

THE CHALLENGE AND RISKS  
OF WORLD EVANGELISM  
ACTS 8:1-25

I.

In 1921 a young couple from Sweden by the name of David and Svea Flood went to the Congo to do missionary work. (PROJECTOR ON--- CONGO) The Floods joined the Ericksons to leave their mission station and relocate in a remote area near the village of N'dolera, near the border with Burundi and Rwanda. The chief would not let them live in the town. So they built a couple of huts about a half mile away.

The only contact which the missionaries had with the villagers was a young boy who was allowed to sell them chickens and eggs twice a week. (DAVID AND SVEA FLOOD) The Floods reached out to that young boy. Svea told the youngster about Jesus, and he eventually expressed belief in Him. There seemed to be no other spiritual results for their efforts.

Then malaria struck. The little band of Christians got very sick. The Ericksons decided to return to the central mission station. The Floods remained in the remote area. Svea discovered that she was pregnant. She gave birth to a baby girl, whom they named "Ain." But Svea was so weakened by malaria that she died a few days later. Husband David was bitter. After burying his wife by N'dolera, he left the area and returned to Sweden. (PROJECTOR OFF)

David was angry with God. He decided that he could not raise a baby girl. So he gave Ain to the Ericksons. Unfortunately both of the Ericksons died within a year. The baby was passed along to American missionaries who renamed "Ain" "Aggie" and brought her to the US when she was three years old to be raised in the States.

What a sad and unfortunate story! The reality is that the task of world evangelism involves great challenge and risks. We saw that last week as Stephen was killed at the hands of the evil high council of Judaism, the Sanhedrin. The death of this powerful preacher of the gospel was a great loss to the church. But it was not without purpose. Oftentimes the Lord uses seeming tragedies as an opportunity to spread the gospel. This was the case with Saul, whom we know better as Paul. He had a part in the execution of Stephen. But what Paul heard and saw in him had an effect on his later conversion to Christ and later preaching of the gospel.

In our passage today we shall discover further good things that come out of this seeming tragedy that happened to Stephen. We will also be reminded about the real challenge and risks involved in the task of world evangelism. If we are tuned in to the concerns of our Lord, we will overcome these challenges and risks to make the job of world evangelism a priority for our own lives.

I.

Let's look then at vv. 1-8 of Acts #8 and THE CHALLENGE OF WORLD EVANGELISM. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE CHALLENGE OF WORLD EVANGELISM) In Acts 1:8 we came across what appears to be the theme of this book. The Lord Jesus Christ is quoted as telling his apostles, **"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."**

We have seen in our study that the apostles and other Christians have done a great job of being witnesses in Jerusalem. Back in #5 when the Sanhedrin hauled all of the apostles into court, the high priest said to them, **"We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us."** The death of Stephen occurred probably a year or two later. It seems that the Christians now have still not moved out of Jerusalem. Certainly the apostles are there.

Stephen was a Hellenistic Jew, which means that he was born and raised in another part of the Greek-speaking Roman Empire. His message seemed to gain a hearing among other Hellenistic Jews in the synagogues of Jerusalem. When some of these Hellenistic Jews started identifying with Jesus and suggesting that the temple and the law were somehow less important, it produced a strong reaction. The kosher Jews began a persecution campaign.

Thus we read in v. 1 of #8, **"And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."** Remember, the second stop in Jesus' worldwide outreach, according to Acts 1:8 was "all Judea and Samaria." The author Luke clearly recognizes that the seeming tragedy of Stephen's death and the ensuing persecution were actually being used to accomplish God's missionary plan.

Luke's statement that **"all** were scattered" doesn't mean that the only Christians left in Jerusalem were the apostles. The term "all" in Luke's writings is a general term that has to be defined in the particular context. In this situation he seems simply to be saying "many." For we will see as the story of Acts unfolds that there are still many Christians in Jerusalem. However, they seem to mostly be native Jews as opposed to Hellenistic Jews.

Luke continues in vv. 2 & 3: **"Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison."** The execution of Stephen is a turning point in the history of the church. Besides scattering Christians throughout Judea and Samaria, it brings Saul into a leadership role. He becomes a leader of the persecution. Saul, who will be better known later as Paul, is convinced that the Christians are not just misguided enthusiasts. They are evil

impostors. They are threatening the foundation of the one true religion. These Christians must be stopped.

