

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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The Cities in which we Dwell, Part 5

Amazing Grace

In 1991 Michael Horton penned the book, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace*. It was directed at a church culture which had in part lost the amazing message of the gospel.

And though it has been fifteen years since the book was first published, very little has changed. For example, over the past decade at pastor's conferences and Christian book seller conventions Horton has quarried many a pastor and church leader with questions like these:

- What is the good news?
- What is justification?
- From what have you been saved?

And to his amazement very few of these church leaders could correctly answered his questions.

Most recently, he posed this question to a multitude of evangelical pastors at a convention: Are you saved by faith alone, faith plus works, or works alone? Most of them answered this question that they were saved by faith plus works!

And so *Putting Amazing Back into Grace* was penned to articulate the amazing Gospel of Grace to a church that rarely hears these truths:

- God has saved ones who could not save themselves.
- God declares the sinner not guilty of his sin.
- God delivers the rebellious and the fool from His wrath.

Let me ask you just how great is God's grace? How does it effect God's disposition toward you when you sin? Can God's grace forgive you when you continue to evidence a rebellious heart against God? Can God's grace forgive you even though you have asked for forgiveness for the same sin now for years? Can God's grace forgive you even though you feel cold toward the things of the Lord?

Samaria

I want us to catch a glimpse of the Amazing Gospel of Grace as we consider the city of Samaria.

Thus far we have been looking at the various cities which populated Israel during the days of Christ, knowing that many of them had a distinct message attached to them. In keeping with our series: If your life were personified by an Israeli city of the first century, I wonder if the message of Samaria might characterize you.

Acts 8:4-8, “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed. And there was great joy in that city.”

This took place following the persecution that arose on account of Stephen. After Saul helped to put Stephen to death, he began breathing threats to the church such that many a servant of the Lord fled for their lives.

One such servant who was Philip went to Samaria. And this is quite shocking! For if you were a Jew living in the early first century this would have been the last place you would have wanted to go.

This raises these questions:

- Why would Samaria be a shocking place for a Jew to go?
- What was Samaria?
- And why wouldn't I have wanted to go there?

Physical Characteristics

To answer these questions let us examine the city beginning with its physical characteristics. Samaria means *lookout* or *watch-mountain* and is well named. It was built defensively on a 300 foot high hill at the western bases of Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. It was forty-two miles north of Jerusalem and twenty-one miles east of the Mediterranean.

This “hill” was situated on the major north-south road through Palestine (which we talked about last time). It also commanded the east-west route to the Plain of Sharon and the Mediterranean Sea. Because the city of Samaria was located in the region of Samaria¹, from prior studies you know that the city would have enjoyed an ample rainfall which would have made it a rather desirable place to live.

Recall that the mountains of Samaria are lower in elevation than those in Judea. As such, the rainfall in this region is evenly distributed across the entire territory making it a perfect place for farming. Its altitude and location gave it a splendid view of the Mediterranean as well as an ease when it came to defending the city from foreign armies. In fact, Samaria's only strategic weakness was that it lacked an internal water supply, the nearest spring was a mile from the city. Yet this difficulty was overcome by the use of cisterns.

¹ So labeled on account of the Assyrian practice of naming regions after their capital cities.

Because of its desirable location, it became a rather opulent city. The city covered an area excess of twenty acres and was protected by two walls. It had an outer wall that was twenty to thirty feet thick and an inner wall that was five feet thick. In it Ahab built a two story palace described as an “ivory house”² and it contained a pool some twenty-five by fifty feet.

Amos, criticizing the apostasy of the city, directed his words this way:

Amos 6:4-6, “That lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; That chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of music, like David; That drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.”

Excavations near the large pool which Ahab built have uncovered a storeroom housing 500 plaques or fragments of ivory used for inlay work in walls, furniture, boxes, and toilet articles. All of this and more made Samaria a coveted location in which to live. Its dense and continuous habitation has brought with it constant rebuilding and this is why archaeologists have had a difficult time excavating the city.

