

# The Wonder of the Gospel

Acts 8:1-40

Studies in Acts #11

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**T**onight I want us to meditate on *the wonder of the gospel*. Not predestination, not for whom Christ died, not views of the millennium, not whether national Israel is still the covenant people, but the gospel. The simple and saving good news about Jesus Christ. From time to time we need to be brought back to just the gospel like going back to building blocks.

1. *The Wonder of its Vocabulary*
2. *The Wonder of its Promiscuity*
3. *The Wonder of its Inclusivity*

## The Wonder of its Vocabulary

First, I want you to see here *the wonder of its vocabulary*. I remember in elementary school taking home vocabulary words every day and having to write out their definitions. But I did that just because I had to and to get it done. Here I want you to stand in wonder at the ways Scripture says the gospel is expressed.

Notice that there are three words used for the gospel here. First, we read of the language of testifying. We see this word in verse 25: **Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord**. The good news is something that has been told to us and so we must tell others as well. Second, there is the language of heralding or proclaiming far and wide the good news. We see it in verse 5 as Philip **heralded to them the Christ**. In pictorial terms, this is what Jesus said when he said preachers spread seed far and wide.

Third, there is the language of announcing or preaching good news. This word is used twice in terms of the action of bringing good news to various places: Peter and John **announced** or **preached to many villages of the Samaritans** (v. 25) and Philip **announced** or **preached in Azotus and to all the towns until he came to Caesarea** (v. 40). But then three times this word is used in terms of the good news itself: **announcing** or **preaching the word** (v. 4). Of course preaching is using words but the gospel is a specific word. What is that word? Notice the way the gospel is announced: **announcing** or **preaching about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ** (v. 12). It has content. God's heavenly rule and reign that has come down in the person of Jesus Christ. And we see this in the third way when we read of **announcing** or **preaching about Jesus** (v. 35).

What is the wonder of the gospel? Jesus! As one song says,

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus  
There's just something about that name  
Master, Savior, Jesus  
Like the fragrance after the rain  
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus  
Let all heaven and earth proclaim  
Kings and kingdoms shall all pass away  
But there's something about that name.

Another song says it like this:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds  
In a believer's ear!  
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,  
And drives away his fear.

## **The Wonder of its Promiscuity**

Second, see the *wonder of its promiscuity*. Children, as you get older you'll learn that being promiscuous is not a good thing. But when we speak of the gospel being promiscuous we're talking about a good thing. How so?

We've been reading of several waves of persecution of the church in Jerusalem. Here Luke uses a word translated as **destroy** that speaks of a brutal and sadistic cruelty.<sup>1</sup> But stand in wonder at the wisdom of God in using a persecution to make his word promiscuous outside the bounds of Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth as 1:8 describes Christ's commission to his apostles. Persecution leads to evangelism. And notice that when the whole church is scattered and it's authorized preachers are bound up to Jerusalem, God still gets his Word out through unofficial but joyful spreading of the word by all believers<sup>2</sup>: **Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word** (v. 4).

Think of this like a dandelion and its seeds. Children, what happens when wind blows hard on a fluffy dandelion? It looks like it gets destroyed but in reality it spreads its seeds to plant even more dandelions. In the same way the gospel is spread like the seeds of a dandelion by the wind of persecution. As one commentator said, "the wind increases the flame"<sup>3</sup> of the gospel. Think for example of how in 1949 when communism took over China and all the foreign missionaries were expelled. Many of those spread into other parts of Asia that's had yet to be reached. And over the course of time, in fact, the number

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<sup>1</sup> See Stott, 145.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, 1:319; Stott, 146.

<sup>3</sup> Bengel cited in Stott, 146.

of Christians in China has increased multiple times ten over and over to the point now of China being the Christian superpower of the world. Praise God!

## **The Wonder of its Inclusivity**

Finally, I want you to see here *the wonder of its inclusivity*. After the persecution we read how the gospel came to the Samaritans in verses 4–25 and then to an Ethiopian eunuch in verses 26–40—and he is a foretaste of Peter’s Gentile mission to come in chapter 10.