These efforts to put out the fire of Christianity, however, only make things worse. Instead of putting out the fire, the persecutors simply spread the burning embers. Thus we read in v. 4, **“Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”** The Lord’s purposes cannot be thwarted. The original word for “scattered” is *diasparentes*, from which we get the word “diaspora.” The term is used today in Israel for those Jews living outside the land of Israel.

Verse 5 introduces us to a key leader of these dispersed Christians. Philip, like Stephen, was one of the Hellenistic Jews who was appointed by the apostles in #6 to help with food distribution for the widows. His talents and gifts were not limited to this role. He was an effective evangelist and preacher. A mature Christian won’t worry too much about his or her titles or offices. He will focus on using his gifts and talents, and the Lord will honor his efforts.

Philip ended up in Samaria. The Samaritans were ethnically part Jewish and part Gentile. They accepted the first five books of the Bible, but they rejected the rest. They also rejected the temple in Jerusalem and promoted one of their mountains as the proper place for worship. So the kosher Jews in Jerusalem rejected the Samaritans because they were racially impure and religiously deviant. The Samaritans returned the bad feelings.

(JUDEA SAMARIA GALILEE) Samaria was located just to the north of Jerusalem and Judea. Galilee was just to the north of Samaria. That was where Jesus was born and raised. Galileans like Him usually went around Samaria when they went to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. But in John 4 most of you remember how Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well when He chose to pass through Samaria.

Like the Samaritans the Hellenistic Jews who had become Christians were also rejected by the religious establishment in Jerusalem. They were rejected largely because they had criticized the contemporary view of Jewish orthodoxy in regard to the law, the land, and the temple. So the experience and message of the Christians found a certain receptivity among the Samaritans.

There is uncertainty about the particular “city of Samaria” where Philip began his preaching. Sebaste and Sychar and Gitta are three of the possibilities. They were located close to each other. It was near Sychar that Jesus had his encounter with the woman at the well. John the Baptist had also preached in this vicinity. So this earlier exposure to Jesus may have contributed to their receptivity to the gospel.

(PROJECTOR OFF)

Another positive influence was the signs and wonders that Philip was performing. These are described in vv. 6 & 7. Keep in mind that this was a pioneer area for the gospel. This was the first exposure that the Samaritans had to the message about the death

and resurrection of Jesus. The apostles also had not been to this area yet since the crucifixion. Then, too, there was apparently a lot of demonic activity going on.

So the Lord saw it as necessary to confirm the message of this ambassador for Christ by giving him the ability to perform miracles. Many were healed of various difficulties. Many evidently believed the message about Jesus. According to v. 8, **“So there was much joy in that city.”**

Jesus’ plan and His desire was to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. But it was comfortable there in Jerusalem. There was some opposition to the gospel. But up until now no one had been killed for being a follower of Jesus. Jerusalem was home to most of these Christians. Family and friends and fellow believers were there. Much ministry remained to be done in the city. New Christians had to be grounded in the faith. More people in Jerusalem needed to be pointed to Christ.

A year or two before our story the high priest himself had declared that Jerusalem had been filled with this teaching about Jesus. The original plan from Jesus was that the Christians were to move out to the world outside of Jerusalem. The church was still not moving out. So the Lord made them move out.

There is a lot of work to be done for Christ right here around us. There are friends and relatives who do not yet know Christ. There are new Christians who need to be built up in the faith. But our country has largely been filled with a witness for Christ, and the gospel still has not been taken to the ends of the earth. There are millions of people who do not yet have any of the Bible in their native language. There are millions more who have never heard a clear presentation of the gospel.

The people of Morocco and Thailand and Rwanda and Somalia and Nepal and Mongolia may not seem to have much relevance to our daily lives. But they are very relevant to the God whom we serve. Our Savior has told us that He wants these people to hear about Him. If we have a heart that truly beats for the Savior, we should have some interest in the task of world evangelism. The Lord has told us to go get them.

If we don’t go ourselves, we should at least have some other kind of involvement in the job. We should inform ourselves about what is going on at least in some parts of the ends of the earth. Then we should pray. Then we should give. About twenty per cent of what we contribute each Sunday does get set aside for the task of world evangelism.