Occupiers

Samaria was inhabited by God's people at the conquest, and became a major city from Omri in 885 BC until the Assyrian captivity of 722 BC. From the eighth century to the fourth century BC it remained a quasi-Jewish city with a large Gentile population who learned to worship the God of the Bible.³

Following the conquest by Alexander the Great (332 BC) the city was rebuilt as a Greek city. It was destroyed by John Hyrcanus in 108 BC during the Maccabean revolt. Later it was rebuilt magnificently by Herod the Great (ca. 30 BC), who renamed it Sebaste in honor of Augustus (Gk. *sebastos*). The Greek is still preserved in the name of the modern Arab village, Sebastiyeh.

Biblical/Redemptive Significance

When we begin to consider how God used this city in history, we immediately note that the first altar to the Lord built in the Promised Land was constructed by Abraham in the environs of Samaria.⁴ To this place, God commanded Israel to return and assemble for the reading of the curses and the blessings of the Covenant.⁵ Joshua later led the people directly to this locale so they could fulfill the Lord's command in renewing the Covenant.⁶

Though, as we shall see, Samaria had a distinct history of idolatry and compromise, nevertheless it would remain the favored location of many Old Testament prophets: Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea. And yet Samaria came into its own in the ninth century BC with Omri — the sixth king of Israel.

Following the death of Solomon, recall that Israel was torn in two with ten tribes opting to follow Jeroboam — Solomon's general. This nation would be called Israel. And, two tribes opted to remain true

² Compare 1 Kings 22:39, and Amos 3:15

³ Compare 2 Kings 17:26-33

⁴ Compare Genesis 12:6-7

⁵ Compare Deuteronomy 11:29-30

⁶ Compare Joshua 8:30-35

to Solomon's son and successor, Rehoboam. This nation would be called Judah.

Focusing on the Northern Kingdom

The first capital city of the newly found nation was Shechem, a city just a couple of miles from Samaria. From here Jeroboam ordered the two golden calves to be fashioned and established in the cities of Dan and Bethel. With the rise of Baasha (the third King of Israel), the capital city was moved to Tirzah, also just a couple of miles from Samaria.⁷ Then when Omri⁸ took the reigns (885-873 BC), six years into his regency he opted to move the capital to Samaria where it remained until the Assyrian Captivity of 722 BC.⁹

With Samaria as the new capital city, great work went into its planning and building. For six years Omri worked on the construction of Samaria — a construction which was continued by Ahab who built a house paneled with ivory.¹⁰ Under Ahab and Jezebel, Samaria became grossly involved in the worship of Baal.¹¹ As such, Samaria became one of the key centers for idolatry in Palestine.¹²

Around 860 BC, Benhadad II of Syria unsuccessfully besieged Samaria.¹³ At the gates of the city, Ahab of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah sat on their thrones in all their splendor while Micaiah the prophet predicted that King Ahab would die in his battle against the Arameans.¹⁴ And it was at the pool of the city which Ahab built that his blood-stained chariot was cleansed and that the dogs lapped up his blood.¹⁵ Later the Syrians reduced it to a dire famine in which women began to feed on their own children.¹⁶ It was relieved only by the panic and sudden withdrawal of the besiegers, which was discovered and reported by the four lepers of 2 Kings 7.

Deaths and Burials

Ahab was buried in the city, as were a number of Israelite kings who made it their residence.¹⁷ Ahab's descendants also were slain there¹⁸ including Ahaziah, who hid in vain in the crowded city.¹⁹

Later Years

Menahem, the sixteenth King of Israel, preserved the city from attack by paying tribute to Tiglath-pileser III.²⁰ His son Pekah, however, drew the Assyrian army back again by his attack on Judah, then a vassal ally of Assyria. The city was besieged and captured by Shalmaneser V of Assyria in 725 BC.

⁷ Compare also 1 Kings 15:33, and 1 Kings 14:17

⁸ Until Sargon II, Israel was known in Assyrian records as, “The House of Omri”- so notorious was Omri on account of his pagan practices.

⁹ Compare 1 Kings 16:24

¹⁰ Compare 1 Kings 22:29

¹¹ Compare 1 Kings 18:22

¹² Compare Isaiah 8:4; 9:9; Jeremiah 23:13; Ezekiel 23:4; Hosea 7:1; Micah 1:6.

