

Acts 8:1-8, 12, 14-17, 25

Introduction

Two weeks ago, we saw how Stephen's testimony [*martyria*] before the Sanhedrin prepared us for the proclamation of the Jewish Messiah outside Jerusalem and—even more specifically—outside the borders of Judea. Last week, we saw how Stephen's martyrdom was used by God in His sovereignty as the impetus for this proclamation of the Jewish Messiah outside the borders of Judea. So we read in verses 1-4 of chapter eight:

I. Acts 8:1-4 — Now Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the assembly—the one in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered/dispersed throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And some devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the assembly, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he was delivering them into prison. Therefore, those who had been scattered/dispersed [throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria] went about, proclaiming the good news of the word.

Here we have the eschatological dispersion (*diaspora*) of the eschatological New Covenant assembly (*ekklesia*) for the sake of the proclamation of the eschatological gospel—the good news that the Messiah is Jesus, raised from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God. We remember that the point, here, is not a lesson about numerical “church growth,” but rather a record of the expansion of the church in redemptive-historical categories. Jesus said to the apostles in chapter one:

➤ Acts 1:8 — “[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea [Jews] and Samaria [Samaritans], and even to the end of the earth [Gentiles/Rome; cf. Isa. 49:6].”

What Luke traces out, then, here in the book of Acts, is the fulfillment of this word that Jesus spoke to His disciples. In this specific section of Acts, what we've come to is the spread of the Gospel from the Jews to the Samaritans.

II. Acts 8:5 — Now Philip [one of those who were scattered] went down to the city of Samaria [Shechem? Sebaste?] and began preaching the Messiah [*ho Christos*] to them.

It can be easy for us, today, to miss the significance of this moment in the scope of redemptive history. At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus sent out the twelve with these instructions:

➤ Matthew 10:5-6 — “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

The point, here, is not that Jesus is prejudiced against the Samaritans. The point is the redemptive-historical priority of the Jews according to God's sovereign election and choice (Rom. 1:16; 2:10). But if Jesus wasn't prejudiced against the Samaritans, the same thing couldn't be said for the Jews in general—or vice versa for the Samaritans in general. In Luke's Gospel, he

tells how Jesus healed ten leprosy men and how one of these men—a Samaritan—turned back and fell on his face at Jesus’ feet.

- Luke 17:18 — Then Jesus answered and said... “Was there no one found who turned back to give glory to God, except this foreigner?”

Jesus isn’t insulting the Samaritan by labeling him a “foreigner.” He’s highlighting the failure of the Jews in light of their prejudice against Samaritans (cf. Lk. 10:30-37). This Samaritan was, in fact, a “foreigner” of sorts (though, as we’ll see, not in the same sense as were the Gentiles). But if this “foreigner”—who was despised as such by the Jews—had turned back to give glory to God for his healing, then what excuse did the other former lepers have who were Jews and who had not turned back? In John chapter eight, Jesus said that His Jewish antagonists were of their father the devil. The Jews responded by saying:

- John 8:48 — “Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?”

If the Jews (as a people in general) despised the Samaritans, the Samaritans (as a people in general) also hated and resented the Jews. Luke tells us in his gospel about the day that:

- Luke 9:52–53 — [Jesus] sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. But they [the Samaritans] did not receive Him, because He was journeying with His face toward Jerusalem.

The strictest among the Jews, when travelling between Galilee and Judea would go far out of their way just to avoid passing through the “unclean” territory of Samaria. We remember what the Samaritan woman at the well said to Jesus:

- John 4:9 — “How do You, being a Jew, ask for a drink from me, being a Samaritan woman?” [And then John’s explanatory comment:] (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

And we might add that Samaritans wished for no dealings with the Jews. What was the cause of such bitter hostility between Jews and Samaritans? The answer to this question is a combination of ethnic, religious, and historical factors, many of which are lost to history. But there’s a basic picture we can piece together.

Ever since the days of Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, Israel had been divided into north and south, with the south being ruled by the Davidic kings, and the north being ruled by a constantly changing succession of *non*-Davidic royal families. At the time of the division, the people of Israel (the ten northern tribes) said to the king in Judah:

- 1 Kings 12:16 — “What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse; to your tents, O Israel! Now see to your own house, David!”

