

# Philip's Samaritan Ministry

Acts is the amazing story of how the good news about Jesus Christ began breaking through all the barriers of religion and culture in the first century. The last word in Acts 28:31 is unhindered. Along with the original apostles and growing number of disciples, Philip was very involved in breaking down the walls that could block the spreading gospel. Philip appears on the scene when there is critical friction within the Jerusalem church. He helped tear down the growing wall of prejudice.



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Today's study places Philip in Samaria, a region torn by prejudice and bitterness between Jews and Samaritans since the Jews returned from exile in Babylon. Next week we will watch Philip introduce an Egyptian court official to faith in Christ, overcoming several layers of prejudice. Life can build some formidable barriers in a person's life, but the grace of God in Christ can knock them all down when we are faithful. Philip is a powerful role model for anyone who really desires to serve God.

As the Jerusalem church grew in numbers and influence, so did persecution. Religious and Roman officials were alarmed that "the Jesus movement" might become a regional war. Saul of Tarsus was leading the effort to round up and execute Christian leaders. But, with the growing threats, the dispersing of the church actually sent more witnesses into the world outside Judea.

We casually say "God so loved the world," but backing that up by going out into the world beyond our comfort zone isn't so easy. Why did Philip go to Samaria? We are not told, but the fact that he ministered effectively to the Greek widows in the Jerusalem church and later to the Ethiopian court official indicates this disciple saw beyond the usual social and cultural barriers. Luke describes what was happening: "At that time, the church in Jerusalem began to be subjected to vicious harassment. Everyone except the apostles was scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria" (Acts 1:8).

We frame our living by our attitude and ability to find opportunity in change.

Philip goes to Samaria where Jesus changed the life of a woman at Jacob's well (John 4:5-30). Philip's preaching, healing and casting out unclean spirits drew crowds. Before Philip arrived in Samaria people were already flocking to hear a charismatic sorcerer, Simon, who was known as "the power of God called Great" (Acts 8:10). There was an obvious contrast to the unassuming Philip who pointed people to Christ, and Simon who exalted himself. As Philip began attracting larger crowds, Simon "came to believe and was baptized" and "became one of Philip's supporters" (vv. 13-14). There is no mention of an established church in Samaria at that point. Peter and John, who had been there earlier with Jesus, came to see what was happening. What they found was a new church start with no sponsors or organization. They understood that before anything else these new believers must know the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (vv. 15-16).

In an earlier recorded story of the Apostle John in Samaria with Jesus, John wanted the Samaritans to be consumed by a heavenly fire (Luke 9:51-56). Now John wants them to be filled with the Spirit! Jesus' final commission to his disciples to carry the good news to the world included Samaria (Acts 1:8). Following Christ is a growing experience for all believers. There are attitudes that must change, prejudices that must be erased, challenges that must be overcome, and an ever-growing trust in God for every circumstance.

Philip and the early church would face social barriers, a move away from legalistic religion to a grace perspective, political threats and false doctrinal ideas. We face the same challenges. Observing Philip and the other early followers of Jesus can help us see that God will bless us and help us get beyond challenging situations to serve him. In Acts we witness the rise of the next generation of believers. We see the church spread across the Roman-dominated world. We witness persecution and death, yet the church continues to spread and grow stronger.

Given the long enmity between the Jews and Samaritans, isn't it a wonder to see this movement out of Jerusalem into Samaria? So much divides our world. In Christ alone humanity can become one race as the children of God. Even

## Formations

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Scripture: Acts 8:4-17

in the "Christian world" there is the oxymoron of our divisions and fighting. Jesus showed the way. He confronted the cold legalisms of the Pharisees, but found support in men like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus taught that life is not found in religious judgment and pride, but in love and grace. So we watch Philip, like Jesus before him, sharing the grace of God with Samaritans. Within God's grace is the reality of unity.

There is a sub-story here that should caution us all. Simon, the self-exalted miracle worker, responded to Philip's message and was baptized. We wonder, was he truly giving his life to Christ, or was he getting in on a good deal for himself? Simon was a showman. Later he offered to buy the kind of power Peter and John had. Peter responded in the strongest language: "May your money be condemned to hell along with you because you believed you could buy God's gift with money! You can have no part or share in God's word because your heart isn't right with God" (Acts 8:20-21). We have seen comparable conversions in our world: promises of success and wealth if we believe in God. Or, pray the right prayer and the heavens will prosper you. In Jesus' parable of the sower (Matthew 4:1-20), some people profess faith in God, but the seed falls into deficient soil and no harvest or fruit is produced. "Because they have no roots, they last for only a little while" (Matt.4:17). Was Simon attracted by Philip's message but unwilling to surrender his life? Were Peter's harsh words the end of Simon's story? We cannot know.

What we can know is that Philip was living out the grace and love of God in a way that brought hope to others. He shows us that out of persecution and events beyond his control God used him to bring others to faith. We don't have to know all the answers or live a charmed life. It is enough to know God loves you, to share that love wherever you find yourself and to trust God in every circumstance of life. Where or what is your Samaritan ministry?

*Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.*