¹³ Compare 1 Kings 20:1-21

¹⁴ Compare 1 Kings 22:10; 28

¹⁵ Compare 1 Kings 22:38

¹⁶ Compare 2 Kings 6:2-9

¹⁷ Compare 1 Kings 22:37; 2; 13:9, 13; 14:16

¹⁸ Compare 2 Kings 10:1

¹⁹ Compare 2 Chronicles 22:9

²⁰ Compare 2 Kings 15:17-20

Following Shalmaneser's sudden death, Samaria refused to pay the tax imposed on them. Accordingly Sargon II, the new king of Assyria, initiated a scheme of mass deportation for the whole area which began in 722 BC.²¹ This deportation would profoundly affect the cultural landscape of Israel from this point on. After the Assyrians took God's people into exile (taking primarily the rich and upper-class), all that remained in Samaria were the uneducated and lower class Jew.

As most powers in the ancient Near East, the Assyrians took part in what is known as “Transporting.” On account of human nature which generally will not die for a land that is not our own, the Assyrians transported the peoples of their conquered kingdoms to other conquered regions.²² This proved quite effective in controlling their newly acquired lands.

Following the Assyrian deportation, the lower class, uneducated Jewish population of Samaria intermarried with Gentile peoples who were relocated to Israel- said to have been “people from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim.”²³ This created a “half-bred” race called the Samaritans — they were half Jew and half Gentile. Accordingly the religion of these “Samaritans” was always looked down upon by the pure Jew. Speaking of the Samaritans we read this:

2 Kings 17:34, “Unto this day they do after the former manners: they fear not the LORD, neither do they after their statutes, or after their ordinances, or after the law and commandment which the LORD commanded.”

The result was that from 722 BC onward there was constant friction between the Samaritans and the Israelites. For example, following the Babylonian Captivity when some Samaritans offered to help rebuild the temple, they were contemptuously rejected- despite their claims to be worshipers of the true God.²⁴ And this continued up to the time of the New Testament such that for the pious Jew of Christ's day there was nothing worse than a Samaritan- for they represented compromise! Most Jews traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem would not travel through Samaria- they would go around it utilizing either the King's Highway or the Via Maris!

This is why Christ's presence in Samaria in John 4 is so shocking. And if they did happen through the region, upon entering into Judea they would shake the dust off their sandals, not wanting to pollute Israel with Samaritan dirt. According to Jewish tradition at the time of Christ (the Mishna), the Samaritan fell outside the definition of a neighbor- and hence the parable of the Good Samaritan.²⁵

When the enemies of Christ wanted to vent their anger toward the Lord, they called Him a “Samaritan.”²⁶

²¹ During the Inter-testamental years, Samaria continued to have its ups and downs. When in 331 BC Alexander came to the city *en route* to Egypt, the populace warmly greeted him. And yet while Alexander was in Egypt the Samaritans murdered the man the General had chosen to serve as prefect over Syria. On his return, Alexander destroyed Samaria, massacred the city's leaders in the cave to which they had fled, and resettled the area with Macedonians.

Samaria was besieged by John Hyrcanus during the Maccabean revolt. Under his leadership, the surrounding countryside was devastated c. 111-107 BC. Later Pompey and Gabinius began to rebuild Samaria (Jos., Ant. 14. 75). And yet it was left to Herod to embellish the city, which he renamed Sebaste (Augusta) in honor of his emperor. In it he housed 6,000 veterans, including Greeks. Upon Herod's death, Samaria became part of the territory of Archelaus and later a Roman colony under Septimus Severus.

²² Compare 2 Kings 17:24

²³ Compare 2 Kings 17:24

²⁴ Compare Ezra 4:1-3

²⁵ Compare Luke 10:30

²⁶ Compare John 8:48

And yet the animosity was two-sided. The Samaritans also hated the Jews. And thus when it was discovered that Christ had set His face toward Jerusalem, the Samaritan villages rejected Him.²⁷

From all of this I want you to see that by the time of Christ, Samaria was a city despised by most Jews! Being filled with “compromisers,” Samaria amazingly ranked ahead of Gentiles when it came to Jewish hatred. And that is why when we come to “Its Message” we ought to be somewhat surprised.