Who are the Samaritans? When the ten northern tribes of ancient Israel turned from the Lord they made Samaria their capital. Later, the Assyrians took them into captivity in 722BC. Those Assyrians left behind foreigners to inter-marry with left behind Jewish women in order to breed the Jews out of existence. The result was half-Jews, half-Assyrians (2 Kings 17:24–41; Ezra 4; Neh. 4). And when Judah later returned from its Babylonian captivity, the Samaritans offered to help rebuild the temple, but Judah refused. This led to the creation of a rival temple on Mount Gerazim in the fourth century BC. Then things got so bad that around 200BC they dedicated their temple to Zeus after Antiochus IV destroyed the rebellious Judas Maccabeus and desecrated the Jewish temple. The Samaritans also rejected all the Old Testament except the Pentateuch. What does this mean? The Jews saw the Samaritans as unclean outsiders so much so that during Jesus’ ministry the soon-to-be-apostle John wanted to call fire down upon Samaria (Luke 9:51–56).

But now we read of the gospel so wondrously including the Samaritans! (v. 5) One of the questions you might be asking is why do we read in verse 16 that **the Holy Spirit...had not yet fallen on any of them** (vv. 15, 16), especially since Peter promised the Spirit to all who repented and believed in 2:38. Quickly, the Roman Church says this is proof of a two-stage of experience of the Christian life, with baptism first then confirmation by the laying on of hands by a bishop through which the Spirit comes. Pentecostalism also sees this as proof of a two-staged experience: first there is conversion and baptism and second there is the baptism of the Spirit.<sup>4</sup> In response to this two-staged experience, many commentators say there is only one stage and argue that the Samaritans' conversion was not genuine, thus the apostles' came. Some say that it was a genuine conversion but that what they received through the apostles was some extraordinary manifestation of the Spirit. This is how Calvin takes it. I think the best way, though, is to say that this is not a formulaic pattern as Rome and Pentecostalism say, nor are the other one-stage explanations correct. Instead, this is an unusual experienced based on the fact that the gospel has now spread to a new area and a representative delegation of the apostles needed to confirm this (v. 14). This is a phenomenon that occurs at key moments in the extension of the kingdom from Jerusalem (ch. 2) to Judea and Samaria (ch. 8) and to the ends of the earth (chs. 10–11). It is unusual and therefore

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<sup>4</sup> The Assemblies of God states it like this:

All believers are entitled to and should ardently expect and earnestly seek the promise of the Father, the baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire, according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. This was the normal experience of all in the early Christian Church. With it comes the enduement of power for life and service, the bestowment of the gifts and their uses in the work of the ministry...This experience is distinct from and subsequent to the experience of the new birth.

[http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/Statement\\_of\\_Fundamental\\_Truths/sft\\_full.cfm#7](http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/Statement_of_Fundamental_Truths/sft_full.cfm#7).

not a pattern for ongoing extra blessings of the Spirit because it deviates from Peter's clear teaching in Acts 2:38. It's unusual as we don't read this happening every time converts are made. It is unusual because while Peter is present at each of the moments in Acts 2 and 10 the Spirit falls without prayer and the laying on of hands but with the speaking in tongues. In Acts 8 the Spirit falls with prayer and laying on of hands but without tongues. What is the significance of this? The apostolic confirmation demonstrates that the Samaritans are one with the rest of the body of Christ; there are no ethnic or racial barriers when it comes to the gospel.

We see this wonderful inclusivity as well in the Ethiopian eunuch. The Psalms describe a day to come in which Ethiopia would stretch out its hand to the Lord (Ps. 68:31) and when the Lord would name Ethiopia in the temple (Ps. 87:4). That's significant because he was a Gentile. It's also significant because he's a eunuch. And the law said in that eunuchs could not enter assembly of the people and offer sacrifices (Deut. 23:1). The prophet Isaiah spoke of day in which eunuchs would be given an everlasting name (Isa. 56:3). The prophet Zephaniah foresaw a day in which Ethiopians would bring offerings to the temple (Zeph. 3:10).

Eunuchs, like Samaritans, were considered on fringes of Israel. Yet what do we see here? We see the church ministering to them. What an application to us! We need to reach out to the hurting, the lost, and the needy.

Persecution comes and the gospel spreads. Ethnic and religious differences are highlighted and the gospel includes the outcast. Here is the wonder of its power. Amen!