Of course, the seeds of this division had long been at work (cf. 2 Sam. 19:40-43; the Samaritans themselves would say since the days of Eli 170 years earlier), but there’s a sense in which we could say that this is when everything started. The political division was an inherently religious

division as the Israelites in the north rejected the Davidic kingship in the south—and with the Davidic kingship, seemingly, God’s covenant promises to David (2 Sam. 7:8-17). Along with the rejection of the Davidic kingship there was also an abandonment of the temple worship in Jerusalem. Jeroboam, the first northern king, made two golden calves and appointed his own priesthood and his own religious feast day. When he set up the golden calves at the northern and southern borders of the land, he said to the people:

- 1 Kings 12:28 — “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt.”

As a result of these things, we can imagine the religious and political divide that must have developed over the years between the north and the south. Omri was the sixth king of the northern kingdom. He purchased a hill and then built a fortified city on that hill and named the city “Samaria,” after the name of its original owner (1 Kings 16:23-24). As the new capital city of the northern kingdom, “Samaria” could also be a shorthand reference to the entire northern kingdom.

The northern kingdom of Israel lasted for only 200 years. In 722 BC it fell to the Assyrians who deported all the Israelites of substance. Hezekiah, the tenth in line from David, became king in Jerusalem about 7 years after the fall of the northern kingdom. He was a spiritual reformer and his first action as king was to cleanse the temple and the Levitical priesthood and restore the temple worship (2 Chron. 29). As a part of this spiritual renewal, Hezekiah planned to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. Since the Israelite population that still remained in the north no longer had any independent political or national identity, Hezekiah sent couriers “from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, and as far as Zebulun,” calling them to come to Jerusalem and join in the celebration of the feast; “but [for the most part, the Chronicler tells us] they were laughing them to scorn and mocking them” (2 Chron. 30:10). What did the North want with Davidic kings and temple worship in Jerusalem?

When the Assyrians conquered the North, they not only deported all the Israelites of substance, but they settled other people from other conquered lands in the former territory of Israel.

- 2 Kings 17:24 — And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon and from Cuthah and from Avva and from Hamath and Sepharvaim, and settled them in the cities of Samaria in place of the sons of Israel [whom they had deported]. So they possessed Samaria and lived in its cities.

Many of the Israelites who still remained in the land intermarried with these foreign transplants, resulting in a “Samaritan” population of generally mixed ancestry. The same thing, however, did not happen in the south, where they had remained at least outwardly committed to the temple in Jerusalem and to the Davidic messianic hope. The southern kingdom lasted for 135 years after the fall of the North. In 586 BC it fell to the Babylonians. The exiled Israelites of the southern kingdom (those “of Judah” [Jews]) remained, in large part, fiercely committed to their ethnic and religious distinctiveness (cf. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; synagogue worship) and they returned to their homeland after a 70-year captivity. In contrast, the exiled Israelites of the northern kingdom were assimilated into the surrounding pagan culture and never returned to

their homeland. In short, while the Israelites of the Babylonian exile ultimately returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and await the Davidic Messiah, the Israelites of the Assyrian exile never returned to the land and those who remained in the land intermarried with the foreign transplants, and had no use for a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem or the promise of a Davidic Messiah.

It was this “mixed bag” of “Samaritans” (before they were called “Samaritans”) who were the first enemies of the “Jews” returning from exile in Babylon. They pretended to be sympathetic to their cause by offering to help with the rebuilding of the temple.

- Ezra 4:1–2 (cf. 2 Kings 17:24–31) — Then the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to Yahweh, the God of Israel, so they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers’ households and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here.”

But the leaders of the Jews responded with these words:

- Ezra 4:3 — “You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to Yahweh, the God of Israel...”

In response to this response we read:

- Ezra 4:4–5 — So the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and dismayed them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel...

It’s impossible for us to know what exactly was the political, ethnic, and religious situation in the north at this time, but we do know that about 70 years after the returned Jewish exiles had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, there was a group of “Samaritans” in the north who built their own temple to Yahweh on Mount Gerizim in Shechem (in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, whose work on the walls of Jerusalem they continued to oppose; cf. Neh. 4, 6). We also know that by the time of Jesus, the Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses) as inspired Scripture. This enabled them to justify their rejection of the temple in Jerusalem as well as the Davidic Messianic hope which were both introduced some 400 years after Moses died. Based on the Pentateuch alone, the Samaritans looked for a coming prophet like Moses (a *Taheb*; Deut. 18:15–19) who would perform miracles (like Moses did), restore the law, and renew the true worship of Yahweh on Mount Gerizim (cf. Bock; they were not looking for a messianic king to arise from the line of David). Based on the Pentateuch alone (and particularly on some of the distinctive “readings” of the Samaritan Pentateuch), the Samaritans believe that Mount Gerizim (not Jerusalem) was the place that Yahweh had chosen for His temple. According to the Samaritans, it was not they, but the Jews, who had abandoned the true Israelite faith.

The Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim was destroyed and then rebuilt in the early 2nd century BC and then destroyed again by *Jewish* forces in 110 BC, after which it was never rebuilt. Of course, the Jews considered the Samaritan temple, while it stood, to be an idolatrous fraud, while the Samaritans, for their part, considered the temple in Jerusalem to be equally illegitimate. This

explains what the Samaritan woman at the well said to Jesus: “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain [Mount Gerizim], and you [Jews] say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship” (Jn. 4:20).

This is a rough sketch which still leaves lots of holes and lots of questions, but it’s enough to help us feel just how deep-seated was the divide between the Jews and the Samaritans. It was a division with roots stretching back well over 1000 years. It was an ethnic, religious, and political division that had been repeatedly inflamed and that in the days of Jesus and the apostles was hopelessly entrenched. If we changed the poet’s “East” and “West” to “South” and “North,” these words might sum up the situation: “Oh, South is South, and North is North, and never the twain shall meet, till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat” (and many might have said, not even then; Rudyard Kipling). But God had another plan. He spoke through the prophet Ezekiel when Ezekiel was, himself, an exile living in Babylon.

➤ Ezekiel 37:15–23 (cf. Isa. 11:10-14) — The word of Yahweh came again to me saying, “Now as for you, son of man, take for yourself one stick and write on it, ‘For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his companions’ [South]; then take another stick and write on it, ‘For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions’ [North]. Then draw them together for yourself one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand. And when the sons of your people speak to you saying, ‘Will you not declare to us what you mean by these?’ say to them, ‘Thus says Lord Yahweh, “Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions [North]; and I will put them with it, with the stick of Judah [South], and make them one stick, and they will be one in My hand.”’ And the sticks on which you write will be in your hand before their eyes. And speak to them, ‘Thus says Lord Yahweh, “Behold, I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them; and they will no longer be two nations and no longer be divided into two kingdoms. They also will no longer defile themselves with their idols or with their detestable things or with any of their transgressions; but I will save them from all their places of habitation in which they have sinned, and I will cleanse them. And they will be My people, and I will be their God.”’”

What we have pictured here is a future day when the North will again be united with the South under the rule of the Davidic king in Jerusalem as God’s cleansed and restored covenant people. But of course, this language is still assuming “Old” Covenant, typological realities. How could it not assume these realities since it was the “Old” Covenant that was still in effect at that time? What other language was there to use even when describing those realities that could be fulfilled only under a New Covenant? So, what happens when all the types and shadows of the Old Covenant are taken up into and fulfilled by the true substance of the New Covenant? Jesus answers this question when He “translates” the Old Covenant, typological language of Ezekiel’s prophecy into the eschatological, New Covenant language of fulfillment. In response to the Samaritan woman’s statement that, “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you [Jews] say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship,” Jesus said:

- John 4:21–23 — “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when *neither* in this mountain [Mount Gerizim] *nor in Jerusalem* will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.”

On the one hand, Jesus affirms that salvation is “from the Jews”—that it was shadowed forth at the temple in Jerusalem and that it would ultimately come through the line of David, of the tribe of Judah. On the other hand, Jesus says that an hour is coming when even the temple in Jerusalem will no longer count for anything—no more than the temple on Mount Gerizim in Samaria had ever counted for anything. How will God unite the South and the North—the Jews and the Samaritans—as one people? How will God accomplish this seemingly impossible thing? Through the proclamation of the good news that the Messiah is Jesus, the Son of David, crucified, buried, and now raised from the dead not to sit on an earthly throne in an earthly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:25), but to sit enthroned at the right hand of God in the “true” Jerusalem that is above (Gal. 4:26). Listen again to these words that Jesus spoke to His disciples as He was about to be taken up into heaven:

- Acts 1:8 — “[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea [Jews] **and Samaria** [Samaritans], and even to the end of the earth [Gentiles].”