The Message

This passage, Acts 8:4-8, occurred forty days after Christ's resurrection. Of the eleven post-resurrection appearances of Christ²⁸, this is the tenth. Here Christ gathered His disciples together on the Mount of Olives, and instructed them.²⁹ First he told them not to leave Jerusalem. Secondly they were to wait until the Jewish celebration of First Fruits/Pentecost — the time when the first fruits of the Messianic Kingdom would be brought forth.

It was at this time that the disciples queried Him, “Is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). And this brings us to Christ’s shocking answer.

Acts 1:7-8, “And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”

What an incredible response. Ours is not to receive “the secret things... of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 29:29). As much as we would love to know the things pertaining to the what, when, where, and why of God's Kingdom work the specific answer to these questions is yet to be revealed. However what has been revealed is our personal and corporate calling as the people of God.

And what specifically is that calling?

WE ARE TO BE GOD'S WITNESSES, “...both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Did you get that?

The disciples were no longer to ignore the Samaritans or the remotest part of the earth. Indeed! They were to understand that the calling of God belongs not only to the Jew, which at the time represented the people of God, BUT also to two other groups.

²⁷ Compare Luke 9:53

²⁸ The following is a list of Christ's eleven resurrection appearances: He appeared:

- a) In Jerusalem: to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18), to the other women (Matthew 28:8-10), to Peter (Luke 24:34), to ten disciples (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-25), to the Eleven, including Thomas (John 20:26-29), at His ascension (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:4-12).
- b) To the disciples on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:13-35).
- c) In the region of Galilee (Matthew 28:16-20; John 21:1-24).
- d) To the five hundred people (1 Corinthians 15:6).
- e) To Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-6; 18:9, 10; 22:1-8; 23:11; 26:12-18; 1 Corinthians 15:8).

²⁹ Compare Acts 1:4-5

First of all, to the Greek/heathen who lived in “the remotest part of the earth.” To the Jew in Christ's day, the Greek was understood to be beyond the pale of salvation. They could be saved but first they had to become a Jew. Christ here says, “NO! By virtue of its proclamation, the gospel also is for them!”

Secondly, the gospel belongs to the outcast, sinner, and dregs of society — the Samaritan! These too were beyond the pale of salvation in the Jewish mind. Recall the time when the prostitute washed Jesus' feet with her hair in the Pharisee's house³⁰ this confirmed to the Pharisee that Christ was no prophet, much less the Messiah. For had Christ been a prophet He would have known she was a prostitute. And had He known that, it would have been expected that Jesus would have treated her as a sinner by kicking her in the face.

The theology of the Jews at the time of Christ was that God helps those who help themselves. And so, while a prostitute was not beyond salvation, she first had to clean up her life, then God could save her. And so it would have been with the Samaritan.

Ah! But with the commissioning of Acts 1:8 the disciples were sent to preach grace not only to the Jews, but also to the Samaritans, the reputed sinners of the world!

Do you see what this means?

I have always been taught that Acts 1:8 contains a geographical progression in the outworking of the Gospel. The Gospel first was to be preached in Jerusalem where the disciples were at that moment. Then the Gospel was preached in Judea — the region in which the Jews lived. Then it was preached in Samaria, the region north of Judea and then to the remotest parts of the earth. That is how world missions work.

Accordingly many have memorized the outline of Acts based on this progression.

- Acts 1-7: The Jerusalem/Judea Witness
- Acts 8-11: The Samaria Witness
- Acts 12-28: The Remotest Part of the Earth Witness

And yet based on the Jewish belief of Christ's day, there is another clear alternative in our understanding of Acts 1:8. In essence it is saying that the Gospel not only is intended for all places, but also for all people! First of all it is for the child of God — Jerusalem/Judea. Secondly it is for the reputed sinner — Samaria. And thirdly it is for the gentile — the Remotest Part of the Earth.