Perhaps we could adopt at least one missionary family. Make an effort to get acquainted with one family or individual who is involved in overseas missions. Write to them. Most missionaries are good at corresponding. Ask for their newsletter. Pray for them. Watch the newspaper for news about their country.

II.A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE RISKS OF WORLD EVANGELISM) In vv. 9-25 then we are going to focus on THE RISKS OF WORLD EVANGELISM. We are going to skip

over the first few verses for now and go to vv. 14-17. What I would like for you to notice here is the risk of A DIVIDED CHURCH. (II. THE RISKS... A. THE RISK OF A DIVIDED CHURCH)

It is the Hellenistic Jews who have introduced Christianity to Samaria. The native born Jews who are followers of Christ seem to have stayed in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. The apostles are among them. So the Hellenistic Jews have been forced out into the mission field, and the native Jews are still at home. There is potential for division.

These Hellenistic Jews have planted a church now in Samaria. The Samaritans have a history of independence. They have their own Roman province. They have rejected orthodox Judaism. They have their own worship center, and they have adopted their own version of the Bible. They have their own customs and traditions.

The question is: How is Christianity going to develop among the Samaritans? What will be the basis for their doctrine? There is no New Testament yet. Will they accept the entire Hebrew Bible? Will they accept the authority of the apostles of Christ whom most of them have not seen and who are native born Jews? There is potential here for the development of a Christian group that is separate from the Christianity of the apostles of Christ.

Fortunately Philip sent a telegram to the apostles, and they hopped on a plane to come to Samaria. Verses 14 & 15 tell us, **“Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.”** The apostles recognized their responsibility to establish contact with this new group of Christians. Peter and John were leaders among the apostles. So they went down to Samaria--- Jerusalem was on a high plateau; so any place nearby was down. When they came to the Samaritan Christians, they laid hands on them so that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

Verses 16 & 17 explain their reason for doing this: **“...for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.”**

Why didn't these Samaritan Christians already have the Holy Spirit? (1 CORINTHIANS 12:13) First Corinthians 12:13 says of Christians, **“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”** Later on the Apostle Paul will say in Romans #8 (ROMANS 8:9), **“... Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”**

Pentecostals and many charismatics see our passage as a support for belief in a second work of grace, for the baptism of the Holy Spirit in distinction from what happens when one becomes a Christian. I would suggest that there is a different explanation for what happened here at Samaria. (PROJECTOR OFF) The Book of Acts describes a transitional period in the beginning history of the church. The Lord Jesus wanted to

preserve the unity of His church. There was no New Testament yet. There was a danger that the Samaritan Christians and even the Hellenistic Jews could develop their own strain of Christianity. But the Lord saw to it that unity was preserved by having the Holy Spirit communicated to these new Christians through the apostles.

Jesus had told the Samaritan woman that salvation is of the Jews. The Samaritan Christians needed to understand that. Also Jesus told Peter (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 16:19) in Matthew 16 v. 19, **“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”** Without going into a detailed explanation of that verse, it is important to notice that when the gospel makes advances into new groups of people in the Book of Acts, it is Peter who introduces them to the Holy Spirit. When the gospel comes to the Samaritans, Peter lays on hands and the Holy Spirit is received by them. When the gospel is first received by Gentiles, it is Peter who explains the gospel, and it is Peter who is present when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. It seems to me that the Lord was preventing a divided church by confirming the leadership of the apostles. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This experience at Samaria also had an impact on the apostles. The impression I get is that Stephen understood better than the apostles that the death and resurrection of Jesus had rendered many of the aspects of traditional Judaism obsolete. Now Peter and John witness the coming of the Holy Spirit upon these Samaritans who were regarded by Judaism as rejects. These Samaritans have the Holy Spirit come upon them--- apparently in an experience similar to that on the Day of Pentecost--- without becoming kosher Jews. That may not strike us as being any big deal. But it may have been a surprising thing to them. Their whole background and experience was that people had to be rightly related to God through the Jewish faith--- with Jesus Christ now being the full development of that faith.

