verse 13 he believed in a superficial way he believed and he was baptized and he wanted to use God for his own convenience and appearances can be deceiving can't they so let me urge you and urge myself to examine ourselves and maybe you've believed you've professed faith maybe you've been baptized but it can be can't it from this passage of phony faith you see it's possible to be perverting the gospel like Simon and we think God might fit our convenience cater to our expectations and we want to use

[28 : 46] God and we may not know anything of a passion to adore God for what he's done for us in Jesus Christ and we may not know anything of a hungering and a thirsting for righteousness but we believe and we've been baptized and it just could be couldn't it that your faith is fake and the warning that Luke is giving us here is examine yourself there's great power in the gospel but you can pervert that you can have a belief in speech marks and be baptized and it might be a false faith and so can you see that when the gospel advances even in IPC Ealing this morning it both delivers wonderfully and it discloses the power and the progress of the gospel it's unstoppable and yet the tragedy of religion is that it can pervert the gospel let's pray and to to to to to to!