From this I hope you see the message of Samaria. Samaria first is a city of sinners and compromisers who rejected Christ because He had set His face toward Jerusalem.³¹ And yet amazingly, it too is the object of God's love such that the gospel must be preached there as well.³²

Is this a city in which you dwell?

Let me ask you: What sin would I have to commit for you to lose respect for me?

³⁰ Compare Luke 7:36-50

³¹ Compare Luke 9:51-53

³² Compare Acts 1:8

- What if you saw me loose my temper?
- What if you saw me with another woman?
- What if I embarrassed you publicly?
- What if I let you down for the third time?
- How far would I have to go before you wrote me off?

I hope you realize that there is a limit to your respect and love and that limit is the line of demarcation in your life between the region of Judea in which you live and the region of Samaria.

Now let me change the focus: What would it take for you to give up when it comes to your walk with God?

- What sin would you have to commit?
- What compromise would you have to make?
- How cold would your heart have to become?
- How many years would you have to struggle with a particular sin?

This too is the boundary line between Judea and Samaria!

Do you see it?

Samaria is NOT simply a geographical region of this world, BUT also a city in which we frequently live. It specifically is a place beyond the reach of the love and mercy of God. Find a person who lives there, and you will have identified a Samaritan!

In fact I would suggest that based upon Horton's work, it is the thinking of most in this room today; truly you can identify with the Samaritan!

- Could God really love me?
- I'm so awful!
- What is God's disposition toward me when I sin? He's angry and incited to get even!

Now listen again to the text.

Acts 1:8, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: **and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria**, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

Did you get that? The gospel which speaks of

- God's unmerited grace.
- The glorious news that God no longer judges us guilty of sin.
- Christ's righteousness reckoned to the sinner.
- And it is applicable to you, the Samaritan!

Whatever boundary line we have created to separate between the loved and the lost, Christ has completely removed! No matter how bad you think you are on account of your sin, the good news is that you are worse than you think and God still loves you!

Oh! Receive this glorious message today!

Your Samaritan brothers and sisters of the first century did; after themselves receiving the gospel, the text says, “And there was much rejoicing in that city” (Acts 8:8). This text ought to melt our hearts as it proclaims the Amazing Grace of God toward the sinner!

Don't miss it.

The doctrine of Justification means that when God looks at us, even when we are sinning, He beholds a child who is most beautiful in His sight. **WE HAVE BEEN DECLARED RIGHTEOUS IN HIS SIGHT!** Truly, “Behind a frowning providence, there hides a smiling face.”³³

The doctrine of Propitiation means that God's disposition toward us when we sin is **NOT** that of anger, wrath, or hatred **BUT** that of a loving Father. **GOD'S WRATH HAS BEEN FOREVER REMOVED!**

The doctrine of Sanctification means that God has set us apart unto Himself as His precious child.

The doctrine of Glorification means that God's plans for us are for our welfare, **NOT** our calamity. And so to the one who considers themselves beyond the pale of the Gospel, the Samaritan, rejoice! God's grace reaches even to this land!

And yet as I close, I want to speak to the citizen of Judea, the one who knows the love of God, but sees it limited on account of the sin of man.

Do you realize that in order for you to fulfill the call of Acts 1:8 you are going to have to change where you go?

Most Jews of Christ's day would rather have traveled to Galilee. They would have went on the King's Highway or the Via Maris before they would have gone through Samaria. They were willing to travel on foot an extra fifty miles if it meant avoiding the Samaritan.

Yet as Christ before us³⁴, if we are going to fulfill the command of Acts 1:8 we are going to have to travel through Samaria. We will have to engage its people! We will have to demonstrate the love of God to the compromiser!

And this means that you must be willing to repent of your

- Arrogance by which you have judged other people.
- Pride by which you have written off another.
- Hypocrisy by which you have remained hardened toward the sinner and yet soft toward your own sin.

And you will have to extend grace, proclaim mercy, and express love.

This sermon is a call for us all to accept and so live in light of the Glorious Gospel of Grace. And, extend

³³ New Trinity Hymnal #128

³⁴ Compare John 4

this grace to the one beyond the border of our love — the Samaritan.

May God grant us the grace to so live!

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on July 9, 2006. Greg is the Preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.