Evangelism beyond our own sphere of influence always entails special risks. One of these risks is the risk of a divided church. To go beyond our sphere of influence in spreading the gospel means that we may encounter people from different cultures, from different economic backgrounds, from different ethnic backgrounds. It means that we may encounter people who talk differently, think differently, dress differently, and act a little differently than we do. It means that we may get involved with people who are inclined to worship a little differently than we do. That has the potential to make us feel a little uncomfortable. It has the potential for divisions in the church. What does this passage teach us? Go for it anyway. We need to move out.

B.

Then in vv. 9-13 and 18-25 we encounter THE RISK OF FALSE PROFESSIONS. (II. THE RISKS... A. B. THE RISK OF FALSE PROFESSIONS) These verses introduce us to an intriguing character named Simon. Luke tells us that he is involved in magic. Perhaps some of what he did was trickery, perhaps some of it was knowledge of science, perhaps some of it was gullibility, and superstition in the Samaritans. Perhaps some of it was a charismatic personality. Perhaps there was also demonic involvement.

Significant advances of the gospel are often met with more open demonic activity. Philip had been involved in casting out demons. Now he encounters a practitioner of the magic arts.

This guy was being called “the Great Power of God.” The title would suggest some kind of incarnation of deity. This Simon was about to encounter one who was a representative of the true incarnation of deity.

A lot of the early church writers outside of the Bible make reference to this Simon. Their descriptions of his life and activities vary somewhat. But all of them give a negative portrayal. Some say that he was the father of an early heresy called gnosticism. Some say that he ended up in Rome, where he led a number of Christians astray from the truth. Some say that he ended up in a confrontation with Peter in which Simon was outperformed by the power of God. One early writer claims that as Simon was buried alive, he vowed that he would rise on the third day. He didn’t, however, pull that off.

According to vv. 12 & 13 in our text, **“But when they [the Samaritans] believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.”**

This Simon was seemingly a great catch for the church. He must have seemed to those early Christians as a trophy of God’s grace. This former occult practitioner was now one of them. But was he really? Philip clearly believed that his faith was genuine. Otherwise he would not have baptized him. But Luke’s statement in v. 13 that Simon believed does not necessarily mean that his was a true commitment to Christ.

The term “believe” in the Bible is used of different kinds of faith. (JOHN 2:23) John 2:23 describes the response of people to the miracles of Jesus. The verse says, **“Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.”** Nicodemus is one of these believers. Just after this statement he comes to Jesus, and it is clear that he doesn’t have a clue as to what is going on with salvation by faith in Him. As may have been the case with Simon his faith was limited to a recognition of the reality of some kind of supernatural power being at work. But the faith of Nicodemus was not yet a saving faith. Simon’s may not have been either. Commentators are divided. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Then when Peter and John showed up, Simon witnessed new manifestations of power. Being a magician who was fascinated by spiritual power he recognized that something amazing was at work here. This was supernatural power that he didn’t have, and he wanted it. Being such a noted celebrity he was probably a wealthy man. As a magician he was accustomed to offering his services for money. He tried that approach now with Peter and John. In the Middle Ages some church leaders were buying and selling positions and titles, and the practice became known as simony, after the Simon in our story.

Wealthy Christians always face a temptation in churches to use their money to win power or influence: “If you do this thing, then I will give this amount of money.” Or, “if you continue doing this thing, I will stop giving money.” The offer of money to Peter did not go over well at all.

Peter responds beginning in v. 20, **“May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”**

Was Simon just an immature Christian in need of correction? Some commentators interpret it that way. I am doubtful. Peter’s language is very strong. He seems to regard Simon as a fake and a threat to the church. The term “repent” is used elsewhere in the Book of Acts only of unbelievers who need to exercise saving faith in Christ. If the testimony of later church leaders is valid, this guy never truly did have a relationship with Jesus.

How then do we interpret Simon’s response in v. 24? **“Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”** My suspicion is that Simon wanted the goodies of the Christian faith without the relationship with Jesus. He hadn’t really confessed his status as a sinner and trusted in Christ as his Savior and Lord. But there are some commentators who think that Simon was genuinely seeking spiritual help.

This section concludes then in v. 25 with a statement that Peter and John preached the gospel along the way on their return to Jerusalem. They have truly recognized the opportunity and responsibility to reach the Samaritans with the witness for Christ.