We could say that in Jesus’ day, in redemptive-historical terms, the whole world could be divided into three different groups of people: the Jews, the Samaritans, and the Gentiles. But the Gospel, we understand, was for *all three* of these groups—to break down every possible barrier and make them all into one. We have a foreshadowing of this reality in John chapter 4:

- John 4:39–42 — From that city [in Samaria] many of the Samaritans believed in [Jesus] because of the word of the woman who bore witness, “He told me all the things that I have done.” So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. And many more believed because of His word; and they were saying to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is truly the Savior of the world.”

If this is the “foreshadowing” of that eschatological “reunion” that Ezekiel prophesied, then it’s here in Acts 8 that we see the fulfillment.

III. Acts 8:5–8 — Now Philip [one of those who were scattered] went down to the city of Samaria and began preaching the Messiah [*ho Christos*] to them. And the crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was being said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was doing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

What should immediately jump out at us is that the same “signs” that were happening in Jerusalem (cf. 2:43; 5:12; 6:8) are now happening in Samaria. Even as the lame man was healed

in Jerusalem (cf. 3:1-10; 4:29-30), now the “paralyzed and lame” are being healed in Samaria. Even as those afflicted with “unclean spirits” were being set free in Jerusalem (cf. 5:16), so now the “unclean spirits were coming out of many in Samaria. Even as God was extending His hand to heal, and signs and wonders were happening through the name of His holy Servant Jesus in Jerusalem (4:30), so now the same thing is happening in Samaria. Here are all the signs of the coming of the kingdom not just in Judea, but now also in Samaria—not just for Jews, but now also for Samaritans; and so Luke tells us in verse 12:

IV. Acts 8:12 — But when they [the Samaritans] believed Philip proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, both men and women.

Even as the Jews were believing and being baptized in Jerusalem—“both men and women” (cf. 2:37-38, 41; 5:14), so now the Samaritans are believing and being baptized in Samaria, “both men and women.” And now we read in verses 14-17:

V. Acts 8:14–17 — Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

Here, then, is the final fulfillment of that eschatological reunion of North and South—of Samaritans and Jews. The same Holy Spirit who was poured out upon the Jews in Jerusalem at Pentecost with accompanying visible signs (Acts 2) has now been poured out upon the Samaritans—also with accompanying visible signs. God has made it abundantly clear that this is the same work of the same Spirit not only by the same signs and wonders that were happening in Samaria, and not only by the same “good news about the kingdom” that was being proclaimed in Samaria, but also by the fact that He delayed the Samaritan’s reception of the Spirit (in all His eschatological fullness and with accompanying visible signs) until the apostles Peter and John had come down from Jerusalem and prayed for them and laid their hands on them. This isn’t a separate work of God alongside the one in Jerusalem. Instead, by one and the same Spirit, believing Jews and believing Samaritans have now been baptized into one body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). The Samaritans have finally—in the fullness of time—been “re”incorporated not into an ethnic Old Covenant Israel (something that was, by then, impossible because of their mixed ancestry), but into the spiritual New Covenant Israel, built upon the foundation of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (cf. Mat. 16:18; Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14). The two sticks have been joined together into one stick. Samaritans and Jews have been joined together into one people—baptized by one Spirit into one body.

At the beginning of this chapter, Luke said: “Therefore, those who had been scattered went about, **proclaiming the good news [euangelizo]** of the word... Philip went down to **the city of Samaria** and began preaching the Messiah to them” (8:4-5). Now Luke concludes:

VI. Acts 8:25 — So, when [Peter and John] had solemnly borne witness and spoken the word of the Lord [**in Samaria**], they started back to Jerusalem, and were **proclaiming the gospel [euangelizo]** to **many villages of the Samaritans**.

Can you hear Luke's joy? In verse 8, he said: "So there was great joy [*polys chara*] in that city." But we know that even as Luke recounts these things he, too, was rejoicing. Here is the fulfillment of God's promise (Ezek. 37:15-23). Here is the realization of Christ's own word before he ascended into heaven (Acts 1:8). Here is the saving, reconciling power of the Gospel, which breaks down all barriers and unites us all together as one. Therefore, let us seek with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind to do justice to this eschatological reality. May we, too, rejoice to live out this miraculous renewal "in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and freeman, but Christ is all and in all" (Col. 3:11).

- Colossians 3:12–17 — [A]s the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another, and graciously forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone, just as the Lord graciously forgave you, so also should you. Above all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body, and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with gratefulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.