Reaching out to people of other cultural backgrounds with the gospel always involves a risk that some will be brought into the church who really don’t know Christ. But even here we do not always know for sure what the spiritual status of professing Christians actually is. It is possible that right here there are people who are official church members or regular attendees who really do not have a personal relationship with Christ. If you should have some uncertainty about that, the solution is really quite simple. The Bible says that we must put not just our intellectual belief in Jesus. We must also put our trust in Him. We must place our dependence upon Him for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life. We must believe that by dying on the cross, He paid for our sins and provided us with access to heaven. It is faith alone in Jesus that will save us.

Our passage just touches on a couple of the risks that come along with a commitment to world evangelism. But besides the reality of challenge and risks that are involved in world evangelism, there is also the promise of reward. For the Hellenistic Christians of our story there was the reward of Samaritans who had become fellow believers.

For David Flood there seemed to be only heartache. He became a bitter man. His wife was left in a grave in Africa. His daughter ended up being raised in the US by another family. That daughter, Aggie, went to Bible college in Minnesota, where she met the man who became her husband. He later became president of Northwestern Bible College in Seattle.

One day Aggie got a Swedish religious magazine in her mailbox. She could not read Swedish, but as she paged through the magazine, she saw a picture of a grave with a white cross that had the words printed on it: "Svea Flood." She knew that this was her mother. Aggie went straight to a teacher at the college who spoke Swedish.

The faculty member summarized the story. It was about missionaries who had come to N'dolera a long time ago... The birth of a baby girl ... The death of the young mother ... The one little African boy who had been led to Christ ... And how, after the missionaries had all left, the boy had grown up and finally persuaded the chief to let him build a school in the village. Gradually he won the students to Christ. Even the chief had become a Christian. Currently there were 600 Christians in that one village. It was all because of the challenge and the risks of world evangelism that David and Svea Flood had taken on.

For Aggie and her husband's 25th wedding anniversary the college presented them with the gift of a vacation to Sweden. There Aggie tracked down her real father. David Flood had remarried and fathered four more children. He had become an alcoholic who seemed to have no interest in God. He also had recently suffered a stroke.

When Aggie met her father, David began to cry. **"Aina,"** he said, **"I never meant to give you away."** **"It's all right, Papa,"** she replied, taking him gently in her arms. **"God took care of me."** The man stiffened and stopped crying. **"God forgot all of us. Our lives have been like this because of him."** He turned his face toward the wall.

Aggie proceeded to tell her father the untold story: **"You did not go to Africa in vain. Mama did not die in vain. The little boy you won to the Lord grew up to win that whole village to Jesus Christ. The one seed you planted just kept growing and growing. Today, there are 600 African people serving the Lord because you were faithful to the call of God in your life.... Papa, Jesus loves you. He has never hated you."**

David came back to the God that he had resented for so long. A few days later Aggie had to return home. A few weeks later her father died. A few years later Aggie and her husband attended an evangelism conference in London. There they heard representatives from various parts of the world give reports about the status of Christianity in their countries.

At one point the superintendent of a national church in the Congo gave a report about the spread of the gospel in his country. Aggie went up to him afterward, introduced

herself, and asked if he had heard of David and Svea Flood. **“Yes, madam,”** the man replied in French, his words then being translated into English. **“It was Svea Flood who led me to Jesus Christ. I was the boy who brought food to your parents before you were born. In fact, to this day, your mother’s grave and her memory are honored by all of us.”** After a tearful embrace, he continued, **“You must come to Africa to see because your mother is the most famous person in our history.”**

Eventually Aggie Hurst and her husband made that trip. They were welcomed by cheering throngs of villagers. The most dramatic moment came when the pastor escorted Aggie to see her mother’s grave. Later in the day, during a church service, the pastor read from John 12:24 (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 12:24): **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”** He followed that up with the words of Psalm 126 v. 5 (PSALM 126:5): **“Those who sow in tears/ shall reap with shouts of joy!”** (*Aggie: The Inspiring Story of a Girl Without a Country*, Aggie Hurst)

Wouldn’t it be great to be welcomed into heaven some day by people who are there because we have made a choice to make some kind of investment in their salvation. If you have no connection at all with the task of world evangelism, ask the Lord to show you how you might make some kind of investment. Reaching the ends of the earth with the gospel is a primary concern of our Lord. It should be ours as well.